Beyond the Coronavirus: Understanding Crises of Social Reproduction

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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 prioritises profits, and a feminist ethic that prioritises life-making or social reproduction. This article 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 article examines crises of social reproduction for capital and labour that arise from the more ordinary workings of capitalism. The focus is on unfolding 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 article is an effort to contribute to feminist political economy analyses of the ways in which production and reproduction are intertwined. It attempts to further develop the concept 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 article. But while the coronavirus crisis is an extraordinary example of a crisis of social reproduction, this article focuses more on crises of social reproduction that are generated by the everyday workings of capitalism (Mitchell, Marston and Katz, 2003; Mezzadri, 2019).

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, 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), sometimes termed indirect care work (Beneria and Sen, 1981; Razavi, 2007; Folbre, 2012); fourth, the labour required to reproduce the "cultural forms and practices" that maintain a labour force differentiated by race, gender, ethnicity or caste (Norton and Katz, 2016).

Setting aside the extreme case of the COVID-19 pandemic, 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 realisation 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 in the "productive" sphere, but also the site of what Nancy Fraser (2016) calls "boundary struggles" over where the boundary between production and reproduction, the visible and the invisible lies, and who bears the costs of social reproduction. As discussed below, such struggles are critical to the resolution of what the article terms crises of social reproduction for labour.

As low-wage or unpaid labour under capitalism, reproductive labour is most likely to be assigned to the most marginalised in society (Norton and Katz, 2017). The low exchange value of such labour power in turn cannot be understood without understanding the racialised, caste-based and gendered forms of stigma that shape the exchange values of what are, from a use value perspective, essential forms of labour power (Rao, 2009; John, 2017). Studying the labour of social reproduction thus sharply reveals how the concrete "social" of capitalism is co-constituted by gender, race and caste alongside class (Davis, 1983; Collins, 2015; Bannerji, 2020). The central role of gender, race and caste in structuring divisions between reproductive and productive labour implies that boundary struggles over who bears the costs of social reproduction must explicitly invoke hierarchies of race, gender and caste alongside class, and that in challenging the social division of labour they should be understood as critical to effective mobilisations against capital (Naidu and Ossome, 2016; Mezzadri, 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 article 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), I argue 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, the South may require a different analysis (Mezzadri, 2019). Such analysis needs to be "provincialized" (Aslan and Gambetti, 2011: 130), including accounting for the particular concrete inter-weavings

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

of caste, race, gender and class in specific contexts.[2] Given the diversity of Southern political economies, this article focuses 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.

Conceptualising Crises of Social Reproduction for Capital and 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 disasters that take a large toll on human life. But this article 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 organise 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 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 recognised, a gap in the literature that feminist political economy analyses, including this one, aim to fill.

The discussion above has focused 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 attempt to resolve crises of profitability or realisation (Elson, 2010). 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 Ossome, 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 article terms

[2] For a rich discussion of how to think about such inter-weaving when collective rather than individual identities are the starting point, and emancipation "is contingent upon the emancipation of the community rather than separation from it" (Rao, 2009: 23), see Davis (1983), Rao (2009), Menon (2012) and Collins (2015), among others.

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, it soon 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 and tuberculosis – pandemics which persist for millions of the most marginalised global citizens – it is not surprising that the extraordinary measures being taken are coming to an end as 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 pandemic. 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 might be analytically useful.

Crises of Social Reproduction as Threats to Accumulation

Pandemics or wars can quite directly set crises for capital in motion by disrupting the supply of labour. But so can disruptions to the organisation 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, 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 organisation 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 or office that is far from the household–family may be conducive to increases in productivity and worker discipline, but reduces the ability to perform reproductive labour. The Chinese model of migrant workers in dormitories maximised output (Mezzadri, 2019), but served to accentuate a demographic crisis that is now viewed as a threat to China's economic future. The emergence of resistance to inequalities of gender, caste or race could create similar conditions by destabilising the gendered/caste-based/racialised divisions of labour required to sustain the social division of labour (Fraser, Bhattacharya and Aruzza, 2019). These can in turn affect the quality and quantity of labour power produced. The secular decline in rates of marriage and childbirth 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 mechanising 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, mechanisation may be too expensive for all workers to afford. The mechanisation of direct care in particular has proven to be quite slow, due to resistance from both those performing as well as those receiving what is

usually intimate emotional labour (Howes, Leana and Smith, 2012). But reliance on paid human labour to care for children and the elderly requires sufficiently high wages to cover those costs. Low-wage workers in the United States 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 (Glenn, 2010). 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 marginalised groups, usually poor women of colour (Beneria, Berik and Floro, 2015; Norton and Katz, 2017). The burden is also spatially displaced – from rich to poor neighbourhoods, and from rich to poor countries when immigrant labour is deployed (Howes et al., 2012; Bhattacharya, 2017).

A different solution to the double burden problem lies in attempts to restructure gendered, caste-based and 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 real wages fall, either through a lowering of the nominal wage 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 United States (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 household 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 United States 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 United States. 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 among low-income, working-class households in the United States (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 prioritise the demands of financial capital over those of the social reproduction of households and families (Himmelweit, 2017). 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 long-standing official commitments of the European Union 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 and 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 mobilise around these struggles do have the potential to move these crises to the front page. There is a long history of class struggles, and Marxism more generally, failing to engage with what it would mean to truly socialise the costs of social reproduction, including within the household–family (Federici, 2012). On the other hand, some feminist struggles have not sufficiently integrated critiques of class and racial or caste hierarchies into demands for the redistribution of reproductive labour (Glenn, 2010). Knitting these forms of struggle more closely together thus remains a challenge.

Conceptualising 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 professionalised and 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 professionalised and salaried work (Bernstein, 2006; Breman, 2010). At any given point in time, a single household may deal with multiple small-scale subcontractors and brokers, money lenders and seed or fertilizer agents, extracting surplus through diverse forms of "formal subsumption", and involving changing work sites and work types (Banaji, 2013; Mezzadri, 2019). These "awkward classes" of labour confront amorphous and shifting forms of capital that are difficult to organise 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 mechanised, less commoditised and far less subsidised 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 and the physical world into use values such as food or housing (Naidu and Ossome, 2016). While crises of direct care tend to dominate the literature on care crises in the Global North, in the South crises of social reproduction may be as 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, clean living space.

Form of dispossession therefore play a more significant role in generating crises of social reproduction for labour in the South (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 to 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 (Levien, 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. The refusal of marginal farmer households to give up land across the Global South may be best understood as a strategy to ensure reproduction, rather than an attempt to generate surplus through agriculture (Naidu and Ossome, 2016).

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 destabilised, 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 labour" makes it relatively difficult for social struggles to target 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 the household–community, rather than the place of employment (Katz, 2001). As a result, struggles over who bears the costs of social reproduction may emerge from the household–community rather than the factory–field, invoke solidarities based upon gender, caste, race and ethnicity as much as class, and may prove to be more

important and fruitful forms of anti-capitalist struggle 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 (Ferguson, 2015; Harris and Scully, 2015).

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. Higher taxes on capital financed a racialised, gendered welfare state whose benefits were channelled through white, male wage workers. Declining profit rates by the 1970s then gave rise to neo-liberal, financialised 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 United States and Europe, and across different social safety net programmes. One relatively consistent feature of these responses, though, was capital's ability to evade higher taxes or greater contributions to subsidise social reproduction (Himmelweit, 2017). 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 subsidised the costs of social reproduction, such programmes tended to focus upon wage workers with relatively permanent jobs. 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, 2016). They were also most likely to be employees of the government itself, so that the share of the workforce whose social reproduction was directly subsidised by capital was even smaller. Across the low-income South, such workers remained a 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 programmes subsidising 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 decentralised, hard-to-locate quality of capital, the ability to get capitalists to contribute to such subsidisation 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 article presents the case of India, where the post-2000s expansion of social safety net programmes 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 per cent 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 subsidised 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 and the concomitant subsidies went to men from upper castes. 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, this period 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 neighbouring 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 important examples of boundary struggles mobilised 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 Andhra Pradesh, for example (Lalita and Kannabiran, 1989; Sen, 2002). Broadly, outside of Kerala, it appears that successful struggles over who would bear the costs of social reproduction expressed themselves primarily through mobilisations 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, but 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 characterised 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, 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 to 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. Reflecting the inter-constitutive effects of gender, class and caste in neo-liberal India, falling rural women's labour force participation during this period was concentrated among lower-income, wage-worker and Dalit households (Rao, 2018). Thus households most marginalised by caste and class were pushed into the most gendered solutions, with women's responsibility for reproductive labour in Dalit, labouring households reinforced by the increased difficulty of finding work for pay or profit that did not require displacement (Rao and Vakulabharanam, 2019). 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., 2002; 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 (Rao, 2018). Within elite groups, the slight increase in women's labour force participation is the result of the ability to draw upon private solutions to the double burden problem: the ability to mechanise, commodify and outsource reproductive labour to more marginalised women (Palriwala and Pillai, 2008). 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

As in other parts of the Global South, the 2000s also brought 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 or unwilling to slow down processes of privatisation and liberalisation in the sphere of production, the state was pushed to increase its subsidisation of social reproduction, particularly through the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), which promised to provide one hundred 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 programmes 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 programmes made women more able to access them directly, as opposed to indirectly through their husbands (Desai, Vashishtha and Joshi, 2015).

These programmes defined 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 et al., 2019). As the coronavirus has made all too clear, access to the programmes 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 reinforced rather than undermined surplus accumulation in India (Breman, 2010).

The relative success of this phase of struggle did bring its own backlash. Since it was elected in 2014, the stance of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government towards these programmes has varied from "indifference to outright hostility" (Jean Drèze quoted in Kumar, 2018). The government has attempted to route programme access through biometric identification, disbanded some key components of the maternal and child welfare programmes, and pushed to privatise what remains of India's threadbare public health system (Dreze, 2018; Maiorano, 2018). After 2014, expenditure on these programmes was stagnant, rising by only about 1 per cent of GDP even after the COVID-19 crisis (Maiorano, 2018; Dey and Kundu, 2020). Throughout this period, the government has acted to repress the social movements that drove these programmes (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 remains largely privatised, and it remains largely the work of women from India's marginalised castes and classes.

The coronavirus crisis compounded an accumulation crisis that was already brewing 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 the 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 subsidise the reproduction of India's working class even at this time of crisis suggests that it sees the goal of its interventions as minimising 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 the low-income South can serve as a model for what comes next: building upon demands to socialise the labour of social reproduction as an integral part of anti-capitalist struggle, and mobilising trans-local households to do so in both urban and rural India.

Conclusion

This article 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 prioritises profits, and a feminist ethic that prioritises 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.

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