

The condition of working-class women on International Women's Day

9 March 2018

There is more talk of gender in the American and global media than perhaps at any previous moment in history. The #MeToo campaign in the US has supposedly brought the conditions of women to the fore like never before. The US media and Hollywood are animated by hardly anything else.

But this is a fraud. The women getting nearly all the coverage belong to the upper echelons of society, the richest five or ten percent. Working-class women are nowhere to be seen in all this, except for a few token exceptions that prove the rule.

This skewed class lineup in the media coverage reflects a greater social reality: the gap between affluent women and working-class women has widened dramatically in the past several decades. On International Women's Day in 2018, what are the conditions of the great majority of women in the world, those who are ignored by the media, those who do not get their faces and their complaints on the evening news?

Today, of the 1.3 billion of the planet's 7.6 billion inhabitants living in extreme poverty, 70 percent are women or girls, according to Project Concern International.

Of the world's estimated 65.6 million refugee population—fleeing war, famine and violence—about half are women. Women who are internally displaced, and those who are unaccompanied, pregnant, heads of household, disabled or elderly are especially vulnerable.

Every day, approximately 830 women die worldwide from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth. Some 99 percent of all maternal deaths occur in the so-called developing countries. Some advances have been made in this area, with the global maternal mortality rate dropping between 1990 and 2015 by about 30 percent.

However, in the United States, the maternal mortality rate increased by 56 percent—from 16.9 deaths per 100,000 in 1990 to 24.7 deaths in 2015. In this regard, the US is in the company of some of the world's poorest nations in sub-Saharan Africa. Luxembourg, Canada and Greece were the other developed countries with a rise in maternal mortality rates, but their overall rate is still two to three times lower by comparison to the US. How is this to be accounted for in 2018 in the richest nation on Earth?

The plight of working-class women in America is inseparably tied to the plight of the working class as a whole. The US consistently ranks as the most unequal country in terms of income inequality. The scandalous statistics on maternal mortality, poverty, wages and unemployment for American women are a reflection of the US ruling elite's seizure of an ever-increasing proportion of the national wealth, and the two big-business parties' slashing of what remains of the social safety net.

A half-century after the Johnson administration inaugurated the "War on Poverty," over half of the 37 million Americans *officially* counted as living in poverty are women. Another statistic shows that more than 100 million Americans are either living on the edge of poverty or churn in and out of it; nearly 70 percent of these are women and children.

Forty percent of all households with children under the age of 18 include mothers who are either the primary or sole source of income. Working women comprise nearly two-thirds of minimum-wage workers in the US. The median earnings of full-time female workers are still about three-fourths of the median earnings of their male counterparts. Although women make up 47 percent of workers ages 18-56, they comprise 56 percent of the working poor—those who despite holding down a job cannot escape poverty.

The issues facing working-class women are the issues facing the entire working class—poverty, exploitation, unemployment, the attack on health care and public education, the degradation and violence, including sexual violence, produced by imperialist war. Basic questions of democratic rights, including the right to an abortion, are also under assault. Poland has completely banned abortion in all but extreme cases. States throughout the US have implemented draconian restrictions on women seeking to terminate pregnancies, with Mississippi on the verge of banning abortions after 15 weeks.

Yet at the same time, women account for four of the top 10 highest-paid CEOs in the US in 2016, all appearing on Equilar's list of the 100 highest paid executives that year. Their total compensation numbers were:

Safra Catz of Oracle: \$40.9 million

Ginni Rometty of IBM: \$33.3 million

Meg Whitman of Hewlett Packard Enterprise: \$32.9 million

Indra Nooyi of PepsiCo: \$25.1 million

These female executives and their small club of women multimillionaires are light-years away from the overwhelming majority of woman workers and their families in every respect. Their greatest concern is their stock portfolios and strategizing to climb to an even higher rung on the corporate ladder. They hire nannies, while workers struggle to pay for daycare; they debate which fine wines to drink and which trendy restaurants to patronize, while millions of families struggle to put food on the table; they make the choice of which penthouse or mansion to jet to, while workers struggle to pay the rent or stave off eviction.

The selfish, upper-middle-class champions of "women's rights" would have us believe that such female elevation to the top of the corporate world is an advance for all women. However, the reality is very different.

It is undeniable that "class inequalities among women are greater than ever before," as Ruth Milkman, professor of sociology at the CUNY Graduate Center, wrote in 2017 in the *Sociologist*, a generally taboo subject in feminist circles. But this reality is concealed by the champions of the #MeToo movement, who over the past year have abandoned due process and legal norms in their crusade against

numerous individuals, mainly men, to discredit and smear them in the name of women's rights. This travesty has been concocted in the name of all "women," but it has nothing to do with advancing the rights and concerns of wide layers of the female population.

The fight for women's rights is a social question that must be resolved in the arena of class struggle, not in the rarified atmosphere of the corporate boardroom and Hollywood. As Rosa Luxemburg once explained: "The women of the property-owning class will always fanatically defend the exploitation and enslavement of the working people, by which they indirectly receive the means for their socially useless existence."

The origins of International Women's Day date to February 28, 1909 in New York City, when a National Woman's Day was organized by the Socialist Party of America. Two years later in the same city, on March 25, 1911, 146 garment workers would perish in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire—from flames or smoke inhalation and by falling or jumping to their deaths. The vast majority of victims, 123, were women, most of them recent Italian and Jewish immigrants, aged 16 to 23.

One hundred years ago, on March 8, 1917, according to the Gregorian calendar, women textile workers began a demonstration in Petrograd marking the beginning of the Russian Revolution, an event that led to a radical advance in the social conditions and rights for workers—women and men alike—in Russia and throughout the world.

The struggle for the social welfare, dignity, and rights of working-class women can only be taken forward on the basis of this great socialist tradition, as a part of the fight by the entire international working class for the socialist transformation of society.

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To contact the WSWs and the
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