

The Condition of Women

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The question of the legalisation - or decriminalisation - of voluntary abortion has a social aspect that determines an important difference between women in the middle and upper-income classes and poor women. When abortion is prohibited, middle- and upper-class women have sufficient resources to secure qualified medical care at home or abroad. In contrast, poor women have to do unskilled and sometimes unhealthy tasks, resulting in high mortality rates. Such maternal mortality rates provide one of the most glaring evidence of the particularly disadvantageous situation of poor women.

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childbirth is at least 40 times higher in poor countries than in affluent countries and up to 150 times higher in the poorest countries. A 2016 document from the World Health Organization reads: Every day, around 830 women die worldwide from complications related to pregnancy or childbirth. In 2015, an estimated 303,000 women died during or after pregnancy and

childbirth. Virtually all of these deaths occur in low-income countries, and most of them could have been prevented. ...The high number of maternal deaths in some parts of the world reflects inequities in access to health services and highlights the differences between rich and poor. Almost all (99%) maternal deaths occur in developing countries: more than half in sub-Saharan Africa and nearly a third in South Asia. More than half of maternal deaths occur in fragile settings and humanitarian crisis contexts. The maternal mortality ratio in developing countries in 2015 was 239

per 100 000 live births, while in developed countries, it was only 12 per 100 000. There are wide disparities between countries and within countries and between high and low-income women, and between rural and urban populations.¹

Sexual Harassment

At the international level, the issue of sexual harassment has been exposed, especially through the denunciations of

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show business personalities who had to submit to it to make a career and reach stardom. But little is said about the countless women workers and employees who suffer it daily and have to endure sexual harassment to keep their jobs. A survey by the French Institute of Public Opinion published on 28 February 2018 indicates that in 2014, 20% of women in France suffered various forms of sexual harassment in the workplace, a percentage that rose to 32% in 2017.²

An ILO document (Sexual Harassment in the Workplace)³ reads: The ILO defines sexual harassment as behaviour based on sex, which is unpleasant and offensive to the person who suffers it. Sexual harassment requires a confluence of both of these negative aspects. Sexual harassment can take two forms: 1) Quid Pro Quo when the victim is conditioned with the attainment of a work benefit - salary increase, promotion or even permanence in the job - to agree to behaviours with sexual connotations, or; 2) a hostile work environment in which the conduct gives rise to situations of intimidation or humiliation of the victim.

These are the behaviours that qualify as sexual harassment. Physical: Physical violence, touching, unnecessary approaches. Verbal: Comments and questions about appearance, lifestyle, sexual orientation and offensive phone calls. Non-verbal: Whistling, sexually suggestive gestures, presentation of pornographic objects.

KEY STATISTICS. A survey published in Hong Kong in February 2007 showed that about 25 per cent of workers interviewed were sexually harassed, of whom one third were men. Among men, only 6.6 per cent reported their situation (compared to 20 per cent of women) for fear of ridicule.

According to a study published in 2004 in Italy, 55.4 per cent of women aged 14-59 reported having been victims of sexual harassment. One in three female workers is intimidated to advance in their careers, with 65 per cent of accusations of weekly blackmail by the same harasser, usually a colleague or supervisor. In addition, 55.6 per cent of women who are sexually intimidated have resigned. In the European Union, between 40 and 50 per cent of women have reported some form of sexual harassment in the workplace, according to the International Labour Office Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work.

WORKING IN FREEDOM. According to a survey conducted by the Australian Equal Opportunities Commission in 2004, 18 per cent of respondents aged between 18 and 64 reported experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace. Of these, 62 per cent were physically harassed, and less than 37 per cent were willing to report it. The research shows that the type of woman most vulnerable to sexual harassment is young, economically dependent, single or divorced, and of

¹ ↪ WHO: [Maternal Mortality](#)

² ↪ IFOP: Observatoire du Harcèlement Sexuel — [Volet 1 : Les Françaises et le harcèlement sexuel au travail — Etude de l'Ifop pour le site d'information](#) - 26/2/2018

³ ↪ OIT: [Sexual Harassment at Work](#)

immigrant status. Among men, those who suffer the most harassment are young men, homosexuals and members of ethnic or racial minorities.

The right to abortion and the fight against sexual harassment are entirely legitimate demands of women, whatever their social class, but they should not leave in brackets or omit, as is often the case, the question of women's rights related to

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the appalling living conditions of women who work, with or without pay or directly in conditions of slavery. Because in addition to sexual harassment, there is also sexual and labour slavery of women and girls.

According to the United Nations, human trafficking is the third most lucrative activity in the world, after arms and drug trafficking, generating

billions of dollars per year. Four million people are held for exploitation each year, 75 per cent of whom are women and girls. The UN (Trafficking in Persons. Global Patterns. UN Office on Drugs and Crime) warns that trafficking networks, mainly for prostitution and labour slavery, are spread worldwide.

Virtually no state remains unaffected by trafficking. There are 127 countries of origin, 98 of transit and 137 of destination. Among the latter, there are 10 with a very high incidence, such as the United States, Germany, Japan and the Netherlands, among others. It also includes some twenty states with a high incidence, including Spain. Africa is, above all, a continent of origin for people trafficked within the continent and to Western Europe. Nigeria is the leading country of origin of victims. In Asia, trafficked persons tend to remain on the continent. They mainly come from China and India. In Europe, victims tend to come from south-eastern and central Europe, mainly from Albania, Bulgaria, Lithuania and Romania. Their most frequent destination is Western Europe. Belarus, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine are the victims' main countries of origin, and they go to Western Europe and North America. Australia and New Zealand are the destinations of people trafficked mainly from Southeast Asia. This deplorable and often dramatic quality of life for poor women is closely linked to the employment situation of the vast majority of women who are dependent workers.

Discrimination in the Labour Field

We will deal, albeit schematically, with this crucial issue of contemporary capitalist society, which affects hundreds of millions of women in the world. We will address the situation of women workers concerning wages, working hours, health and safety at work, social security, access to education, leisure time and the condition of migrant women workers.

Globalisation has brought about changes in social relations and, in particular, in labour relations, one of which is the massive entry of women into the labour market. The conditions and circumstances under which this entry into the labour market has taken place have not disproved but instead confirmed the discrimination that women have been and continue to be subjected to in this field.

Women entered the labour market for two reasons: first, their desire to be recognised as individuals and as citizens in a

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society in which such recognition depends above all on participation in the labour market; second, because of the unavoidable need to work in the face of unemployment and the decline in the income of male family members and the reduction or disappearance of the social benefits enjoyed by the family headed by the man, a fundamental

active member. But this incorporation took place under conditions as discriminatory as the pre-existing ones, with the

aggravating factor that women were used as reserve labour to impose lower wages and offer less favourable conditions to all workers.

Indeed, companies sought to lower their production costs to increase their competitiveness in the international market.

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Many relocated their headquarters to countries with lower-priced labour and very often to so-called "export processing zones" (industrial free trade zones). High unemployment rates acted as a coercive bargaining factor as companies managed to lower wage costs in order, they argued, to become more competitive. Women were the first to accept the offer of low-paid, part-time work without

social benefits to ensure family survival in the face of male unemployment. But this trend of women entering the labour market, even under unfavourable conditions, has stagnated in recent years and even reversed.

An ILO report (Women at work: Trends in 2016) begins as follows: 'Throughout their working lives, women continue to experience great difficulties accessing decent jobs. Only minimal improvements have been made since the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, so there are significant gaps to be filled in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by the United Nations in 2015.

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Over the past two decades, the remarkable progress made by women in educational attainment has not translated into a comparable improvement in their position at work. In many regions of the world, compared to men, women are more likely to find and remain unemployed, have fewer opportunities to

participate in the labour force and are often forced to accept lower-quality jobs.

Progress in overcoming these obstacles has been slow and is limited to some regions of the world. Even in many countries where the gap in labour force participation and unemployment has narrowed and where women are moving out of ancillary family work and into the service sector, the quality of women's jobs remains a concern. The unequal sharing of unpaid care and domestic work between women and men and between families and society is an essential determinant of gender inequalities.

An ECLAC communiqué issued on 7 March 2017 on the eve of International Women's Day reads: Although labour market indicators have shown a positive evolution over the last decade, the female labour participation rate has stagnated at around 53%, and 78.1% of women who are employed do so in sectors defined by ECLAC as low productivity, which implies lower wages, low social security coverage and less contact with technologies and innovation. Furthermore, women's unemployment rates are systematically higher than men's, stresses a document prepared by ECLAC's Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean (OIG).

In May 1953, 64 years ago, the ILO Convention 100 concerning equal remuneration for men and women workers for work of equal value came into force. But despite the time that has passed, the wage gap between men and women - another way of accentuating capitalist exploitation - persists everywhere. The Preface of the International Labour

Organization's Global Wage Report 2014/2015 Wages and Income Inequality reads:⁴ ...global wage growth in recent years has been driven by emerging and developing economies, where real wages have been rising since 2007, although wage growth has slowed in 2013 compared to 2012. In developed economies, wages generally remained stagnant in 2012 and 2013, and in several countries, they remained below their 2007 level...In the current climate, where the global economy risks falling back into a low-growth trap, higher wage growth would be desirable in countries whose wages in the past lagged behind productivity growth...In many countries, the distribution of wages and paid employment has been a key determinant of recent trends in inequality. ...The wage gap between women and men and between nationals and migrants remains significant....,

The report also shows that lower-income groups are overly dependent on social transfers or income from self-employment. In fact, in almost all countries, income sources are more diverse at the top and bottom ends of the income distribution than in the middle of the household income distribution, where households rely much more heavily on wages. This illustrates the importance of achieving coherence between wage policies and social protection and the creation of paid employment to reduce inequality. For example, in Spain today, the wage gap between men and women

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is revealed in one figure: 64.8%. This is the percentage of the average male wage earned by women. One of the most important factors in the size of this wage gap is that while only 7% of men work part-time, this figure rises to 25% among women. Thus, while only 7.8% of male employees earn less than the minimum wage, this figure increases to

18.6% among women. More and more companies are using temporary or part-time workers, limited-term contracts, external workers, subcontracting a large part of the work or using other forms of outside work.

In the past, temporary work responded to an employee's need, to a choice. Women are an essential part of these "outside sources" of work. They also constitute an important part of informal, undeclared workers who do not enjoy any social benefits or perform self-employed tasks that do not provide them with a minimum income for survival. In most industrialised countries, women's increased labour force participation is explained by the spread of part-time work. A large proportion of women in part-time jobs are mothers of young children, and there is a correlation between part-time work and the availability of childcare and more or less extended school hours. This type of work does not entail the same benefits, career prospects, and training opportunities as full-time work, suggesting the marginalisation of women with family responsibilities.

The trend towards more flexible working patterns and practices, together with unemployment, has meant that many low-skilled women have been pushed into casual, temporary, domestic or "self-employed" work, as well as home-based work or informal forms of work such as street vendors, domestic workers or undeclared home-based workers.

In Africa, Asia and Iberian America, women survive and enable their children to stay in conditions of poverty or extreme poverty, thanks to this type of work which benefits large companies, their subcontractors or other companies engaged in the unrestricted exploitation of women, children and minorities, with the protection or tolerance of governments and the economic powers that be.

⁴ ↪ ILO: [Global Wage Report 2014/2015](#)

Home-based work has also developed significantly in both industrialised and less developed countries. This form of work, which allows women to superimpose a salaried activity on domestic work, is paid well below the general standards for such activities and below the minimum wage. In general, it obliges them to work much longer hours than the legal working hours, as the piecework method and the insufficient pay force the worker to try to produce as much as possible to obtain what is necessary for her subsistence. Because they are isolated, homeworkers are more likely to be exploited, and the network of agents, contractors and subcontractors is also on the lookout for profit at their expense.

In agriculture, the introduction of new technologies, such as those related to mechanisation and biotechnology, initially led to an increase in female labour due to the increase in the area cultivated and the persistence, for a certain time, of some traditional tasks that were then displaced. In reality, the new technologies supplanted female labour in the fields and reduced women's participation in the agricultural labour force. In general, when mechanisation and new technologies are applied to rural activity, men tend to take over the existing jobs, which are far fewer in number than those offered by traditional agricultural work.

In sub-Saharan Africa, where women had generally fared favourably compared to other underdeveloped countries on

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mortality, nutrition and health indicators because of their important role in the agricultural system, new agrarian technology has displaced them from that role. The promotion of export crops, which employ essentially male labour, and structural adjustment have also contributed to the deterioration of their

situation. Both have harmed them by reducing their access to land, as the allocation of land due to structural adjustment programmes has often caused them to lose their traditional use rights to arable land, thus weakening their earning potential.

The introduction of individual property rights and the reduction of communal land rights have reduced women's access to productive resources in South Asia. Another effect of globalisation on women's status and work is migration to other countries. According to some sources, 80 million people were working outside their country in 1994, and within Asia alone, some 300,000 workers cross their country's borders to work abroad each year. In 2010, according to the United Nations Population Division, there were 214 million international migrants in the world, half of whom were women.

Many of these women work in domestic service, small businesses or labour-intensive industries and the informal service sector. In the Philippines, Asia's largest emigrant country, women outnumber their male compatriots by 12 to 1. Among the causes of the increase in poverty and extreme poverty in the world that are characteristic of this period of

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globalisation are unemployment, the creation of paid jobs below the minimum subsistence needs, and the reduction or elimination of social services provided by the state. According to the general rule that the lower individuals or groups are on the social ladder, the more serious the consequences of current economic policies are for them, women are among

the primary victims of poverty. According to the ILO, "several studies have shown that the flexible distribution of women's time has been one aspect of adaptation to increasing poverty; women have increased the time they spend on productive and community activities, often at the expense of work in the home, family care and their own leisure time".

In the context of globalisation, the shrinking role of the state in the economy, particularly the drastic reduction in social spending, hurts women more than men because many of the reduced or eliminated services helped alleviate some of their family responsibilities and make employment compatible with motherhood. Reduced childcare services force them

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to take part-time jobs or leave their children in the care of other women in the family, increasing the burden on the latter. Cuts in education or health spending force them to struggle to replace these services or leave their children and family members stranded. Privatisation of health services forces

women of more modest status to care for the sick themselves. This has significantly increased women's workload.

As a UN document states, "there is growing evidence that as poverty, unemployment and homelessness increase, structural adjustment policies come to exacerbate violence against women by reducing their economic power and increasing their burden through the reduction or loss of social services" (UN, "Peace: Measures to Eliminate Violence against Women in the Family and Society", Report of the Secretary-General to the 38th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, E/CN.6/1994/4, New York, New York, E/CN.6/1994/4, p. 1. /1994/4, New York, 7-18 March 1994, para. 54). Women throughout the world are responsible for reproductive functions, which involve not only giving birth but also raising, feeding, educating, caring for the health and socialisation of children and caring for other family members and family property. This domestic work is not paid, is not recognised in economic statistics and is not taken into account for retirement. For example, in Spain, unpaid domestic work is mostly carried out by women (73%) and is equivalent to 27.4% of the Spanish GDP, according to the National Institute of Statistics. This is unpaid work and therefore invisible to a country's economy, as this work carried out in the home is not included in the calculation of the Gross Domestic Product.

The massive incorporation of women into the labour market has reduced their time on these tasks, but above all, it has reduced their free time. The lack of free time hinders their right to rest and leisure and their right to education and participation in cultural and scientific life. When women do not have time for all the tasks they have to take care of (fetching water and firewood, subsistence farming, food preparation and, very often, participation in the labour market), they tend to offload part of it onto their daughters, who are forced to drop out of school.

In 1990 there were 948 million illiterate adults in the world, with the highest illiteracy rates found in poor countries and,

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within each country, among the poor, especially women and girls (UNESCO, 1991). And as far as girls are concerned, "...the growing tendency in many areas to keep girls out of school to help with their mothers' chores virtually ensures that another generation of women will grow up with lesser prospects than their brothers. In Africa, for example, "increasing numbers of girls are dropping out

of primary and secondary school or not attending school at all because of growing poverty," says Phoebe Asiyo of the United Nations Development Fund for Women" (Jodi Jacobson, 1992). "Still today, 70% of the world's poor and two thirds of the world's illiterate are women. Women hold only 14% of managerial and administrative positions, 10% of parliamentary seats and 6% of ministerial posts... They often work longer hours than men, yet their work is largely ignored, unrecognised and undervalued"... (UNDP, 1995). Thus the vicious circle is set in motion in which women lack

the necessary training and have to accept the lowest-ranking, lowest-paid jobs with the harshest conditions, often bordering on slavery.

Free Trade Zones and Maquiladora Companies

Free trade zones are created by states that provide tax exemptions and other advantages to foreign companies set up in

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them to manufacture products for export or manufacture a part of a product or assemble parts from other countries (maquiladoras). The latter also exist in large numbers outside the free trade zones as part of the fragmentation of the production process on a global scale to lower production costs, first and foremost the cost of labour. In

the mid-1980s, there were some 176 EPZs in 47 peripheral countries, where TNCs employed 1.3 million people and 600,000 more in EPZ-like sites.

Twenty years later, it was estimated that 2,000 free trade zones in the world employed 27 million workers; in 2006, there were some 3,500 spread over 130 countries - peripheral and central - with 66 million workers, most of them women. The common denominator of the free trade zones and the maquiladoras is the disregard for labour rights regarding wages, working hours, health and safety, etc. And the prohibition of trade union organisation. Any attempt to do so is harshly repressed.

In 2015 we wrote: Mexico's border with the United States, approximately 3,185 kilometres long, is extremely porous, legally and illegally. On the Mexican side of the border, about 3,000 "maquiladoras" are part of binational production chains: they import components and raw materials from the United States, which Mexican workers assemble for wages ten times lower than those in the United States and then re-export across the border. For example, in Ciudad Juárez (the number of women murdered each year is in the thousands), on the border with the US city of El Paso, many women work in the "maquiladoras" in appalling working conditions (low wages and long hours) with the aggravating factor of insecurity: they travel to work at dawn, partly by bus and partly on foot, walking in practically deserted areas when there is still no daylight, and return home at night in the same conditions. Some of them are attacked and disappear. Sometimes their bodies are found, and sometimes they are not. Eighty per cent of the textile and garment industry workers are young women between 18 and 24.⁵ Most of them work in appalling conditions, with low wages, long hours and virtually non-existent safety conditions.

And that happens in countries on every continent. On 25 March 1911, 146 women died, and 76 were injured in the fire

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at the Triangle Shirtwaist shirt factory in New York. They died by suffocation, burned alive or by throwing themselves out of windows to escape the fire. The tragedy took on this magnitude because exits were closed so that the bosses could better control the workers. More than 100 years later, the working conditions of women in the textile and

clothing industry do not seem to have changed much in many parts of the world. This was evident on 24 April 2013, after the collapse of the Rana Plaza textile factory in Bangladesh, which resulted in 1,134 deaths, the vast majority of them women.

⁵ ↪ María José Torres Marín: [Mujeres en la industria textil: su realidad como trabajadoras](#)

Also, as a century earlier in New York, the victims were so numerous because several exits were closed for better employer control of the workers. A few days later, a fire in another textile workshop caused eight deaths, and in November 2012, another fire in a garment workshop, also in Bangladesh, had caused 111 deaths. In recent years, 1700 people have died in similar accidents in Bangladesh. In other industrial sectors, the situation is similar. There is a kind of global scale or "ranking" of the exploitation of women workers. Among the most exploited are those in various Asian, African, Latin American, Central American and Caribbean countries.

Working Women in Europe

In February 2007, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) published a Report on Internationally Recognised Core Labour Standards in the European Union, which analysed the situation on this issue on a country-by-country basis. The Report stated that All EU Member States have ratified the two ILO core conventions on forced labour. However, trafficking in human beings, mainly women and girls, for forced labour and sexual exploitation is, to some extent, a problem in virtually all countries.

In some Member States, prisoners are forced to work for private companies. The Report's Conclusions state: In the EU Member States, there is still a deep gap between legislation and practice concerning gender equality. Women in Europe earn up to 40 per cent less than their male counterparts, have higher unemployment rates, and are under-represented in managerial positions.

Economic discrimination against women is particularly acute in some Eastern European Member States, where the pay gap in the public sector is often even wider than in the private sector. In any case, the high concentration of women in part-time jobs and the service sector has also unfavourably changed the situation of women in some Western European countries. Discrimination against ethnic minorities, particularly the Roma community, is a serious concern. Unemployment is much higher among Roma than among other groups of different ethnic backgrounds. Sexual harassment remains a problem in many countries.

ILO Conventions

As far as the international labour conventions of the ILO are concerned, protective measures for women in employment have in some cases been repealed on the grounds that they are an obstacle to equal treatment and equal opportunities for women in employment. The same has happened - and continues to happen - in many national legislations.

It is said that the prohibition of women's employment in specific jobs closes opportunities for them or that the different conditions to which they are entitled, in some cases, make them more expensive as labour or detract from their work performance, leading to discrimination against them. What is at issue, in principle, are not maternity protection standards, which all seem to consider necessary (although Convention 103 on Maternity Protection was amended by 183 to make its application more flexible), but those covering all women as such or those of childbearing age.

On the grounds that legislation to protect women promotes discrimination against women, one of the first countries to repeal any such legislation was the United States.

The fact that women are concentrated in traditionally female-dominated industries and low-skilled activities is said to prevent them from earning high wages, hinder their chances of advancement and expose them to unemployment. In fact, as we

have seen, in industries that traditionally prefer to employ female workers, wages are lower, not because they require

less qualification, but because employers take advantage of the social devaluation of women (since women themselves are often not only recipients but also disseminators of devaluing cultural notions) and take advantage of their qualifications without adequate compensation. Of course, employers generally argue that women's increased absenteeism due to family obligations, the prohibition of night work, the obligation to provide childcare or independent services, maternity leave or the protections owed to them during maternity and breastfeeding make them less profitable as workers.

On the grounds that legislation to protect women promotes discrimination against women, one of the first countries to repeal any such legislation was the United States, where there are now no regulations or other legal measures regarding working hours, no limitations on women's occupations or night work, and no special service requirements for women only.

In Australia, a 1984 sex discrimination law had the effect of overriding state laws for the special protection of women. In New Zealand, special provisions concerning women's working hours in factories and those prohibiting women from working with lead have been repealed. Instead, provisions for seating and rest breaks, which previously existed only for women, have been extended to all workers. This latter measure extending the benefits of the law to men appears to be exceptional in the face of the general trend of limiting workers' protection.

In 1976, the European Community Directive 76/207/EEC on the implementation of the principle of equal treatment for men and women led to a revision, if not the abolition, of the various measures for the protection of women at work that exist in the Member States of the European Union (night work, handling of maximum authorised weights, working with

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lead-containing materials, etc.). Based on this Directive, the European Commission imposed on France in 1999 a fine of 900,000 francs per day from 30/11/2000 until it abolished the legal prohibition of night work for women. France completely abolished the ban in May 2001. In Belgium, the prohibition of activities involving exposure to lead compounds or heavy lifting was repealed. In Greece, provisions granting special protection to women have been removed from legislation on the maintenance

and lubrication of machinery and the maintenance of boilers, carpentry workshops and the preparation and use of lead-based paints and activities in various industries. Ireland has repealed restrictions on women's employment in industrial activities at weekends and on the employment of women in underground work in some non-manual activities. The Netherlands has replaced provisions on toilet facilities which distinguish between men and women. The UK has revised protective legislation concerning the underground employment of women in mines and quarries, working hours and manual handling of heavy objects. Spain is in the process of replacing protective legislation with equal legislation for both sexes.

Workers' organisations have repeatedly called for the continuation of protective measures for women and their extension to men. They opposed any repeal of special measures for the protection of women at work on the grounds that there were biological differences that justified such special standards and that, in addition, the traditional division of roles between the sexes continued to exist in today's society, subjecting millions of women workers to the double burden of being engaged in paid work and, at the same time, taking care of household and family chores. Because workers were experiencing changes in working conditions due to increased intensity and pace of work, new technologies, noise, hazardous substances, etc., they felt that protection needed to be generally increased rather than weakened.

This social order is imposed on the people through the mass media, through official and private institutions and organisations, through intellectuals of different shades and currents at the service of the system, through the ruling political elites and, when persuasion and consensus do not work, through repression.

Government agencies and employers' organisations, on the other hand, believed that protective measures were not

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justified. The European Commission, after studying the legislation on the protection of women in the EU Member States, concluded, inter alia: "...with the passage of time it has become clear that many protective measures can now be criticised as anomalous or inadequate because they have lost their original justification..... for example, arduous work or

tasks involving heavy lifting may be prohibited for all women because, in general, women are often physically weaker than men; women are prohibited from working with certain substances which may be hazardous to reproduction while no account is taken of individual cases or of the dangers to the reproductive functions of both sexes; and some women, but not all, and in certain sectors only, are given special protection against night work..... the Commission is therefore of the opinion that protective legislation should, in principle, be the same for both sexes and for all occupational sectors."

It is quite clear that the European Commission put forward arguments that would be valid if it were proposing the extension of protective measures to men, but that its ambiguous conclusion ("legislation should be the same") is designed to pave the way for legislative changes that do not extend but restrict protection. In fact, this is what most EU member states have been doing as part of their plan to liberalise the rules governing structured work. Particularly affected have been working hours, compulsory rest periods and days and time off, as workers are increasingly being forced to remain at the disposal of employers at any time; night work for women and the extension of night hours without compensatory pay; rules excluding women from heavy, arduous or unhealthy work, because their repeal leads many women to take on workloads previously reserved for men (such as in underground work), despite the intensity of the effort required. Minimum wages, women's retirement age, and all social benefits, including maternity benefits, have also been seriously affected. All this is done under the guise of so-called "rationalisation", which eliminates jobs and often offloads the tasks previously carried out by several positions onto a single worker.

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❖ **About the author:** Mirta Libertad Sofía Brey de Teitelbaum (1933-2020) was born in Buenos Aires, taught in slum schools and obtained her law degree from the University of Buenos Aires, where she taught. She practised her profession in the Buenos Aires courts and, in a compassionate manner, was a defender of political and trade union prisoners, persecuted students and workers in the slums, particularly abandoned mothers and fighters who suffered from police brutality in the slums. Exiled in France, she was a consultant for Unesco and an official at the United Nations, where she worked in the field of human rights in the offices of that international organisation in Geneva. In this capacity, she carried out fact-finding missions on human rights and electoral processes in Nicaragua, Peru, Guatemala, Sri Lanka, and the former Yugoslavia territories. She participated in numerous international meetings and wrote reports and studies for Unesco and the United Nations. She published plays for puppets and children's theatre from her early youth and participated in cultural periodicals. Later, her short stories appeared in magazines and on cultural websites. Her first collection of short stories, "Beyond Fear", her first novel "Elemental Watson", and her second collection of short stories "Generations", were published by Corregidor in 2000, 2009 and 2014, and "Sacar a Luz" by Editorial Dunken in 2016.



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