

WOMEN: Against Imperialism. Against neo-liberalism. Against fundamentalism. For socialism

2010 – 2013 Three years of struggle

This booklet has been written to be released at the 12th National Conference of the AIDWA at Bodh Gaya, Bihar from 22nd to 25th November, 2013. It is an information document dealing with major events in the international arena which has seen tumultuous movements, agitations and also heartbreaking violence and aggression. The document attempts to give some idea of the way in which these events have impacted women in different parts of the globe. The impact has been almost uniformly adverse. The document also attempts to capture the participation and visibility of women in all struggles and battles against imperialism, unemployment, austerity measures and religious fundamentalism all over the world. Their courage and commitment is extremely inspiring for our own movement. Many of our members and certainly many of the women among whom they work so tirelessly, lead lives which isolate them from events in our own country, even from events that seem to be taking place at a distance from them or in social spheres very different from their own. Obviously they feel that what is happening in countries that are far away and unfamiliar has little bearing on their own lives.

AIDWA has always been part of the anti-imperialist struggle. Today this struggle has assumed greater significance and new dimensions. Governments of the developing nations, including our own, are compromising their national interests by increasingly following the diktats of the imperialists and of the international corporate sector. Our own Government has unfortunately turned its back on our own glorious heritage of anti-imperialist struggle and non-aligned movement. It has, therefore, become all the more important to understand the impact of policies dictated by foreign agencies and to explain this to our activists and members. The links between these policies and economic exploitation and misery in our own country have also to be understood and explained. In this way we can contribute not only to effective struggles at home but to the anti-imperialist struggle being waged by people all over the world.

Subhashini Ali, Vice President, AIDWA.

CONTINUING DEPRADATIONS OF IMPERIALISM

The US operates and/or controls between 700 and 800 military bases in 63 countries. There are 255,065 US military personnel deployed worldwide. The total land area occupied by US military bases domestically within the US and internationally is of the order of 2,202,735 hectares, which makes the Pentagon one of the largest landowners worldwide.

Imperialism's quest for global domination continues unabated.

President Obama won his first election on the promise of getting the US Army out of **Iraq** and closing down the infamous Guantanamo prison. While he reneged on both in his first term, his second term has seen the withdrawal of most US troops from Iraq after a decade of occupation that has prepared the grounds for a new Iraq "that would be ripe for the growth of sectarian politics. Iraq under Saddam Hussein ... was ... a fiercely secular government. There were no suicide bombers in Iraq under his watch... Iraq seems to be spiralling into a renewed round of violence and bloodshed." (Yohannan Chemarapally, Peoples Democracy, May, 2013). It is estimated that more than 1,25,000 Iraqi civilians have died since the invasion. The toll for just August, 2013 is more than **800 civilians**. As far as women are concerned, they no longer enjoy the access to education, jobs and an emancipated life that they did earlier. The Family Statutes Law that guaranteed equal treatment in terms of marriage, divorce, inheritance and custody of children is no longer in place. Now religious and tribal leaders have been given the power to regulate family affairs with their interpretation of religious laws. This means that women from different sects (Sunni or Shia) or religion (Muslim or Christian) face different legal treatment on the same issues. Women are now practically invisible in the workplace. Violence against women and lack of legal protection is also on the rise and is justified by religious conservatives.

On 23rd August, 2013, a decorated US soldier, Sgt. Robert Bales, was convicted of having killed 22 innocent Afghans, 17 of whom were women and children, in a few hours in March 2012. He had no explanation for his behavior other than to say that he felt like doing it.

The US invaded **Afghanistan** claiming that it would capture Osama bin Laden, destroy both Al Qaeda and the Taliban and bring equality to Afghan women. Bin Laden was ultimately captured in Pakistan and Al Qaeda is flourishing in many parts of the world while the Taliban controls large parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan. In a country bleeding from every pore, subject daily to drone attacks and acts of terrorism, women are condemned to desperation and destitution and equality has become a distant dream. Womens' rights have not received even legal sanction. In 2009, President Karzai could not get a law against violence against women endorsed by Parliament and in May 2013, members of Parliament refused to accept 16 as the minimum age of marriage for a woman, opposed shelters for victims of domestic abuse and refused to limit polygamy to 2 wives. It is impossible to list the unspeakable crimes against women that have become the norm. Not only are they victims of domestic violence but they are even used by their own fathers to pay off drug-trade debts. In fact, they have assumed the form of currency used to pay off debts of all kinds including debts of honour. Health statistics are appalling: the country has the 9th highest fertility rate in the world; it has one of the highest maternal mortality rates estimated in 2010 at 460 deaths/100,000 live births and the highest infant mortality rates 119.41 deaths/1,000 live births; one in ten children dies before he/she is five years old. Afghanistan also has the highest number of disabled persons - more than a million - many of whom have lost their limbs as a result of landmines. Female literacy is only 10%.

ARAB STRUGGLES FOR JUSTICE AND DIGNITY AND THEIR SUBSEQUENT DISTORTIONS AND DEFEATS

The deprivations of Imperialism have been experienced in different ways in most of the Arab world. Israel's colonization of Palestinian land continues unabated; Gaza's punishment by sanctions and regular attacks remains unchanged; US support to Israel's actions remains unwavering. The new and significant developments are, however, US interventions in and its reactions to the struggles against corrupt dictatorships by their citizens and their aftermath. Support to loyal, autocratic Arab regimes of the Middle East and Northern Africa is crucial to US access to and control of oil production. This is the key to understanding the cataclysmic events of the last 3 years in this region.

The end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011 witnessed a series of astonishing mobilizations against corrupt and autocratic regimes in the region. In Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Jordan and Syria, large numbers of youth took to the streets demanding democracy and economic benefits. They occupied central areas in various capital cities and were joined by other sections of society including workers, leftists, liberals and democrats. Women were prominent everywhere. They defied violent attacks to demand equal rights and liberty. The contours of the movements, while similar in many respects, were also varied as were their results.

In **Tunisia**, the dictator Ben Ali was forced into seeking exile in Saudi Arabia, while in **Egypt**, President Hosni Mubarak, close ally of both the US and Israel, had to resign and go to jail within weeks of the occupation of Tahrir Square by huge numbers of protestors - young people with young women in the lead, workers, intellectuals and venerable activists of the vintage of Hannan al Ashrawi. In both countries, the protestors were enthusiastic but lacked organization and strategy. This was not surprising as Left and democratic organizations have been persecuted and decimated in decades of dictatorship. The only organized political group that survived was the political Islamists who could find sanctuary in mosques and seminaries and enjoyed a love-hate relationship with the Government. That is why the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Ennahda Party in Tunisia could win the elections that were held as a result of the efforts of those struggling for democracy, equal rights and better futures. Since their formation of Governments, the struggles and the sacrifices of those who fought for the change were seriously compromised. In Tunisia, two left-liberal and popular national leaders have been assassinated leading to massive protests. There is serious economic discontent but, so far, the Government has managed to pacify its worst critics and is still in the saddle although demands for its resignation have begun to gain momentum recently.

The events in Egypt have been tragic and have now come full circle. The Muslim Brotherhood, Morsi Government alienated many – the minorities, women, workers and young people. As a result, they took to Tahrir again in June, 2013 and demanded its resignation. Once again, they looked to the army for support. The army was only too happy to oblige. It stepped in and, after a “peoples’ coup by the armed forces”, ensured Morsi's resignation and arrest. Subsequently, massacres of Brotherhood supporters occurred in which more than a thousand people were killed and these are being followed by indiscriminate violence against and imprisonment of striking workers and ordinary citizens. Mubarak has been freed by a court and is under house arrest.

Saudi Arabia has been quick to offer its complete solidarity and generous financial support to the Egyptian military, its old and trusted ally, and the US has been loath to call a coup a coup for

obvious reasons. As Jim Michaels says in USA Today, 17.8.13 'The US military is heavily dependent on Egypt to move personnel and equipment to Afghanistan and around volatile parts of the Middle East, complicating US efforts to place pressure on the Egyptian military'. The Egyptian army also defends the security of Israel and keeps vigil on the entry points to Gaza.

In **Libya**, similar protests had erupted. Here the US and Nato forces actively intervened against President Gaddafi and supported various armed groups, including Al Qaeda affiliates, because not only is Libya the world's largest producer of high-grade oil but Gaddafi himself had had the audacity to nationalize Libyan oil production and distribution. Gaddafi was killed and Libya is now ruled by a loose alliance of armed groups that control different parts of the country with guns and money that they have been given by the Western powers.

Protests against autocracy, unemployment and injustice erupted in **Bahrain** and even in some parts of **Saudi Arabia** but these have been brutally suppressed with overt Saudi and covert US help. In **Jordan**, protests forced the King was forced to intervene and change several Governments. Other monarchies like the UAE and Qatar have also increased their involvement in jockeying for power in neighbouring States.

Syria is the flashpoint of the Middle East today. Protests by angry citizens against the Assad regime have now metamorphosed into opposition to the regime by armed groups that constitute the Free Syrian Army of which the extremist Jabhat al Nasra Front is the most fanatic and aggressive element. Syria is in the throes of a civil war which has already taken more than 1,00,000 lives while hundreds of thousands of Syrians have fled to Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Assad's opponents enjoy the support of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, UK, France and the US. Russia and China support Assad. While there is no denying the anti-democratic nature of the Assad regime, not only do its opponents contain extreme fundamentalists in their ranks but are being supported by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies. One major strand of their opposition to Assad is their anti-Shia obsession which led them to stamp out opposition to the monarchies of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia itself.

In recent weeks, the Syrian armed forces have made significant gains and, according to many independent observers, this is the real reason behind the hue and cry that was raised over the alleged use of chemical warfare by Assad's troops so that US armed intervention could be justified. Opposition to this was widespread both inside the US and outside. In an unprecedented gesture of defiance, MPs in England voted against their Prime Minister's proposal to support a US attack and in the US, Obama had to announce that he would only go ahead with an attack on Syria if it was authorised by Congress. Members of Congress belonging to both parties were pressurised by their constituents to oppose any intervention.

At this juncture, Russia's President, Putin, made an incredible intervention. He said that the Syrian Government should be asked to hand over all chemical weapons in its possession to an international body. The Syrian Government accepted with alacrity and the US had no option but to say that it would postpone air strikes. A situation that threatened to lead to escalating violence with widespread repercussions was defused by the Russian intervention. While this has been a most welcome development, the situation in Syria remains unchanged. The killings, the brutality and the enforced migration of thousands of families continue. Cracks have appeared within the ranks of Assad's opponents and the extremist factions have broken with those whom Western powers have been propping up. While the threat of US intervention has receded, the plight of the Syrian people, of women and children, of the old and the sick remains unbearable.

Another important development has been the change of regime in Iran. The new President, Rouhani, is making conciliatory gestures. His speech at the UN General Assembly in which he categorically stated that his country would never make nuclear weapons while it would continue with its programme to develop nuclear energy for peaceful use led to Obama contacting him on the telephone – the first direct contact between the Heads of State of the two countries after decades. While it is premature to expect a breakthrough in the near future, there is some hope that the cruel sanctions regime that Iran has been subjected to maybe eased in the near future. Of course, Israel has been enraged by these developments.

On the whole, however, the euphoria of 2010-11, of the Arab Spring, is being drowned in blood. On the surface, it seems as if the citizens of the Arab world and those Afghanistan and Iraq are intent on killing each other but closer inspection reveals the machinations of imperialists and their allies. The natural resources of the region and its strategic location at the cross-roads of the world make it too valuable a prize to be lost to independence and democracy. “The one hopeful sign” according to Aijaz Ahmad in his 2011 essay ‘Rebellion and Reaction’ “is that much of the paraphernalia of the entrenched dictatorships is gone and a new order can now at least begin its struggle to be born, albeit in highly inauspicious circumstances”.

Women, especially young women, were often the face of the struggles in the region; struggles for democracy and equality and, also, struggles against fundamentalism and repression. In Tunisia, they formed large numbers of the protestors. In **Libya**, they sold their jewellery to help the protestors, acted as couriers of messages and arms and were active in every way against the dictatorial regime; in **Egypt**, they led the way to Tahrir and remained steadfast in their commitment to the struggle, facing violence and intimidation. During the second round of protests, despite the fact that more than a hundred women were raped, they continued to come out in protest, undaunted. In **Saudi Arabia**, they have braved the wrath of a despotic monarchy by driving cars, protesting on the internet and in malls, and by taking up cases of women in prison and accused of immorality (in Saudi Arabia, speaking to a man who is not a husband, son or brother is a heinous crime as a poor, old widow recently learned when she was sentenced to 600 lashes – with breaks in between so that she did not die – for having asked some young boys in her neighbourhood to bring bread for her and her family.) In **Bahrain**, girl students, women doctors and teachers participated in the protests and paid a heavy price.

Unfortunately, women across the region have experienced an erosion of their rights and autonomy in the aftermath of the heady days of protest. In Tunisia, fundamentalism is on the rise. While the earlier autocratic regime had given Tunisian women more rights than many of their Arab sisters, the new Ennahda Government is trying hard to stifle their voices and take away their rights and access to public space. Egyptian women face more violence today than ever before. Members of the Morsi regime stated openly that women were ‘100% responsible’ for their rapes and a prominent cleric, Abu Islam, claimed on national television that, blaming a man for committing sexual assault, was akin to ‘blaming a cat for eating meat that was left outside.’ The military takeover has done nothing to make their future any more secure. In Libya, women enjoyed the best personal laws and had the right to leave abusive husbands and the right to child custody after divorce. Now a new constitution is being drafted and the Government is determined to restore polygamy and Sharia law. A woman professor’s response is ‘I feel like we were taken like spoils of war.’

The intrepid and ageless Hannan al Ashrawi, who was so much a part of the recent struggles, sees much that younger women who have little experience of political processes

cannot. Recently, she met with women activists and feminists in the US who asked her what they could do to help women in the Arab world. She told them – The best thing you can do is to fight your Government and change its policies.

CRISIS, RECESSION, AUSTERITY

“Recessions can hurt but austerity kills” write Stuckler and Basu in ‘The Body Economic. They calculate that more than 10,000 additional suicides have been recorded in the US and Europe after austerity measures followed the crisis. More than 5 million Americans have lost access to jobs since the recession and 10,000 families in the UK have been pushed into homelessness.

Waging war and looting the natural resources of others have not helped to resolve the economic crisis in the US and Europe. The neo-con policies that they are increasingly succumbing to, while enormously and obscenely increasing the affluence of the 1%, are also exacerbating the recession. Growth rates have plummeted: the US is struggling to achieve a 2% growth rate and Britain’s has fallen to less than 1%. The austerity measures that have been adopted across the board to deal with the crisis by transfer its entire burden to working and poor people are increasing employment and poverty to the extent that mainstream bourgeois economists are not just aggressive in their criticism of Government policies but have taken to quoting Marx approvingly!

The resultant unprecedented concentration of economic power and wealth is casting black shadows on the institution of democracy itself. The fate of those who expose the lies of their Governments – Assange, Manning, Snowden, Miranda and others – is an indication of the increasing authoritarianism of Western democracies. The various draconian laws that were enacted in the name of combating ‘terror’ are now being used against ordinary citizens with increasing regularity. Spying on all citizens and freely accessing their mails is now part of Government policy. The freedom of the press is in jeopardy not only because of the pusillanimity being displayed by the corporate-owned press but because of the willingness of Governments to publicly crack the whip. All this was relatively unknown a few years ago. The role of corporate money in elections is not only resulting in victories for extreme conservatives but is now reflected in brazen demands for quid pro quos in policy-making. In fact, the complete takeover of democratic institutions by corporate might is now emerging as a distinct possibility: Karen Hudes who served with the World Bank for 2 decades as a Senior Counsel in May, 2013 revealed that 147 financial institutions and central banks — especially the Federal Reserve, which was created by Congress but is owned by essentially a cartel of private banks - comprised the heart of the network that had taken over the State. She has, of course, lost her job.

On the other hand, pro-rich policies and refusal to increase taxes on the richest sections are accompanied by austerity measures for everyone else.

Across Europe, it is women who are facing the brunt of the austerity measures.

- **Unemployment.** The jobless rate among women in the **Eurozone** rose to 12.1% in January 2013, highest in a decade or more; more than 25% of the female labour force is currently unemployed in **Greece and Spain**. In **Greece** 62% of young women are currently unemployed. **Italian** women with children are nine times more likely to be

jobless than fathers in the North of Italy, 10 times more likely in the centre of Italy and 14 times more likely in the South; 1 in 4 women who were employed before becoming mothers are still without a job two years after the birth of their first child and female unemployment in 2010 was 30.6%. In the education sector 19,700 women's jobs have been cut and 87,000 more are expected to lose their jobs in coming years. In the **UK**, 710,000 public sector jobs will be lost by 2017, with twice as many women than men expected to lose their jobs. In **Germany**, in 2009, unemployment benefits of men were higher by more than 200 euros higher than those for women.

- **Poverty.** 17% of women in the **EU** are in poverty. 33.7% of **Italian** women between 25 and 54 years of age don't have an income at all.
- **Cuts in benefits (maternity, and care-giving).** In **Romania**, maternity benefit was reduced by 65% in 2010 and maternity leave was also reduced. In **Macedonia**, in 2010, maternity benefit was reduced from 100% to 75-80% of total salary. Even in **Germany**, parental leave benefit has been cut. In **Estonia** benefits paid to parents taking care of a sick child have been reduced from 100% to 80% of the salary. In the **Czech Republic** the benefits given to those taking care of dependent family members (mainly disabled people) have been reduced. In **Ireland** the carers' allowance, mainly used by middle-aged and older women for whom it is an important source of income, has been reduced by €8 per week.
- **Falling wages.** In the healthcare sector in **Portugal**, the new short-term contracts for nurses now have an hourly salary of €4, €2 less than in 2011. In **Latvia**, the difference in salaries of men and women was 13.4% in 2008 by 2010 it had increased to 17.6%. By 2011, teachers of whom 80% are women; were earning 30% less than in 2008.
- **Cuts in child-care.** In **Portugal** benefits for the care of disabled children were cut by 30%. In **Ireland** and **Denmark** child benefits have been reduced. In the **UK**, the level of child benefit has been frozen until April 2014 which will translate into heavy cuts of about £130 per child per annum. Child benefit has been frozen also in **Finland**. In the **Netherlands** from January 2012 most parents have received a smaller proportion of their childcare costs. (It needs to be remembered that Europe has been experiencing a severe shrinking of its population and all Governments were giving incentives to families to remedy the situation.)
- The impact of these cuts is being felt already: in 2011 the employment rate of European women with children under 12 was 12.7% lower than that of women with no children.
- **Social cost of austerity.** **Spain** has slashed by the budget promoting policies for equality by 24% and has reduced government expenditure on combating violence against women by 7%. Today 44% of **Spain's** female population feels that stress and anxiety have increased because of economic problems that are forcing them to work harder in the home and face a precarious job situation outside. **Spain** and **Portugal** have witnessed a 15% increase in female prostitution as a result of many white collar administrative workers, professionals and young university students resorting to this.

If there was a deliberate plot to undermine the autonomy, security and development of women and children it could not have done more damage than these austerity measures. Not surprisingly, therefore, violence against women – in the home, in public spaces, in workplaces and in institutions – is seeing an exponential rise which is being attributed to the increasing unemployment, homelessness, frustration resulting from the austerity measures which are also

responsible for cuts in various Government schemes that contributed to the safety and wellbeing of women.

The situation in the US is no better. While it continues to extend its domination of the world and its resources, it is experiencing an internal hollowing out that ensures that the minimum needs of its citizens are not met. Recent events like the shutdown of the Federal Government and the narrowly averted crisis of foreign debt payments have exposed the weaknesses of the US economy and of its badly fractured and polarised politics.

In May, 2013, the Census Bureau reported that one out of six Americans lives in poverty and, according to Internal Revenue Service (IRS) data, the average household in the bottom 50% brings in about \$18,000 per year which is less than the poverty line for a family of three (\$19,000). Despite this, the US Congress is trying to cut food assistance. A Republican Congressman, Stephen Fincher, has gone to the extent of referring to food stamps as 'stealing'. This at a time when just 20 rich Americans made as much from their 2012 investments as the entire 2012 SNAP (food assistance) budget, which serves 47 million people; and the 400 richest on the Forbes list made more from their stock market gains in 2012 than the total amount of the food, housing, and education budgets. As a result, the top 10% of earners took 46.5% of all income in 2011. Further tax concessions to the rich have maintained this trend while efforts to increase the minimum wage have been stonewalled.

Rising unemployment has placed a myriad burdens on women. According to an analysis of US census data released by the Pew Research Center, working mothers are now the sole breadwinners for 40% of US families compared to just 11% in 1960. Increasing tuition fees, laid off and unemployed husbands, falling wages etc. are all forcing women to take up any jobs that they can find often for less money than they were earning before raising families and most often not commensurate with their qualifications.

The Government has rewarded the banks and financial institutions responsible for the crisis with huge bailouts but has done little to mitigate the hardships of its victims. The most glaring example of this is the way in which at least 10 million people from more than 4 million homes across the country have been displaced by predatory banks backed by Government support and Government guns since 2007. African American neighborhoods, which had been aggressively targeted by banks to take housing loans, are the greatest victims. The effect, according to a 2012 National Fair Housing Alliance report, has been "the largest loss of wealth for these communities in modern history." **Between 2009 and 2012, African Americans lost just under \$200 billion in wealth, bringing the gap between white and black wealth to a staggering 20:1 ratio.**

It was three in the morning when at least a dozen police cruisers pulled up to the single-story, green-shuttered house in the African American Atlanta suburb where Christine Frazer (black) and her family lived. "Who's in the house?" they shouted. Aside from Frazer, a widow, there were three other residents: her 85-year-old mother, her adult daughter, and her four-year-old grandson. Things began to happen fast... "They came to my home like I was a drug dealer," she told reporters later. Over the next seven hours, the officers hauled out the entire contents of her home and cordoned off the street to prevent friends from helping her retrieve her things.

Bank evictions have not only created enormous misery, for blacks, women and children, but have aggravated the crisis. Vacant houses mean less property tax revenues for local governments which then resort to further cuts in essential services. Closed schools in Philadelphia and Chicago, closed hospitals in Cleveland, slashed programmes for senior citizens in Baltimore are the result. In 2011, a report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office cited nearly a dozen examples of how such declines in tax revenues caused by vacancies have led cities to cut funding for public works, libraries, parks, recreation programs, and school districts. Many cities are teetering on the brink of bankruptcy and are resorting to vicious cuts in wages, pensions, education and health budgets and social services. Chicago has announced the closure of 54 public schools which will impact more than 46,000 children. Detroit, the automobile manufacturing centre, has declared bankruptcy and Philadelphia, the pride of the East Coast, is to follow suit. It is important to remember that these and other industrial hubs have been hit twice as hard as others. In their search for super profits, companies like auto-manufacturers and others re-located their factories to low wage countries and bankrupted their own former production centers.

Neo-slavery not Martin Luther's 'dream' is the reality. 2.2 million people, or 25% of the world's prison population, occupy US jails. 60% of them are non-white. Spending cuts have rendered the court system completely incapable of provided legal representation to the poor. Individuals and corporations perpetuate a form of neo-slavery under which prisoners work inside jails and prisons for nothing or, at the most, a dollar an hour. Incarceration itself has become a very lucrative business for private contractors who send lobbyists to Washington to make sure that laws and legislation continue to funnel a steady supply of poor people into the prison complex and make public money available to them to build the prisons, provide food service, hire guards and administer detention facilities. Privatisation of jails and availability of prison labour has fattened corporate profits.

STRUGGLES VS AUSTERITY MEASURES AND THE 1%

Strikes and struggles of a breadth and intensity that have not been witnessed for decades have erupted in the West against the austerity measures being unilaterally imposed not only by national Governments but on the diktat of supranational agencies like the IMF, World Bank and the EU. Spain witnessed a massive general strike in 2011 with half of its labour force participating and this was followed by the 'indignados' (angry ones) eruption. Greece is in a state of permanent agitation against the austerity measures imposed in 2012. The last 3 years have witnessed persistent strikes in France. In London, the huge student demonstrations of November 2010 against unprecedented fee hikes were followed by a march of 400,000 in March 2011 in the largest union-organized event in 20 years. The huge mobilizations associated with the Arab Spring were also triggered by many of the concerns of those opposing austerity measures for the poor and policies of enrichment for the corporate and the rich. Turkey, Brazil and now Mexico have all witnessed sudden eruptions of innumerable young people, workers and middle class supporters that have occupied city centers fired by similar emotions.

The US was hit by the Occupy Wall Street Movement which spread to many parts of the country and was able to sustain itself for months in the capital of corporate finance, New York. These movements have been triggered by the connections being made by many between the indebtedness of students, homelessness and joblessness of millions and the huge earnings of the very people responsible for widespread misery and impoverishment. The slogan of the Occupy Movement "We are the 99 per cent" resonated with those swamped by debt.

DECLARATION OF OCCUPY WALL STREET, 30.9.2011

They have taken our houses through an illegal foreclosure process, despite not having the original mortgage. They have taken bailouts from taxpayers with impunity, and continue to give Executives exorbitant bonuses. They determine economic policy, despite the catastrophic failures their policies have produced and continue to produce. They have perpetuated inequality and discrimination in the workplace based on age, the color of one's skin, sex, gender identity and sexual orientation. They have consistently outsourced labor and used that outsourcing as leverage to cut workers' healthcare and pay. They have continuously sought to strip employees of the right to negotiate for better pay and safer working conditions. They have donated large sums of money to politicians supposed to be regulating them. They continue to block alternate forms of energy to keep us dependent on oil. They have purposely covered up oil spills, accidents, faulty bookkeeping, and inactive ingredients in pursuit of profit. They continue to block generic forms of medicine that could save people's lives in order to protect investments that have already turned a substantive profit. They have poisoned the food supply through negligence, and undermined the farming system through monopolization. They have held students hostage with tens of thousands of dollars of debt on education, which is itself a human right. They have influenced the courts to achieve the same rights as people, with none of the culpability or responsibility. They have spent millions of dollars on legal teams that look for ways to get them out of contracts in regards to health insurance. They have sold our privacy as a commodity. They have used the military and police force to prevent freedom of the press. They purposefully keep people misinformed and fearful through their control of the media. They continue to create weapons of mass destruction in order to receive government contracts. They have accepted private contracts to murder prisoners even when presented with serious doubts about their guilt. They have perpetuated colonialism at home and abroad. They have participated in the torture and murder of innocent civilians overseas.

To the people of the world, we, the New York City General Assembly occupying Wall Street in Liberty Square, urge you to assert your power.

The US has also witnessed big working class mobilizations and strike actions. School teachers in Chicago went on a historic 9 day strike in 2012 and won important victories; low wage workers in Walmart and fast food joints across the country have been launching a series of strikes; Government employees have fought back union-busting administrations and immigrant workers have been agitating and fighting for their rights.

WOMEN IN STRUGGLE AGAINST AUSTERITY

Across the Western world, women, the worst victims of austerity measures, are in the forefront of struggles to change Government policies. Just the year 2012-13 has been witness to this development that could be the precursor of immense social and economic change.

EUROPE

From the March 8 Manifesto – Feminist Network of the European Left (EL-FEM) Today, on the International Day of Women 2013, women across Europe protest against the degradation of their lives caused by the capitalist crisis and patriarchal living conditions in our countries! As women and feminists of the European Left, we are part of this international women's movement. We fight against living conditions dictated by the financial markets and demand that our governments and the EU put a ban on the speculation with public money and implement wealth taxes. Austerity programs must be stopped as they are ruining national economies and risking the very survival of the people, especially the most vulnerable, among which women are the majority. We also protest against the corruption in which politicians of all countries are involved and we demand that they be judged. We emphatically reject the dismantling of the welfare state that primarily hits women as workers and as users of these services. We demand work, wages and decent working conditions for everyone, men and women, immigrants. But economic output and labour cannot and must not destroy nature and the planet. The number of working hours should be reduced and care work done by women should be more highly valued. We do not want the economy organized according to the principles of profit maximization and growth, but according to human needs.

Spain. Women resorted to a massive protest in July, 2013, against the Health Ministry which not only wants to curtail abortion rights but is also determined to falsify figures of increasing violence against women. These are obvious results of the recent cuts made in the Health budget. The protesting women were beaten by the police.

France. On the 9th, June, 2013, the Left Front of Women organized a huge protest against austerity in Paris. As an example of how austerity is hurting them the most, they said that while the average pension for a woman is 900 euros a month, for men it is 1,552 euros; women's salaries are 27% less than men and 30% of women workers work only part-time. 5 million people in France are now on the dole, most of them women. As a result, their angry cry was – How not to scream in anger?

Italy. It was women and their protests that led to the ouster of Berlusconi who is now in jail. With unemployment now at 11.5% and youth joblessness at over 38%, men and women in Italy are on the streets. “Enough. We cannot wait any longer” was the slogan behind which tens of thousands of workers, students, pensioners and radical left activists, many of them women, marched in Rome in May, 2013 in the first major protest against Italy's new centre-left-right government demanding an end to the austerity policies that are creating a deepening recession and rising unemployment. Women workers from crisis-hit firms in northern city of Bologna headed the demonstration.

Portugal has been hit hard by austerity and has seen huge job losses and increases in poverty level. Women have organised a movement that they call the Precarious Inflexible. They have been active in a number of protests over the last year for which they are paying a heavy price. Myriam Zaluar, a freelance journalist and teacher, a founder-member of the group, wrote an open letter to the Prime Minister in 2011 in response to his advice to the unemployed to migrate. Since then she has agitated in print and on the streets and now faces legal action by the police; similarly Mariana Avelas, who had demonstrated with thousands against Government austerity measures, has also been threatened with legal action; Paula Montez who also participated in the demonstration has been accused of assaulting police officers. All three face prison sentences.

USA Women trade unionists have emerged as the most successful and creative leaders of recent years. Karen Lewis, a black teacher, led the historic nine day teachers' strike in Chicago in September, 2012 that forced the Mayor to reverse his union-busting and economy measures that would have blighted the lives of unprivileged children. The NYC taxi drivers' Union leader, Bhairavi Desai, a woman of Indian origin, has proved to be a formidable negotiator and adversary who has notched up impressive gains on behalf of her Union. Maria Elena Durazo, a Latino immigrant, negotiated a contract with provisions rarely seen by labor unions: the jobs of workers who were deported or lost authorization to work in the United States would be held over 2 years at the same wages. She is the executive secretary-treasurer of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor and, while union membership is declining nationally, it is growing in California, and much of that growth can be attributed to Latino immigrants. The fast-food workers' strikes and the strikes at Walmart that are occurring regularly across the US are led and enthusiastically participated in by large numbers of women workers.

OUR NEIGHBOURS

Relations between our Government and the Governments of neighbouring countries remain troubled and the hope that regional co-operation and friendship would strengthen remains unfulfilled. Our neighbours are also wracked by internal conflict.

Pakistan recently held its first election under a civilian Government for the first time but otherwise not much has changed. The elections saw the defeat of progressive, secular forces in the North West and victories for Imran Khan's party in that region and for the PML nationally. Both these parties are very ambivalent in their approach to fundamentalism and various terrorist groups and leaders. This is, in part, because of the popularity and legitimacy that many of these now enjoy because of their strident opposition to the US and because of the corruption and failures of various democratic parties and leaders. Today, Karachi is the most dangerous city in the world and the contiguous areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan are the most dangerous region in the world. Violence of all kinds is rampant – ethnic, communitarian (against Ahmediyas and Shias), communal (against religious minorities), misogynist (against women in the family and in public), political (assassinations of important political leaders, both men and women) and criminal. It must be mentioned that many women, including prominent lawyers and legislators, have taken strong public stands in solidarity with minorities and against fundamentalism and terrorism.

The status of women has suffered setbacks. In the '50s, laws had been enacted that gave women rights in marriage, divorce and succession but they have been eroded and today whatever exists in tradition and custom that deprives women and young girls of their rights is being legitimized. As a result, Pakistan occupies the 123rd rank out of 148 countries in the UN Gender Inequality Index. The MMR is high, 260 of 1,00,000 live births; only 18.3% of women have completed a secondary education and only 21% participate in the labour force.

While the Zardari Government took some positive legislative action – the Protection against Women in the Workplace Act was passed; primitive anti-women practices were declared criminal acts, acid throwing was to be punished by life-imprisonment and the National Commission of the Status of Women was revived. The reality, however, is that women and girls are still used as commodities by their families and tribes to settle debts. Some male family members marry their sisters to the Koran in order to deprive them of their rights to ancestral property and domestic violence is still not accepted unambiguously as a crime. The threat of violence has been very effective in ensuring the seclusion of large numbers of women.

The Malala case illustrates the situation graphically. While Malala is recognised by many in Pakistan (and across the world) as an inspirational character, a young girl who jeopardised her life in her unflinching pursuit to access education for herself and all her sisters, she is also demonised as an Imperialist stooge who has given legitimacy to US and Zionist criticism of Islam as anti-woman and then used this criticism to intervene and cause immeasurable havoc and misery to millions, including women and children.

Unfortunately, fundamentalist and terrorist groups and leaders are able to inflame passions with their rhetoric, not only against their own countrymen and countrywomen, but against 'Hindu' India. They are responsible for cross border infiltration among other things and also help to legitimise the Hindutva forces.

In **Nepal**, the replacement of the monarchy by democratic parties led by various shades of Communists was greeted enthusiastically by the poor, especially women. Many steps were taken, like 33% reservation of elected seats for women, land distribution, removal of laws that discriminated against dalits and women etc. but, unfortunately, a situation of increasing political confusion and turmoil set in which continues till today. As a result, unemployment and poverty are still the reality of life for most people. Most poor people choose migration as the way out and, for women, migration often means trafficking. Thousands of poor women are trafficked into prostitution every year. Nepal fares poorly on the Gender Inequality Index (but better than

Pakistan) but recent gains are also reflected: it is ranked 102 out of 148 countries; MMR is 170 for 1,00,000 live births; nearly 18% of women over 25 have completed secondary education; more than 80% form part of the labour force and 33.2% of members of Parliament are women.

In **Sri Lanka**, even in the years of civil war, successive Governments were able to ensure progress in the social sector. This trend has continued after the conflict ended. The sex ratio is 97:100 (males); IMR is down to 11 and the birth rate to 2.2%; female enrollment at the 3rd level of education is between 98 and 100%. Political participation, however, is low at about 5%. The area of greatest concern is the large number of people in refugee camps – more than 2,50,000. They live in conditions of great deprivation and fear and there have been serious allegations and complaints of severe human rights abuse. This question is of particular concern to Indian citizens and has become an important factor in Tamil Nadu politics.

Myanmar is taking faltering steps towards democracy. While Aung San Su Kyi has been released and is now a Member of Parliament and while her Party has swept the polls, real power is still wielded by the Military. Long years of military dictatorship devastated and pauperised the country. Women lost their traditional status which was relatively high. They were subjected to the worst kind of abuse by the junta including being used as human coolies.

Despite this, on the Gender Inequality Index, Burma's rank is 80 out of 148, relatively better than its neighbours. This could be because of the fact that 75% of women form part of the labour force because other indicators are very poor – the MMR is 200 of 1,00,000 live births; women in Parliament account for only 4% and only 25% of women achieve secondary education. Only 25% of the population has access to electricity.

Myanmar is also faced with tremendous ethnic conflict. Most recently, brutal attacks on the Rhongyars, a Muslim tribe, have led to migration and misery. Women are bearing the brunt of this.

Recent events in **Bangladesh** need to be noted. Sheikh Hasina's Government has been trying to live up to its promises of fighting fundamentalism, restoring secular values and institutions, ensuring peaceful relations with India and strengthening democracy with varying degrees of success. Her Government's decision to bring to trial those who had collaborated with the Pakistani Army in 1970 has resulted in far-reaching convulsions in Bangladeshi society. Most of those being tried and being convicted belong to the Jamaat e Islami. Judgments against the ring leaders triggered off two kinds of protests. On the one hand, thousands of people who oppose religious fundamentalism and feel a sense of tremendous outrage and anger when they recall the atrocities committed by the Pakistani army and its collaborators, took to the streets to protest against the fact that the collaborators were not given the death sentence. On the other, the Jamaat, its political allies and its extremist supporters also came out indulging in violence against their opponents and raising the banner of Islam in Danger. They accused their opponents of being atheists and secularists and, therefore, enemies of Islam. What was remarkable was the amazing courage displayed by women, most of them young, who withstood abuse and physical attacks to not only participate in but lead the protests at Shahbag in the center of Dacca.

The protests have seen extraordinary participation by women. Students, working professionals and mothers accompanied by their young children have all lent their voice to the Shahbag protests....Some students came to show solidarity. Their exams were imminent. They did not let anyone go, they engaged in the sit-in protest and opened their books to study...A journalist writes "It was 1.30 at night. I saw a young girl walking towards the square holding her mother's hand..."

The battle still unfolding in Bangladesh has significance beyond its borders. It is an important part of the battle against Islamic fundamentalism being waged from within the Muslim world itself in which women are playing an important role.

Another important but certainly not inspirational aspect of recent developments in Bangladesh is the exposure of the cruel underside of globalisation. Bangladesh is a preferred destination as a production hub for international garment manufacturers. This sort of outsourcing has been touted as an achievement for the neo-liberal paradigm since it is claimed that it results in jobs and 'empowerment' for men and, even more important, women in poor countries. In the last 3 years, a large number of factories that house thousands of garment workers, most of them women, have either collapsed or caught on fire. Nearly a thousand were killed in two major fires in 2013 and 2012. Walmart is the biggest culprit not only in terms of being the biggest buyer but because of its continuous refusal to insist and contribute towards improved safety conditions in these factories. The reality of outsourcing is that no one is responsible for the workers. Outrage against these incidents has resulted in some improvements but, for hundreds of thousands of women and men in these sweatshops and others like them, payment and working conditions remain abysmal and the right to unionise, a dream.

LATIN AMERICA

Venezuela. The most significant event in the region was the tragic death of Hugo Chavez on 5th March, 2013. His death was deeply mourned all over the world. He has been especially mourned in Latin America which he helped to transform from the backyard of US imperialism, used and abused and exploited to benefit the US and its corporate sector, kept in check for them by a series of abominable dictators, to a region that now leads opposition to imperialism at the global level. Chavez and his vision, his enormous energy and constant display of the courage of his convictions, his ability to make policy out of creative thinking and his total commitment to the welfare and freedom of the oppressed people of the world left an indelible imprint on anti-Imperialist movements everywhere.

The Chavez legacy is proof of the fact that a real alternative to the neo-liberal paradigm peddled by the advanced capitalist countries and the financial institutions that they control is possible.

Oil revenues were used to finance large public investments in health, education, housing, pensions and food subsidies to the poor with the result that, according to the World Bank, poverty declined sharply from slightly more than 60% in 2003 to slightly more than 30% in 2011. Oil supplies to Cuba ensured doctors, para-medics and first class medical attention for the Venezuelan people; oil paid for Uruguayan cows; poor blacks in Harlem, USA, received gifts of cheap cooking fuel from Venezuela!

The electricity and telecom industries were nationalized. Land reforms were undertaken and three million hectares of land distributed to the landless who, in turn, with the help of Government incentives, inputs and training, ensured that food imports were drastically reduced. Illiteracy was eradicated and the number of teachers went up from 65,000 to 350,000 and education is now free till the university level. The health mission has ensured establishment of a network of primary health centers manned by thousands of Cuban doctors and medical personnel with Venezuelans are being trained to take their place. The mortality rate has declined from 20 per 1000 (1999) to 13 per 1000 (2011). The entire population has access to clean drinking water. According to the UNDP, Venezuela, which was the country with the highest inequality in the 1990s has become the least unequal in Latin America with a Gini co-efficient of 0.39 in 2011.

Chavez also initiated the establishment of a regional bank and creation of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) from which the US was excluded to help free Latin America from US hegemony.

The Presidential elections that followed Chavez' death were bitterly contested. All those opposed to his policies and to the re-distribution of wealth that they ensured united to support Henrique Capriles who had unsuccessfully opposed Chavez earlier. The US was open and generous in its support. Chavez' appointed successor, Maduro, however was able to win, garnering 52% of the votes polled. It is significant that Chavez' pro-people projects or 'missions' are so popular that even Capriles had to promise, during his campaign, that he would maintain and augment them.

Ecuador. In February, 2013, Ecuador went to the polls and President Rafael Correa was re-elected, polling 57% of the votes. His victory is attributed to reduction in unemployment to 4.1%, reduction of poverty by 27% and increased spending on education and access to health care.

Bolivia. The poorest country in Latin America with a 60% population of indigenous peoples, elected its first indigenous President, Morales, in 2007. The following year, a US-backed coup tried to oust him but, with huge popular support, he not only saved his Government but retaliated by asking the US Ambassador to quit Bolivia. Morales has launched a tremendous struggle against powerful vested interests in his country and outside to use Bolivia's natural resources for the development of its people. The Morales government has been investing in the poor. It has approved a programme of free reproductive health services for women, is expanding health care to children and people over 60, and building rural clinics. More than 5 million acres of previously state-owned land have been distributed to people in the countryside.

Brazil. The PT (Workers Party) continues to rule in Brazil with Dilma Rousseff winning the election. While the PT has implemented several pro-people policies which have benefitted the urban poor, it is also under tremendous pressure from MNCs and its own corporate sector and often enters into agreements with them that are ecologically and economically damaging. In June, 2013, as popular movements exploded all over the Middle East and Europe, many cities in Brazil, Sao Paulo in particular, witnessed massive protests by young people and workers which were sparked by an increase in public transport fare. Rising inflation, falling wages, cuts in education and social benefits and many strike actions formed the backdrop to these. Despite arrests and repression, participation in the protests increased. Finally, the President initiated a dialogue with the protestors and agreed to many of their demands. Most significantly, the President announced publicly that her Government had been guilty of arrogance and would, in future, be more responsive to peoples' grievances and problems.

Colombia. The pro-US regime has had to face tremendous opposition from rural peasants, miners, teachers, medical professionals, truckers and students. Since mid-August, there have been continuous strike actions and demonstrations by all these sections which are opposing the US-Colombia Free Trade Agreement which is exacerbating poverty, privatization and unemployment in the country. More than 200,000 people have blocked roads. The Government has responded with shooting, torture, tear-gassing, arrests and even sexual assault. According to the AFL-CIO, more than 37 trade unionists have been killed in the first half of 2013.

While the trend towards pro-people and anti-imperialist policies continues to be reflected in recent elections and political developments in Latin America, the very real threat of US intervention and sabotage cannot be ignored. It is the conflict between the two and the ways in

which it plays out that will determine future developments in the region. The events that marked the last (Sixth) Summit of the Americas (a decades-old US initiative to isolate Cuba) held in April, 2012 in Colombia illustrate this conflict well. Correa of Ecuador and Ortega of Nicaragua did not attend the summit in protest against Cuba's exclusion. A resolution to put an end to Cuba's isolation was supported by 32 countries while only the US and Canada voted against it.

SOCIALIST COUNTRIES

China's amazing economic progress is uncontestable. It is now a world leader in many spheres, economic, sports, infrastructure etc. Chinese women have been beneficiaries of this progress.

Education - the percentage of women with no education was reduced to 6.6% in rural areas and 3.5% in urban areas by 2010. Access to secondary and higher education has tripled in rural areas and doubled in urban areas. 33% of eligible women enter Universities.

Health –increased women's access to health has resulted in a dramatic improvement in maternal mortality rates which are down to 38 per 1,00,000 live births in 2008. Hospital births now account for more than 90% of all deliveries, even in rural areas.

Employment - Chinese women have enjoyed an employment rate that is amongst the highest in the world for the last 2 decades and three out of four women are employed. The development of a free market economy closely integrated to global markets, however, has resulted in a less favourable trend over the last few years. Employment rates for women have actually fallen quite significantly after the 1990s and those who lose their jobs are finding it more difficult than men to find new jobs. In some cities like Jilin and Heilongjiang women in employment were down to less than 45%. Reorganisation and privatization are having a negative impact. Despite the fact that economic reforms (neo-liberal policies) have created new opportunities for them and have even given birth to a small feminine elite, they have in general been harmful for women who are now exposed to economic insecurity and frequent early retirement. Sexual discrimination in the labour market, from which they were earlier protected, has cheated them of the sexual equality promised by the Constitution.

According to a draft regulation reviewed and approved by the State Council in 2012, paid maternity leave for female employees will be extended from the current 90 calendar days to 98, and women who have miscarriages or abortions are also entitled to paid leave. A welfare measure introduced to help women, however, has had an unforeseen result – one that women workers in capitalist countries are familiar with:

The All China Women's Federation (ACWF) in Eastern China's Shanghai Municipality received 67.11 percent more labor rights complaints from women during the first half of 2013 compared to the same period last year. Most complaints were filed by childless married women who face employment discrimination when looking for a job because employers are reluctant to hire them as they believe that they will soon have babies and the company will have to incur many expenses. Also, some companies illegally terminate pregnant employees' labor contracts or deny new mothers paid leave for nursing purposes.

The greatest paradox in the status of women is the persevering, highly skewed, sex-ratio. The one-child norm adopted and implemented strictly by the Government earlier has served to intensify the son preference that was a norm in pre-Revolutionary China. It has now become so deeply ingrained that even after the one-child norm has been made much more flexible, girl children continue to face tremendous discrimination. Sex selective abortions are still numerous and, tragically, many surviving girl children die as a result of receiving poorer health care than boys. The mortality of girls before their first birthday is higher than that of boys. In 2010, 118.0

boys were recorded for every 100 girls in the under-15 age group (as against 108.5 in 1990 and 113.6 in 2000), that is, a proportion of around 15 percent higher than the norm.

The effect of systemic son-preference combined with the effect of liberalization of the labour market and the disengagement of the state from child-care, health and education have not only further re-inforced it but have had the effect of pushing more and more women home, further strengthening stereotypes of feminine domesticity and subordination. *(This section, except for box, uses information from a study published in 2013 'Being a Woman in China Today: A Demography of Gender', by Isabelle Attane based on data from the All China Womens Federation and National Bureau of Statistics, China)*

The Third Survey of the Social Status of Women in China, conducted in 2010 found that nearly 62 percent of men and nearly 55 percent of women said "men belong in public life and women belong at home," increases of 7.7 and 4.4 percentage points from 2000. The income gap is widening, the survey found, with women's average annual income 67.3 percent of men's in urban areas and 56 percent in rural areas, down 10.2 and 23 percentage points from 1990. Of female "high-level talents" in 2010, 81 percent had college degrees, 7 percentage points more than men, but 80.5 percent said men held the senior jobs at their workplace.

One offshoot of the changing status of women is the mushrooming of matchmaking networks and the determination of many young women to marry wealthy men. An article in the ACWF journal quotes Zhou Xiaopeng, a psychologist and marriage consultant with the Baihe.com, China's biggest matchmaking business network. "Wanting to marry for money... shows that these girls don't want to grow up, since growing-up means you will have to earn money by yourself with your own hard work... there are so many young girls looking to marry rich older men." The article goes on to say that Rong Weiyi, an associate professor of the People's Public Security University of China and an expert on social gender research, feels that frequent news reports on this trend show that such patriarchal concepts such as men being superior to women and women being goods to be sold in the marriage market are still alive and thriving in contemporary China.

Some recent activism: In Beijing on Feb. 14, Valentine's Day, three young women in white bridal gowns smeared with red paint protested domestic violence. Days later, in Guangzhou, female students took over the men's section of a public toilet to protest the lack of facilities for women and their lower social status, a protest since emulated in other cities. Yet crucially, say many feminists, there is no political will to improve women's standing.

The last word, perhaps, belongs to Wu Qing, a 74-year-old retired English professor, who carries a tattered Chinese-language copy of the 1995 declaration of the International Women's Conference, and copies of the Chinese Constitution, the Labor Law, the Education Law, the Teacher's Law, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women with her at all times. She says "I carry these with me wherever I go. It's the longest revolution. All other revolutions are pretty easy and short in comparison."

Vietnam. Key social indicators have registered a tremendous advance in the last two decades. While aspects of a market economy have been adopted, 'doi moi', a Vietnamese attempt at controlled and managed reform process, has insulated the people from some of the worst effects of the neo-liberal paradigm. As a result its social indicators have been much better than many countries with a higher GDP (UN HDR). Gender equality in Vietnam is much higher than much of the Third World and even some of the First. Equal pay and maternity leave with 4 to 6 months full pay are established norms. Female enrolment in tertiary education (13%) is close to the male figure (18%) and women are fairly well represented in the National Assembly, with 27% of the seats and 12% of the ministerial portfolios – the leading example in Asia. Women hold 42 per cent of the presidency positions of functional committees of the National Assembly,

and one of the vice-presidents of Vietnam is a woman. Unfortunately, in the Party Central Committee of 186 members only 23 are women.

Cuba. Despite US efforts since the Cuban revolution, Cuba remains defiant. From its earlier isolation in a Latin America dominated by US lackeys, Cuba now occupies a position of mentor as far as most of its present-day leaders are concerned. This is because of the tenacity it has displayed in adhering to its pro-people policies despite the vicious economic embargo imposed by the US and despite its own meager natural resources. The Cuban State has developed its people as its richest natural resource by guaranteeing them a superior education, an excellent and caring health system and a society free of obscene and demeaning disparity.

What is amazing is the innovative approach that the Cuban State has developed towards agriculture, health systems etc. From a country disastrously dependant on a single crop – sugar cane – and on food aid from the Soviet Union, Cuba has now become the world’s leader in organic farming and innovative, biological pest eradication.

(The following section is based on reports on Cuba by Brinda Karat carried in Peoples Democracy in April, 2013)

The Cuban Government has also adopted a very democratic approach to the framing of policies. In 2011, the Sixth Party Congress of the ruling Communist Party adopted new economic and policy guidelines which the international media has been quick to describe as a move away from socialism towards a market economy. In actual fact, not only are these policies well thought out, cautious responses to a changed situation but they were discussed for a full year in the course of 1,63,000 meetings and after nearly 8,00,000 suggestions were received, discussed and, in many cases, adopted. In implementation too, the Government is proceeding cautiously, taking the people into confidence. The situation in Cuba that has prompted these policies is the possibility of development that has arisen out of the changed political situation in Latin America. While the decades-long inhuman blockade initiated by the US had forced Cuba into a situation of closed development today alternatives to this are possible because of the fact that many of its neighbours are friendly allies who have entered into trade relationships. Despite the blockade, Cuba ensured free and universal education and health systems, superior to those prevailing in advanced capitalist countries, to its people. Now it is using the more favourable economic climate to improve the quality of life and all round development of its citizens.

- Food security is guaranteed to its citizens through market interventions and a universal public distribution system that supplies them with all essential food items. Old people, expectant mothers and children are given special nutritional aids and the result is that, according to Unicef, nutritional standards of Cuba’s children are among the best in the world -

<u>Item</u>	<u>Amount per person</u>	<u>Ration</u>	<u>Market Price</u>
Rice	7 pounds.	25 cents a pound	5 pesos a pound
Sugar	4 pounds	15 cents "	4 pesos
Cooking oil	1/2 pound	20 cents	20 pesos 1/2 pound
Salt	1 packet	35 cents	10 pesos
Powder milk	1 kg	2.50 pesos	15 pesos a kg

<i>Milk</i>	<i>1 kilo every 2/3 days</i>	<i>2 pesos</i>	<i>10 pesos a litre</i>
<i>Fruit juice</i>	<i>13 cans</i>	<i>25 cents a can</i>	<i>5 pesos a can</i>
<i>Coffee</i>	<i>Quarter pound</i>	<i>4 pesos</i>	<i>10 pesos</i>
<i>Chicken</i>	<i>2 pounds</i>	<i>70 cents a pound</i>	<i>20 pesos a pound</i>
<i>Sausage.</i>	<i>one pound</i>	<i>70 cents "</i>	<i>20 pesos a pound</i>
<i>Mince meat</i>	<i>one pound.</i>	<i>70 cents. "</i>	<i>20 pesos a pound</i>
<i>Eggs</i> <i>cents</i>	<i>Ten eggs.</i>	<i>Average 52 cents each</i> <i>over 2 pesos each</i>	

- Health and education services are not only free but of excellent quality. Health care begins with family doctors and community-based services but now also includes world-class super-speciality hospitals. Cuba has a doctor-patient ration of 1 doctor:150 people (India – 1 doctor:2000 people). Medical education including books is also free. The health profile of Cubans is the best in the world; its IMR (4.2) is better than the US.
- Employment of women is highly visible in all fields: of scientists they are 58%; of health professionals, 60%; of health professions, 78%; of doctors, 80%; in the educational sector, 60% and in Government jobs, 48%. They also occupy high positions including in the judiciary. They are paid equal wages, enjoy access to free creches for their children who can stay there upto 12 hours and are provided with food, milk and medical attention and can avail of maternity leave of four and a half months with full pay or one year with 60% pay and a second year, unpaid.
- Violence against women is punished with great severity. For example, child rape can attract upto 30 years imprisonment. The laws are strictly implemented.
- Political participation of women in Cuba is inspiring: they have achieved 48.5% representation in elected bodies; of 15 provinces, women head 10; 42% members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party are women with 1 woman Polit Bureau member of 15. 4 provincial committees have women Secretaries.

The people and Communist Party of Cuba are an inspiration for all those fighting imperialism and its policies of exploitation and repression. Their amazing successes against US blockades and interventions have given courage to freedom fighters everywhere. Cuba proves to the world that nothing succeeds like Socialism.