



Assumption
University

Digital Commons @ Assumption University

Economics, Finance and International Business Department Faculty Works Economics, Finance and International Business Department

2020

Beyond the Coronavirus: Understanding Crises of Social Reproduction

Smriti Rao

Assumption College, srao@assumption.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.assumption.edu/economics-faculty>



Part of the [Economics Commons](#), and the [Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rao, Smriti. "Beyond the Coronavirus: Understanding Crises of Social Reproduction." *Political Economy Research Institute: Working Paper Series* 523 (August 2020). <https://www.peri.umass.edu/publication/item/1343-beyond-the-coronavirus-understanding-crises-of-social-reproduction>.

This Working Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Economics, Finance and International Business Department at Digital Commons @ Assumption University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Economics, Finance and International Business Department Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Assumption University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@assumption.edu.



**Beyond the Coronavirus:
Understanding Crises of
Social Reproduction**

By Smriti Rao

August 2020

WORKINGPAPER SERIES

Number 523

**POLITICAL ECONOMY
RESEARCH INSTITUTE**

Beyond the Coronavirus: Understanding Crises of Social Reproduction

Smriti Rao

May, 2020

Abstract

From a feminist political economy perspective, the unfolding of the coronavirus is a further reminder of the fundamental contradiction between a capitalist system that prioritizes profits, and a feminist ethic that prioritizes life-making or social reproduction. This paper argues for a more systematic understanding of crises of social reproduction under capitalism, stressing the difference between such crises for labour, and those for capital. The coronavirus crisis represents an extraordinary example of a crisis of social reproduction for capital, but this paper examines crises of social reproduction for capital and labour that arise from the more ordinary workings of capitalism. The paper focusses on the unfolding of such crises in the global South, using the case of India to illustrate the usefulness of such an analysis.

Keywords: Social reproduction, gender, labour, political economy, India

Introduction

This paper is an effort to contribute to feminist political economy analyses of the ways in which production and reproduction are intertwined. The paper attempts to further develop the notion of a crisis of social reproduction (Fraser 2014, 2016), by building on the distinction between crises of social reproduction for labour, and those for capital (Rao and Vakulabharanam 2019). The 2020 coronavirus pandemic, a crisis of social reproduction in the most basic sense, highlights the vital importance of the activities performed by everyday agents of social reproduction, and the severe shortcomings of capitalist political economy when it comes to ensuring basic human well-being - both starting assumptions of this paper. But while the coronavirus crisis is an extraordinary example of a crisis of social reproduction, this paper is more focussed on crises of social reproduction that are generated by the everyday workings of capitalism (Mitchell, Marston and Katz 2003).

The feminist conception of social reproduction adds the production and maintenance of labour power itself to Marx's original formulation of the term, extending it into the realm of the household-family where at least some of this labour is usually expended without pay (Dalla Costa and James 1972, Beneria and Sen 1981, Federici 2012). Reproductive labour can also be performed for pay or profit in corporate, household, and state settings, as evidenced by the vast industries of childcare, health care or cleaning and food services that account for a significant share of output in advanced capitalist economies, and a particularly significant share of women's paid work across the world (Luxton and Bezanson 2006). The labour of social reproduction, as defined by feminist political economy, comprises at least four kinds of labour. First, the work of biological reproduction or the production of children. Second, the care of children, the elderly and others, or direct care work. Third, the associated production of goods and services necessary for the maintenance of human life (such as the collection of water and fuel or the production of food and drink) known as indirect care work (Beneria and Sen 1981, Razavi 2007). Fourth, the labour required to reproduce the "cultural forms and practices" that maintain and help us make sense of a labour force differentiated by race, gender, ethnicity or caste (Norton and Katz 2016).

The study of social reproduction is emphasized by feminist political economists not only because reproductive labour, whether paid or unpaid, is so often gendered as feminine and performed by women, but also because it is central to Marxist-feminist critiques of capitalism. While accepting the Marxist critique of how and who appropriates surplus under capitalism, many feminist political economists also argue that imperatives of life-making or provisioning should be prioritized above those of profit-making, in an ethic of provisioning or of ‘reproduction-first’ (Bakker 2003, Power 2004, Mies 2014). That is, feminist political economists might ask not only that those who produce surplus are able to appropriate it, but also that the imperatives of life-making take precedence over those of profit-making (Bhattacharya 2017).

Setting aside the extreme case of the global pandemic we find ourselves in the midst of, even under more normal conditions capitalism does not have a mechanism for guaranteeing the reproduction and maintenance of the labour power it needs (Katz 2001). On the contrary, the drive to accumulate surplus often involves undermining the ability of the household-family/community to engage in social reproduction, in ways that we discuss below (Federici 2012). As a result, apart from crises of profitability or realization of the kinds extensively discussed within Marxism, capitalism is also prone to crises of social reproduction. By extension, capitalist society is not only the site of class struggles over the distribution of surplus between capital and labour, but also the site of what Nancy Fraser calls “boundary struggles” over who bears the costs of social reproduction (Fraser 2016).

As the labour least valued under capitalism, reproductive labour is most likely to be assigned to the most marginalized in society (Kofman 2012, Norton and Katz 2017). The central role of gender, race and caste in structuring divisions between reproductive and productive labour imply that boundary struggles over who bears the costs of social reproduction may emerge as mobilizations around non-class hierarchies of race/gender/caste (Fraser 2016). These may or may not overlap with class struggles as understood in the Marxist tradition, but feminists argue that they should nevertheless be understood by political economists as having the potential to do so, and indeed as critical to effective mobilizations against capital (Naidu and Osofsky 2016, Fraser, Bhattacharya and Aruzza 2019).

There is a considerable feminist political economy literature on the size and scope of activities in the sphere of social reproduction. However, the literature that probes crises of social reproduction - the forms such crises may take, or the mechanisms that set them in motion - is less developed despite an otherwise rich literature on capitalist crisis in Marxism (Caffentzis 2002, Mitchell, Marston and Katz 2003)¹. This paper thus seeks to deepen our understanding of the nature of reproductive crises more generally. In particular, building on an argument made in Rao and Vakulabharanam (2019), the paper argues for the need to distinguish between crises of social reproduction for *capital*, and crises of social reproduction for *labour*.

In addition, the literature on crises of social reproduction that does exist is largely focused on advanced capitalist economies in the North. Both in terms of the content of reproductive labour, and in terms of how reproductive labour relates to dominant forms of surplus accumulation, developing countries may require a different analysis. Given the diversity of Southern political economies, this particular paper focusses on the case of India, where recent history provides a particularly stark example of how important it is to distinguish between crises of reproduction for labour and those for capital.

Conceptualizing crises of social reproduction: Crises for capital and crises for labour

Crises of social reproduction for capital involve changes in the quantity or quality of labour power that threaten capitalist accumulation processes (Caffentzis 2002, Fraser 2014). Fraser (2016) argues that crises of social reproduction are endemic to capitalism, which has no endogenous mechanism for ensuring the production or maintenance of labour power. Reproductive labour performs a critical function for capital by providing it with labour power, and threats to accumulation arise from the sphere of social reproduction when the quantity and/or quality of labour power decline in ways that challenge continued processes of accumulation. One way this could occur is certainly through pandemics, wars, or natural

¹ In order to avoid confusions of language, this paper refers to crises of surplus production and realization as crises of accumulation, and uses the term crisis of social reproduction to represent a breakdown in the ability to produce and maintain labor power.

disasters that take a large toll on human life. But this paper is concerned with a more everyday contradiction between social reproduction and surplus production. The contradiction arises from the fact that under capitalism, the responsibility to produce and maintain labour power - and to secure and organize the resources and labour required to do so - remains outside the sphere of surplus generation in the last instance. This is the rupture between life-making and profit-making under capitalism that is critiqued by feminist political economists (Bhattacharya 2017).

The existence of contradictions between the labour of social reproduction and surplus generating labour - the 'double burden' problem as it is popularly termed - implies that the even the normal operations of capitalism, which involve increases in the quantity and intensity of surplus generating labour can generate declines in reproductive labour, setting in motion crises of social reproduction. While the existence of a 'double burden' problem is now acknowledged in most discussions of women and the economy, it is often treated as a niche issue, relevant only to questions of women's participation in the labour force. Its centrality to the functioning of capitalism and thus to struggles against capitalism are much less widely recognized, a gap in the literature that feminist political economy analyses, including this one, aim to fill.

The discussion above has focussed on how disruptions to the production and maintenance of labour power can throw capitalist accumulation into crisis. However, there is another way in which the notion of crisis comes up in studies of social reproduction. Feminist analyses of the effects of neo-liberal capitalism have shown that in many different contexts, it is the sphere of social reproduction that bears the brunt of adjustment as capitalists attempts to resolve crises of profitability or realization (Elson 2010, Vertova 2014). Indeed, when labour is on the losing side of class struggle more generally, crises emerge within the sphere of social reproduction as the household-family fights for its survival and well-being (Naidu and Osome 2016). This kind of crisis of social reproduction is, however, a crisis for labour. Capital actually benefits from higher rates of absolute and/or relative surplus. To the extent that it is usually women who perform reproductive labour, they bear the brunt of these adjustment efforts (Bakker

2003, Beneria, Berik and Floro 2015). At least within the feminist literature then, there is a great deal of emphasis on what this paper terms crises of social reproduction for labour, rather than for capital.

As the coronavirus crisis unfolds, for example, it is clear that large scale death and illness poses, and is seen to pose, a threat to accumulation - a crisis of social reproduction for capital. This was clearly one reason for many elites' initial consent to lockdown measures. On the other hand, as the lockdowns got longer, it also became clear that for many of those elites, the policy goal was not the elimination but the containment of disease so that it minimally affected accumulation. Based on our experience with HIV/AIDS, Malaria or Tuberculosis, pandemics which persist for millions of the most marginalized global citizens, it is likely that the extraordinary measures being taken will come to an end once the crisis of social reproduction for capital is ameliorated, even if millions of households still have to deal with the health and economic implications of the illness. If we think of the latter as a crisis of social reproduction for labour, it becomes clear why the distinction between these two kinds of crises this paper attempts to develop might be analytically useful.

Crises of social reproduction as threats to accumulation

Pandemics or wars can quite directly set in motion crises for capital by disrupting the supply of labour. But so can disruptions to the organization and performance of reproductive labour, including disruptions to the race/gender/caste hierarchies that structure the social division of productive and reproductive labour. A rise in work for pay or profit on the part of groups such as women, and/or particular caste/racial/ethnic groups tasked with reproductive labour does, on the one hand, have the potential to push costs of production down (particularly if these groups can be effectively discriminated against in the workforce), and thus increase absolute surplus. However, these same increases in their labour force participation give rise to a 'double burden' problem, making it more difficult for them to continue to perform the labour of social reproduction and potentially threatening the sustainability of a regime of accumulation. Thus, for example, increased hours of paid work for women may result in reduced time for childcare, or outmigration by women may result in diminished care of dependents if the gender division

of labour remains inflexible. This problem of the ‘double burden’ is at the heart of the threat posed to capital from the sphere of social reproduction (Federici 2012, Bhattacharya 2017).

Changes in the organization of work that create or accentuate spatial and temporal divides between productive and reproductive labour can further reduce the ability to combine both reproductive and productive labour, threatening the former (Massey 2013). For example, work concentrated in a factory/office that is far from the household-family may be conducive to increases in productivity and worker discipline, but reduce the ability to perform reproductive labour. The emergence of resistance to non-class inequalities of gender, caste or race could create similar conditions by destabilizing the gendered/caste-based/racialized divisions of labour required to sustain the social division of labour (Aruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser 2019). These can in turn affect the quality and quantity of labour power produced. The secular decline in rates of marriage and child birth in advanced capitalist countries, at least partly shaped by feminist movements, certainly seems to point to a future crisis of reproduction for capitalism in those societies.

In such cases, possible solutions to such a crisis for capital may lie in mechanizing reproductive labour or replacing such labour with commodity substitutes. Here too, if the responsibility for social reproduction lies within the family-community in the last instance, mechanization may be too expensive for all workers to afford. The mechanization of direct care in particular has proven to be quite slow, due to resistance from both those performing and well as those receiving what is usually intimate emotional labour (Howes et al 2012). But reliance on paid human labour to care for children and the elderly requires sufficiently high wages to cover those costs (Bar et al 2018). Low wage workers in the US who must rely upon complex and unstable arrangements of care provided by networks of family and friends exemplify the difficulty poorer women have commodifying care work (Coontz 2016). In general, the use of market mechanisms to find paid substitutes for reproductive labour has tended to shift the burden of this work onto more marginalized groups, usually poor women of color (Beneria, Berik and Floro 2015, Norton and Katz 2017). The burden is also spatially displaced – from rich to poor neighborhoods, and from rich to poor countries when immigrant labour is deployed (Howes et al 2012, Kofman 2012).

A different solution to the ‘double burden’ problem lies in attempts to restructure gendered/caste-based/racial divisions of labour to more equally redistribute the burden of reproductive work (Folbre 2012). Thus, for example, a redistribution of reproductive labour from women to men within the household-family would ease some of the disproportionate time pressure on women; or the refusal of lower caste groups in India to perform certain kinds of reproductive labour would force some restructuring of that labour (Anandhi 2017). Such attempts, which represent challenges to entrenched forms of inequality, may of course also generate backlash and social unrest that is also potentially disruptive to regimes of accumulation.

Another potential solution lies in the state taking on some of the functions of social reproduction. This could be progressive if the costs are borne by greater taxation of capital. But while this solution can ameliorate inequalities based on class, it may reinforce gendered or racial inequalities if the state’s subsidies are conditioned upon re-inscribing particular gender or racial divisions of labour.

Crises of social reproduction for labour

When labour is on the backfoot in class struggle, this translates into tremendous stress within the sphere of social reproduction. If the real value of labour power falls, either through a lowering of the nominal wage and/or a rise in the cost of essentials, households are torn between the intensification of labour for pay or profit (so as to raise household income) and the intensification of reproductive labour as an expenditure saving mechanism. When the former dominates, as ‘lean in’ feminism advocates, there is a care deficit, as the supply of labour for social reproduction reduces (Folbre 2012). Where the latter dominates, this could result in a decrease in the labour force participation of women, of the kind that has been documented in the US (Blau and Kahn 2013).

Either way, a likely outcome is an increase in women’s time poverty, and if the household fails in its attempt to balance these needs, a decline in the standard of living, or the use-values the households is able to consume. The most dire outcome is when individuals give up the struggle to reproduce themselves entirely, as in the case of the ‘deaths of despair’ documented in the US by Case and Deaton(2015).

Households make longer term adjustments as well. Fertility rates may fall, as well as rates of marriage, as is increasingly the case for non-college educated men and women in the US (Schneider 2017). It is unlikely to be a coincidence that the ‘social evils’ blamed by US social conservatives on feminism - divorce, children growing up without stable parenting - are now concentrated amongst low-income working class households in the US (Coontz 2016).

Even without downward pressure on earnings, when relative rates of surplus rise as capitalists find ways to increase productivity, there are increased demands placed on workers’ physical, mental and emotional resources. These demands can generate health and emotional deficits that once again must be addressed within the sphere of social reproduction, particularly if access to health care is inadequate. The potential effects of such stress, from substance abuse to mental health challenges, also end up coming back home in the form of increased burdens of care work, as well as increases in domestic violence (Bhattacharya 2017).

These forces are at work during what would appear to be ‘boom’ periods in capitalist economies – US corporate profits rose sharply during the very 2008-2020 period during which fertility rates were falling and deaths of despair increasing. They can be accentuated further when the state is prevailed upon to rescue capitalist profits through austerity and budget cuts. Feminists working on the structural adjustment policies of the 1980s and 1990s pointed out that in the end, reproductive labour performed in households had to adjust the most. In the context of relatively inflexible gender divisions of labour, women’s and girls’ labour time and work intensity was absorbing the bulk of this shock (Elson 2010, Beneria, Berik and Floro 2015). More recently in Europe, post-2010 austerity policies reflected a decision to prioritize the demands of financial capital over those of the social reproduction of households and families (Himmelweit 2016). And we now know that the greatest costs of these policies were borne by elderly and poor women in terms of both time and income poverty, despite the longstanding official commitments of the EU to ensuring various forms of gender equality (Karamessini and Rubery 2014).

Crises of reproduction for labour usually do not attract the attention of the state since they occur precisely in periods of improving/successful accumulation. Within households and communities,

inequalities of gender, race and caste have unequally distributed the impacts of such crises, disproportionately shielding men from dominant races and castes who usually have the most ability to influence political agenda-setting. Any resultant declines in the quantity or quality of labour power produced usually only manifest over a long period of time, and thus do not present any immediate problems for capitalist economies. But political movements that mobilize around these struggles do have the potential to move these crises to the front page.

As Fraser points out, these struggles are not always class struggles. They are sometimes focused on a particular form of subsidy for the costs of social reproduction – the various mobilizations around expanded access to health care in the United States being one example. Or they may be focused on redistributing the costs of reproduction by gender or race alone. Meanwhile there is a very long history of the reverse problem, where class struggles, and Marxism more generally, have failed to engage with what it would mean to truly redistribute the costs of social reproduction within the household-family (Federici 2012). Knitting these two forms of struggle more closely together thus remains a challenge for political economists.

Conceptualizing Crises of Reproduction: The View from the South

After seven decades of attempts to replicate Northern models of capitalist development in the South, the limits of that attempt, and its implied teleologies, have become clear. The substantive differences between the global North and South when it comes to forms of accumulation resist any attempt to cast them as the past of the North playing itself out in the South (Bernstein 2006, Harriss-White 2018). In relatively low-income countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, surplus accumulation still does not take the form of the “proper job or proper business” (Ferguson and Li 2018). Indeed, at least as far as non-agricultural work goes, the kinds of precarity now being discussed in the North have always been a feature of livelihood generation in the South (Scully 2016). But one important change is that agriculture no longer constitutes the main source of livelihoods in the global South.

Agricultural production was relatively spatially rooted for obvious reasons. The professionalized/salaried forms of work that urban formal sector employees in manufacturing and services engage in also have a rooted quality, based as they are in access to certain specific kinds of infrastructure (the factory, the office, the internet network, the power grid, the airport) that are less fixed in space, but nevertheless available in a relatively narrow range of locations. Failed or bypassed agrarian transitions in the low income South did result in a move away from rooted agricultural labour, but to forms of “footloose labour” rather than to professionalized/salaried work (Bernstein 2006, Breman 2010). At any given point in time, a single household may deal with multiple small-scale sub-contractors and brokers, money lenders and seed/fertilizer agents, extracting surplus through diverse forms of ‘formal subsumption’, and involving changing work sites and work types (Banaji 2013, Das 2015). These “awkward classes” of labour confront amorphous and shifting forms of capital that are difficult to organize against as transient forms of livelihood generation introduce a radical uncertainty and instability into work location, timing, and content (Harriss-White 2018). This is an instability fundamentally at odds with the requirements of social reproduction (Massey 2013).

The resultant accentuation of the contradiction between social reproduction and surplus generation is also an accentuation of the ‘double burden’ problem on a vast scale, affecting not just wage work but also forms of self-employment and unpaid labour in family enterprises. Furthermore, in the South reproductive labour itself is less mechanized, less commoditized and far less subsidized by state or capital than in the North (Razavi 2007). A greater proportion of such labour thus involves the conversion of ‘free’ inputs from nature/the physical world into use values such as food or housing (Naidu and Ossome 2016). Unlike in the North, where crises of direct care tend to dominate the literature on care crises, in the South crises of social reproduction may be more likely to arise from the inability to perform forms of indirect care – in particular to secure the inputs necessary to generate food, drink and a safe and clean living space.

Form of dispossession therefore play a more significant role in generating crises of social reproduction for labour (Mies 2014). As in the case of the North, falling wages or rising costs of

essentials leave the household torn between trying to increase income to afford commodity substitutes, or intensify the reproductive labour to produce use-values within the household-family. Given that the latter requires more direct access to nature in many parts of the South, forms of dispossession not only change the household's ability to participate in surplus generating activities, they also affect the household's ability to produce use-values for social reproduction (Levein 2017). The ability to resist such dispossession and a refusal to give up land or homes in the village; to hold on to some rootedness of social reproduction, may thus be a crucial form of resistance on the part of labour. As Zhan and Scully(2018) discuss, the refusal of marginal farmer households to give up land across the global South is best understood as a strategy to ensure reproduction, rather than an attempt to generate surplus through agriculture.

The impact of this accentuated contradiction between reproduction and production, and the nature of the struggle to resolve it, is contingent upon the gender/caste/race hierarchies that structure the social division of labour between production and reproduction. The more that gender/race/caste divisions of labour are destabilized, the more the potential threat to accumulation from these accentuated contradictions increases, turning crises of reproduction for labour into crises of reproduction for capital. There is some evidence that the devastation wrought by the HIV/AIDS crisis in South Africa played some role in disrupting existing gender and generational divisions of labour, so that crises of reproduction for labour became more likely to spill over into the sphere of accumulation (Ferguson 2015).

The world of “footloose labor” makes it relatively difficult for boundary struggles, not to mention class struggles, to target the employers, despite worker strikes and agitations at mines, factories and corporate farms across the South. The one common site in these various forms of work is therefore the household-community, rather than the place of employment (Katz 2001). As a result, boundary struggles are much more likely to arise from the household-community and be based upon non-class identities of gender, caste, race and ethnicity. Struggles like these, particularly around who bears the costs of social reproduction, may emerge as much more important and fruitful than traditional Marxist analyses has allowed for (O’Laughlin 2008).

Historical trajectories of boundary struggles in the South

Recent work in critical development studies points out that boundary struggles have intensified and succeeded in the low income global South in a way that diverged from their trajectory in the North. This literature also points out that these struggles often reflected not just resistance to neo-liberalism, but resistance to features of the accumulation regime that predated the neo-liberal era (Harris and Scully 2015, Ferguson 2015).

Nancy Fraser(2016) traces three distinct phases of boundary struggles within advanced capitalist societies in the twentieth century. The Great Depression brought to an end an early phase of Northern capitalism in which workers almost entirely bore the costs of reproduction. Corporations were pushed to increase the subsidization of their workers' retirements and healthcare, and higher taxes on capital financed a particular form of the welfare state structured around wage-workers. Access to those subsidies was thus largely channelled through men, and white men in particular. Declining profit rates by the 1970s then gave rise to a neo-liberal, financialized form of capitalism that successfully pushed costs of reproduction in the North back upon the household-family, even as the group of wage workers able to access the welfare state became more diverse (Bakker 2003, Luxton and Bezanson 2006). This neo-liberal regime was disturbed, if not displaced, by the Great Recession, as state responses to the recession varied across the US and Europe, and across different social safety net programs. One relatively consistent feature of these responses though was capital's ability to evade higher taxes or greater contributions to subsidize social reproduction (Himmelweit 2016). It is an open question whether the new shock of the coronavirus crisis will change that.

In the low-income South this trajectory has been different (Ferguson 2015). To the extent that newly independent post-colonial states in Africa and South Asia subsidized the costs of social reproduction, such programs tended to focus upon wage workers with relatively permanent. Such workers were not only likely to be men from privileged caste/race/ethnic backgrounds as in the North, but unlike in the North, they constituted a small minority of all workers (Scully 2018). They were also most likely

to be employees of the government itself, so that the share of the workforce whose social reproduction was directly subsidized by capital was even smaller. Across the low-income South, such workers remained a very small minority even at the end of the twentieth century (Ferguson and Li 2018). In terms of direct impacts then, the neo-liberal turn in the 1980s had a larger and more significant impact upon various state supports to surplus production in agriculture and industry in the South than it did upon what were more minor programs subsidizing social reproduction.

Instead, as Harris and Scully(2015) have argued, much of the South saw an expansion of state subsidies for social reproduction in the first decade of the 2000s, largely in response to grassroots struggles. They note that these attempts were not uniform, and tended to go further when the state directed subsidies to particular demographic categories (the elderly and children for example) than when it directed them at the “productive” poor. Focusing on wage-workers and the “productive poor” is problematic even in the North, as it excludes those performing reproductive labour. It is even more meaningless in the context of the under-employed ‘awkward classes’ of the global South. Unsurprisingly, given the dominance of formal subsumption strategies and the resultant decentralized, hard-to-locate quality of capital, the ability to get capitalists to contribute to such subsidization has also been very limited. The state, however flawed, remains the primary target of attempts to resolve crises of reproduction for labour (Ferguson 2015).

But this broad analysis, while highlighting an important divergence between the unfolding of neo-liberalism, and the resistance to it, in the North and South, does of course mask significant differences by country. This paper presents the case of India, where the post-2000s expansion of social safety net programs reached a much smaller share of the population than in a country like South Africa, and where there has been some retrenchment of that expansion since 2014.

Crises of Social Reproduction in India

Outside of a very narrow slice of government and formal sector employees (estimated at about 10% of the Indian workforce today), there was no systematic sharing of the costs of social reproduction

by the Indian state or Indian capitalists in the twentieth century (Chibber 2012). The Nehruvian era of big dams and big industry did create pockets of workers in rural and urban India whose jobs came with access to pensions and to subsidized healthcare and education. These benefits were in turn financed by relatively high rates of taxation on a small group of non-agricultural capitalists. But access to even these pockets of support was heavily mediated by gender and caste. The bulk of this employment went to men from upper castes, and thus access to the subsidies that came with the employment also had to occur via upper caste men. For women and their natal families, marriage to men with employment of this kind became, and remains, a means to access not just the culturally and socially valuable status of being a married woman in a patriarchal society, but also access to vital economic resources that enable social reproduction (Palriwala and Pillai 2008).

During the 1960s-1980s governmental subsidies for social reproduction did increase somewhat. At the national level, the 1960s-80s saw an expansion of the Public Distribution System for essential foods, finally reaching rural Indians in the 1980s (Swaminathan 2000). But it was at the state level that the most change occurred, particularly in South India. Kerala's unique political economy resulted in sharp expansions in state subsidies for social reproduction. Anti-brahminical movements in neighboring states such as Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu yielded governments willing to expand the provision of meals in public schools, decrease the price of grains provided through the Public Distribution System, and expand government sponsored housing targeted at rural areas (Nagaraj 2012). There were some examples of boundary struggles mobilized around gender that had some success: the anti-price rise demonstrations of the 1970s, the Chipko movement to protect forest resources, or the anti-alcohol movement in the erstwhile state of Andhra Pradesh for example (Lalita and Kannabiran 1984, Sen 2002). Broadly, outside of Kerala, it appears that successful struggles over who would bear the costs of social reproduction expressed themselves primarily through mobilizations around caste (Nagaraj 2012).

Neo-liberalism came to India as an attempt to resolve a crisis of accumulation faced by Indian capital in the early 1990s. This accumulation crisis was primarily solved by cutting state support to petty producers - the support of state and capital to social reproduction was too minimal for those cuts to have

as much of an impact (Palriwala and Pillai 2008). Falling state subsidies for credit and other inputs, and reduced price controls re-routed agriculture and small-scale manufacturing in India more firmly through the intermediaries of capital. As a result, the post-1993 expansion of capitalism was characterized by the contrast between an unevenly distributed but severe decline in agricultural employment and earnings on the one hand, and growth in an extremely narrow group of private sector, urban, non-agricultural sectors on the other (Vakulabharanam and Motiram 2016, Harris-White 2018). The former directly affected the livelihoods of a majority of the Indian population, creating a reproductive crisis for labour. When local non-agricultural livelihood options failed to expand, the only way for workers to survive was become 'footloose' (Breman 2010).

Many of the suicides by marginal farmers documented from late 1990s through the 2000s were Indian 'deaths of despair' (Nagaraj et al 2014). But for a large share of rural households, the resolution of the crisis of social reproduction for labour involved a willingness to move between low-wage jobs and low-wage work sites, whether near or far. The fundamental 'double burden' dilemma of being torn between earning an income and engaging in reproductive labour is made even more difficult to reconcile in a context where earning an income requires mobility, and reproductive labour requires remaining in place. Falling women's labour force participation during this period would suggest that households were pushed into a highly gendered solution, with women's responsibility for reproductive labour reinforced by the increasing difficulty of finding work for pay or profit that did not require displacement (Rao 2018). The forms of non-agricultural employment, including migrant labour, that expanded the most over this period continued to be dominated by men in both rural and urban India (Mosse et al 2003, Garikipati 2008, Thomas 2015).

The trans-local households that have come into being as a result do raise some interesting possibilities for transforming gender relations (Gidwani and Ramamurthy 2018). But thus far, outside of some elite groups, there is little evidence of a shift in the gender division of labour (Palriwala and Pillai 2008, Rao 2018). At the socio-cultural level as well, the continued high rates of violence against women, the role of dowry in commodifying women, and the declining child sex ratio all suggest that the

management of instability in social reproduction has involved a re-inscription of some key patriarchal gendered norms (Palriwala and Pillai 2008, John et al. 2009, Anandhi 2017).

Sharing the costs of social reproduction: Boundary struggles in India

Like in other parts of the global South, the 2000s did also bring an expansion of social protection in India, in response to pressure from grassroots social movements and an unusually receptive Supreme Court (Khera 2011). The threat posed by a successful Maoist movement in Central India also shaped the state's response. While unable/unwilling to slow down processes of privatization and liberalization in the sphere of production, the state was pushed to increase its subsidization of social reproduction, particularly through the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) which promised to provide 100 days of employment to each rural household. There was also an expansion of mid-day meals for school children through the National Food Security Act of 2013, pension schemes for widows, and housing for the poor. Taken together, these programs did represent an increase in the Indian state's subsidies to the sphere of social reproduction (Dreze and Khera 2017). Counter to the above trends in the gender division of labour or the child sex ratio, this round of programmatic changes also reflected an increased attention to gender inequality (Khera 2011). The design of these programs made women more able to access them directly, as opposed to indirectly through their husbands (Desai, Vashishtha and Joshi 2015).

These programs did define beneficiaries based on demographic characteristics rather than "productivity" – the children and elderly when it came to food security and pensions, and all rural households when it came to NREGS. But the rural character of NREGS also meant that urban Indians were denied access to one of the most significant components of the safety net in India (Basole 2019). As the coronavirus has made all too clear, access to the programs continued to be based on the kind of residence-in-place that the larger accumulation regime was acting to disrupt. Indeed, the provision of services in urban India more generally, from water to sanitation to schooling, remained severely restricted, as the temporariness of urban-rural migration became a feature rather than a bug for surplus accumulation in India (Breman 2010).

The relative success of this phase of struggle did bring its own backlash. The new BJP government's stance towards these programs has varied from "indifference to outright hostility" (Dreze 2020). The government has attempted to route program access through biometric identification, disband some key components of the maternal and child welfare programs, and pushed to privatize what remains of India's threadbare public health system (Ibid, Mariano 2018). Expenditure on these programs has remained relatively stagnant since 2014 (Mariano 2018), and the government has acted to repress the social movements that drove these programs (Human Rights Watch 2019). Overall then, the promise of the struggles of the 2000s remains only partially fulfilled – the labour of social reproduction in India remained largely privatized, and it remains largely the work of women.

The coronavirus crisis compounded an already brewing accumulation crisis in India after 2016. The particular form this crisis took also exposed the extent to which workers' sacrifice of their quality of life paid for India's boom years. Millions of migrant workers chose to walk home for hundreds of miles after Indian coronavirus lockdown was announced because they knew their migrant camps provided them with no access to the basic inputs of social reproduction. Once their income was gone they could not stay alive there, and it was also no place to die (Dutt 2020). Meanwhile the Indian central government's extreme reluctance to subsidize the reproduction of India's working class even at this time of crisis suggests that it sees the goal of its interventions as minimizing the crisis for capital, even if the crisis for labour intensifies.

But as the migrants leave, this time at least some of them are threatening never to return (Dutt 2020). The extent of their desperation, and the fact that they were denied the most basic assistance as the crisis initially unfolded has at least temporarily shaken the narrative that India's boom years were a win-win. It just may be that the boundary struggles from a decade ago in India and across the rest of low-income South can serve as a model for what comes next: building upon demands to socialize the labour of social reproduction as an integral part of anti-capitalist struggle, and mobilizing trans-local households to do so in both urban and rural India.

Conclusion

This paper argues for a more systematic understanding of crises of social reproduction under capitalism, stressing the difference between such crises for labour, and those for capital. It tries to trace trajectories of crises for labour in the global South, using India as a case study, arguing that the neo-liberal period in India was characterised by a crisis of social reproduction for labour, rather than for capital.

The terrible pandemic sweeping the globe caused capitalist accumulation to be temporarily suspended in order to address the threat to the production and maintenance of life posed by the virus. One could sense the impatience generated by this unprecedented move in an economic system that is designed to reverse that order of priorities. The suspension did not last long, precisely because of how poorly it fits our current political economy. From a feminist political economy perspective, this is a further reminder of the fundamental contradiction between a capitalist system that prioritizes profits, and a feminist ethic that prioritizes life-making or social reproduction. Perhaps it also opens up space for us to better integrate social reproduction into political economy analyses and to imagine what it would be like to put reproduction first.

References

- Anandhi S. 2017. Gendered negotiations of caste identity: Dalit women's activism in rural Tamil Nadu. in Anandhi, S. and Kapadia, K. eds. *Dalit women: Vanguard of an alternative politics in India*. New York: Routledge.
- Bakker, I. 2003. Neo-liberal governance and the re-privatization of social reproduction: Social provisioning and shifting gender orders. In *Power, production and social reproduction* (pp. 66-82). Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- Banaji, J. 2013. *Theory as History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation*, Delhi: Aakar Books.
- Bar, M., Hazan, M., Leukhina, O., Weiss, D. and Zoabi, H., 2018. Why did rich families increase their fertility? Inequality and marketization of child care. *Journal of Economic Growth*, 23(4), pp.427-463.
- Basole, A. et al. 2019. State of Working India, Centre for Sustainable Employment, Azim Premji University, Bangalore India. Available at: https://cse.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/State_of_Working_India_2019.pdf

- Beneria, L. and G. Sen. 1981. Accumulation, Reproduction and Women's Role in Development: Boserup Revisited, in E. Leacock and H. Safa (eds.), *Women's Work*, pp 141-157. Massachusetts: Begin and Garvey.
- Beneria, L., G. Berik and M. Floro. 2015. *Gender, Development and Globalization: Economics As If All People Mattered*. New York: Routledge.
- Bhattacharya, T., 2017. Introduction: mapping social reproduction theory. *Social reproduction theory: remapping class, recentering oppression*. Pluto Press, London.
- Blau, F.D. and Kahn, L.M., 2013. Female labour supply: Why is the United States falling behind? *American Economic Review*, 103(3), pp.251-56.
- Breman, J., 2010. *Outcast Labour in Asia: Circulation and Informalization of the Workforce at the Bottom of the Economy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Caffentzis, G. 2002. On the Notion of a Crisis of Social Reproduction: A Theoretical Review. *Commoner* 5: 1–22.
- Case, A. and A. Deaton. 2015. "Rising morbidity and mortality in midlife among white non-Hispanic Americans in the 21st century." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112, no. 49: 15078-15083.
- Chibber, V., 2012. Organised Interests, Development Strategies and Social Policies. In *Growth, Inequality and Social Development in India* (pp. 168-193). Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- Coontz, S., 2016. *The way we never were: American families and the nostalgia trap*. Hachette UK.
- Dalla Costa M. and James S, eds. 1972. *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*. Bristol: Falling Wall Press
- Desai, S., Vashishtha, P., and Joshi, O. 2015. Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act: A Catalyst for Rural Transformation. National Council for Applied Economic Research, New Delhi.
- Drèze, J. and Khera, R., 2017. Recent social security initiatives in India. *World Development*, 98, pp.555-572.
- Dreze, J. 2018. Interview with The Citizen. <https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/newsdetail/index/2/14677/hindutva-is-better-described-as-a-movement-of-the-oppressive-minority-jean-dreze>.
- Dutt, B. 2020. On the Road with the Pandemic: A seminar with Barkha Dutt. Center for Contemporary South Asia, virtual event. <https://youtu.be/vT1OWCuw5Uc>.
- Elson, D. 2010. Gender and the global economic crisis in developing countries: a framework for analysis. *Gender & Development*, 18(2):pp 201-212.
- Federici, S., 2012. *Revolution at Point Zero*. San Francisco, CA: PM Press.
- Ferguson, J. and Li, T.M. 2018. Beyond the "Proper Job:" Political-economic Analysis after the Century of Labouring Man, *Working Paper 51*. PLAAS, UWC:Cape Town.

- Ferguson, J., 2015. *Give a man a fish: Reflections on the new politics of distribution*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Folbre, N. ed. 2012. *For Love and Money: Care Provision in the United States*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Fraser, N., T. Bhattacharya and C. Arruzza. 2019. *Feminism for the 99%*. New York: Verso.
- Fraser, N. 2014. Behind Marx's Hidden Abode for an Expanded Conception of Capitalism. *New Left Review* 86: 55-72.
- Fraser, N. 2016. Contradictions of Capital and Care. *New Left Review* 100: 99-117.
- Garikipati, S. 2008. Agricultural wage work, seasonal migration and the widening gender gap: Evidence from a semi-arid region of Andhra Pradesh. *The European Journal of Development Research*, 20(4): pp 629-648.
- Gidwani, V. and P. Ramamurthy. 2018. Agrarian questions of labour in urban India: middle migrants, translocal householding and the intersectional politics of social reproduction. *Journal of Peasant Studies* 45:5-6, pages 994-1017.
- Harris, K. and Scully, B., 2015. A hidden counter-movement? Precarity, politics, and social protection before and beyond the neoliberal era. *Theory and Society*, 44(5), pp.415-444.
- Harriss-White, B. 2018. Awkward classes and India's development. *Review of Political Economy*, 30(3), pp.355-376.
- Himmelweit, S., 2016. Conclusion: Explaining Austerity and Its Gender Impact. In Bargawi, H., Cozzi, G. and Himmelweit, S. eds. *Economics And Austerity In Europe: Gendered Impacts And Sustainable Alternatives*, pp.189-203.
- Howes, C., Leana, C. and Smith, K., 2012. Paid care work in Folbre, Nancy ed. *For Love and Money: Care Provision in the United States*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Human Rights Watch. 2019. Country chapter: India. *Human Rights Watch World Report 2019*. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/india>
- John, M.E., Kaur, R., Palriwala, R. and Raju, S., 2009. Dispensing with daughters: Technology, society, economy in north India. *Economic and Political Weekly* 44(15), pp.16-19.
- Karamessini, M. and J. Rubery. 2014. Economic Crisis and Austerity, in Maria Karamessini and Jill Rubery, eds. *Women and Austerity: The Economic Crisis and the Future for Gender Equality*, pp 314-352. New York: Routledge.
- Katz, C., 2001. Vagabond capitalism and the necessity of social reproduction. *Antipode*, 33(4), pp.709-728.
- Khera, R. 2011. "The Battle for Employment Guarantee," in Reetika Khera (ed.), *The Battle for Employment Guarantee*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

- Levien, M., 2017. From primitive accumulation to regimes of dispossession. *The Land Question in India: State, Dispossession, and Capitalist Transition*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, p.49.
- Luxton, M. and Bezanson, K. 2006. Introduction: Social Reproduction and Feminist Political Economy. In Luxton, M. and Bezanson, K. eds. *Social reproduction: Feminist political economy Challenges neo-liberalism*. McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP.
- Maiorano, D. 2018. India's Social Policies under the BJP Government. ISAS Working Paper number 313. <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/ISAS-Working-Papers-No.-313.pdf>
- Massey, D., 2013. *Space, place and gender*. London: John Wiley & Sons.
- Mies, M., 2014. *Patriarchy and accumulation on a world scale: Women in the international division of labour*. Zed Books.
- Mitchell, K., Marston, S.A. and Katz, C., 2003. Introduction: life's work: an introduction, review and critique. *Antipode*, 35(3), pp.415-442.
- Nagaraj, R., 2012. Development strategies and poverty reduction. In *Growth, Inequality and Social Development in India* (pp. 25-62). Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- Nagaraj, K., Sainath, P., Rukmani, R. and Gopinath, R. 2014. Farmers' suicides in India: Magnitudes, trends, and spatial patterns, 1997-2012. *Review of Agrarian Studies*, 4(2), pp.53-83.
- Naidu, S.C. and Ossome, L., 2016. Social reproduction and the agrarian question of women's labor in India. *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy*, 5(1), pp.50-76.
- Narayanan, S. and Gerber, N., 2017. Social safety nets for food and nutrition security in India. *Global food security*, 15, pp.65-76.
- Norton, J. and Katz, C., 2016. Social reproduction. *International Encyclopedia of Geography: People, the Earth, Environment and Technology*, pp.1-11.
- O'Laughlin, B. 2008. Gender justice, land and the agrarian question in southern Africa. In: H. Akram-Lodhi and C. Kay, eds. *Peasants and globalization: political economy, rural transformation and the agrarian question*. London: Routledge, pp. 190–213.
- Palriwala, R. and Pillai, N., 2008. The Political and Social Economy of Care: India Research Report 1. *Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD)*.
- Power, M., 2004. Social provisioning as a starting point for feminist economics. *Feminist economics*, 10(3), pp.3-19.
- Rao, S. 2018. Gender and Class Relations in Rural India. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 45, nos. 5–6, October, pp. 950–968.
- Rao, S. and V. Vakulabharanam. 2019. Migration, Crises and Social Transformation in India after the 1990s in *Handbook of Migration Crises*, Eds. Cecilia Menjivar, Marie Ruiz, Immanuel Ness. Oxford University Press.

- Razavi, S. 2007. The political and social economy of care in a development context: Conceptual issues, research questions and policy options. United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, Working paper 3.
- Schneider, D., 2017. Non-marital and teen fertility and contraception during the Great Recession. *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 3(3), pp.126-144.
- Scully, B., 2016. Precarity North and South: A Southern Critique of Guy Standing. *Global Labour Journal*, 7(2), pp.160-173.
- Sen, S., 2002. Towards a Feminist Politics? *The violence of development: The politics of identity, gender, and social inequalities in India*, pp.459-524.
- Swaminathan, M., 2000. *Weakening Welfare*. New Delhi: LeftWord Books.
- Vertova, G., 2014. What's gender got to do with the Great Recession? The Italian case. In R. Bellofiore and G. Vertova, eds. *The Great Recession and the Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism*. Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Vakulabharanam, V. and Motiram, S., 2016. "Mobility and inequality in neoliberal India." *Contemporary South Asia*, 24(3): pp.257-270.
- Zhan, S. and Scully, B., 2018. From South Africa to China: land, migrant labour and the semi-proletarian thesis revisited. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 45(5-6), pp.1018-1038.