

COLOMBO 2025
TOWARDS FUTURES
OF JUSTICE, EQUALITY AND PEACE

Ending Patriarchy
in the World of Work



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Patriarchy has long defined the structures of work, labour, and value. It dictates who is seen as a worker, whose labour counts, whose safety matters, and whose voice is silenced. Across South and Southeast Asia – from the garment lines of Bangladesh to the domestic households of India, from plantations in Sri Lanka to care collectives in Fiji – women sustain economies that neither recognize nor safeguard them.

Today, the contradictions of this system are more visible than ever. The climate crisis, economic inequality, technological shifts, and the disproportionate responsibility of care have converged to expose the deep injustice at the heart of how work is organised. The experiences of women workers—especially those in informal, precarious, and essential roles—demonstrate the urgent need for transformation.

The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2023) reports that 66% of all workers in Asia and the Pacific



are informally employed, and a large share of them are women. Women in informal wage employment earn, on average, just 42% of the wages of men in formal employment. This is not an accident—it is a design. A design rooted in patriarchy and capitalism, where women's labour is treated as cheap, flexible, and infinitely expandable.

This booklet is a collective reflection, a political education tool, and a call to action. It draws from struggles, organising, and feminist practices across the region. It is written in the collective “we” because this transformation cannot belong to one organisation, one movement, or one nation—it must be a collective project of liberation.

We invite you to read this booklet not only as analysis, but as an invitation to courage, imagination, and action. We can build a feminist and just future of work—grounded in care, dignity, and ecological harmony. But first, we must understand how the current world of work was built.

How Patriarchy Built the World of Work

The world of work did not emerge in a vacuum. It was built on a foundation of social norms, colonial structures, caste and class hierarchies, and patriarchal beliefs that determined who counts as a worker and whose labour holds value. Men's labour has been framed



as skilled, productive, and worthy of pay. Women's labour has been framed as natural, unskilled, and a duty of love, often performed without recognition or reward.

Patriarchy shaped labour systems by drawing a false division between two spheres:

- « **"Productive" labour** (paid, public, male-coded)
- « **"Reproductive" labour** (unpaid, private, feminized)

This division ensured that men entered public spaces to earn wages and hold power, while women were confined to homes to provide unpaid services that made men's labour possible. Without women's cooking, cleaning, caregiving, emotional support, and household management, no worker could enter the labour market. Yet this labour—essential for the functioning of society and the economy—was not recognised as work.

When women began entering paid labour in greater numbers, patriarchy followed them there too. Women have been channelled into roles seen as extensions of domestic duties: teaching, nursing, domestic work, caregiving, hospitality, food preparation, stitching, and other "feminised" tasks. These sectors have been kept low-paid and low-status precisely because they were associated with women.

Across the Asia-Pacific, patriarchal norms also intersected with caste, class, ethnicity, religion,



and migrant status. Dalit and Adivasi women in India were pushed into sanitation, manual scavenging, construction, and other dangerous jobs. Migrant women from Indonesia, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Nepal were channelled into domestic work in cities and Gulf states, often facing racialised and sexualised exploitation. Indigenous women across island nations were displaced from lands and livelihoods due to climate change and tourism-led development.

Patriarchy adapted itself to every era—colonial, industrial, and neoliberal—but one thing remained constant: women's work was systematically devalued.

Ending patriarchy in the world of work requires dismantling these historical foundations rather than simply increasing women's participation in the labour market, but transforming the very meaning of labour, productivity, and value.

Capitalism, Class and the Hidden Subsidy of Women's Labour

Patriarchy alone does not explain the exploitation of women's labour. Patriarchy and capitalism work together, reinforcing each other to ensure that women perform the most essential work for the lowest cost.

Capitalism depends on women in three key aspects:



1. To Provide Unpaid Care Work that Subsidises the Economy

Cooking, cleaning, childcare, eldercare, emotional support, and household management—these are tasks the state and market would otherwise have to pay for. Women’s unpaid work keeps the cost of labour low for employers because families, not public systems, bear the burden of social reproduction. If this labour were paid, economies would collapse.

2. To Supply Cheap, Flexible, Disposable Labour

Women are treated as a reserve **army of labour**—brought into the workforce when needed and pushed out during crises. The COVID-19 pandemic proved this. Women filled frontline roles to keep societies functioning.

3. To Perform Work Deemed “Natural” and Therefore Underpaid

When women perform paid labour similar to unpaid domestic tasks—teaching, nursing, cooking, cleaning, childcare—it is systematically underpaid. The logic is simple and cruel: *If women do this at home for free, why pay them much in the market?*

This intersection of patriarchy and capitalism ensures that exploitation is not an accident but is rather a feature.



An example of this is of ASHA and Anganwadi workers in India. They carry the nation's public health and childcare system on their shoulders. They provide essential services—vaccination, nutrition support, reproductive health care, early childhood education—yet they are classified not as workers but as “volunteers”. They receive “honorariums”, not wages; recognition, not rights. The state depends on their labour but refuses to acknowledge it.

Across borders, this pattern repeats. In Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Vietnam, 70–85% of garment workers are women—paid low wages to maximise export profits. In Sri Lanka's tea plantations, women pluckers work long hours for wages that do not meet survival needs. Migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, and the Gulf live at their employers' mercy, facing surveillance, wage theft, sexual exploitation, and precarious immigration status, often having their passports seized by their employers.

Capitalism could not function without women's labour—but it continues to deny women the rights and dignity they deserve.

Women's liberation would require recognising, valuing, and redistributing care work; paying decent wages; guaranteeing social protection; and ensuring democratic control over economic resources. Such transformation would strike at the heart of capitalist and neo liberal accumulation.



This is why gender struggles cannot be separated from class struggles. Our fight for a feminist future of work is inseparable from the struggle to transform our economies.

The Feminisation of Labour: Stories Across Asia and the Pacific

Over the last few decades, governments, corporations, and international institutions have celebrated the growing number of women entering the labour force as a symbol of progress. But the truth is more complex. The increase in women's labour force participation has not resulted in equality—it has resulted in the feminisation of labour, where more women participate in work, but in the most insecure, informal, and exploitative forms of labour.

The feminisation of labour is not empowerment—it is an economic strategy. It is a deliberate reshaping of labour markets to suit neoliberal capitalism, which seeks cheap, flexible, and compliant labour.

Consider the following realities across the region:

India: ASHA and Anganwadi Workers

They are the backbone of the country's public health and early childhood system. ASHA workers ensured immunisation, maternal care and community health surveillance; Anganwadi workers laid the foundation for early childhood learning and nutrition. Yet both groups



are classified as “honorary workers”—their labour is valued in words, not wages. They are expected to serve communities with devotion, to be “like mothers”—a framing that romanticises their exploitation.

Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Vietnam: Garment Workers

Export-led industrialisation in these countries has relied heavily on young women workers. Factories prefer women for their perceived “nimble fingers”, “docile nature”, and willingness to accept low wages. Behind these coded phrases lies patriarchy: women are preferred because they are easier to exploit.

Sri Lanka and India: Plantation Workers

Tea plantation labour, rooted in colonial structures—relies on women working in harsh conditions for wages that barely sustain life. The labour is backbreaking, the hours long, and sexual harassment widespread. Yet women’s labour remains invisible in household decision-making and community leadership.

Migrant Domestic Workers Across Asia and the Gulf

Millions of women migrate from the Philippines, Indonesia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and India as domestic workers. They cook, clean, care for children and elders, and keep households running for middle- and upper-class families. Many live with employers, with no private space, no days off, and constant surveillance. Their migrant status ties them to employers, making



exploitation easy and justice nearly impossible. In many cases, the employers often seize the passports of their domestic workers, further restricting their mobility.

Across all these contexts, a pattern emerges:

Women are doing more work than ever before, yet the value and dignity of that work remains suppressed.

Feminisation of labour is the modern expression of a centuries-old logic: women's work is to serve, to care, to neutralise social and economic shock. But this labour—so often treated as natural, disposable, impermanent actually keeps families, communities, and economies alive.

To challenge feminisation of labour is to challenge the idea that women exist to support economies that fail to support them.

Living Under Constant Risk: The Continuum of Insecurity

For women across Asia and the Pacific, insecurity is a condition of life.

Insecurity begins at home, continues in transport, intensifies at the workplace, and follows women back home again. It is the awareness that at any point—during work, travel, pregnancy, illness, or protest—one could lose employment, safety, dignity, or life.



This continuum of insecurity is maintained through:

- « **Economic Dependence:** Without their own income or with wages too low to survive, women lack bargaining power at home and work and have to depend on male members of the household.
- « **Violence and Harassment:** Sexual harassment, threats, and coercion remain tools of control across sectors—from factories to domestic work, from gig platforms to farms and markets and even in their own homes.
- « **Lack of Social Protection:** Informal workers often have no maternity benefits, pensions, health insurance, or paid leave. A single crisis or illness can push families into debt.
- « **Exclusion from Decision-Making:** Whether in government, unions, cooperatives, or workplace committees, women are rarely included where decisions are made.

These are not isolated incidents. They are structural features of a system designed to keep women outside positions of power.

The ILO (2023) shows that:

- « Two-thirds of the region's workforce is informal, and women form the majority of this group.
- « Women in informal employment earn 58% less than men in comparable work.



- « Rural women face higher levels of informal work and exploitation than urban women.
- « Those with less education are almost completely absorbed into informal sectors.

Women are expected to make up for State withdrawal from welfare. Women are often the workforce filling the gaps left by privatised health, declining public education, and shrinking social services.

Patriarchy ensures the normalisation of this exploitation and capitalism ensures its profit.

To transform this reality, we need to imagine a new future of labour—one which challenges both patriarchy and capitalism at their roots. As we begin to dream of transformation, it is imperative to be cognisant of newer forces that alter the world of work even further: technology.

Artificial Intelligence, Digitalisation and the New Frontiers of Exploitation

We stand at the edge of a new era of work. One that is defined by artificial intelligence, automation, and digital platforms. These shifts are often celebrated as the future of progress. But for women workers—and particularly for informal workers—this future may carry both promise and peril.

Technology is not neutral. It reflects the values, biases, and power structures of the societies that create and



control it. When used within capitalist and patriarchal systems, technology often deepens inequality rather than reducing it.

AI is transforming work in several ways:

Automation of Labour

Stitching, packaging, data entry, cashiering, tele-support, tasks often done by women workers are among the first to be automated. Women, positioned in these roles face higher risk of job displacement.

Digital Platforms and Invisible Labour

Gig platforms present themselves as offering “flexibility” but often replicate the same gendered inequalities. Women gig workers on food service, domestic work and home-based platforms report unpredictable wages, unsafe work conditions, customer harassment, and algorithmic penalties.

Surveillance and Control

Technologies in factories, domestic work, and delivery platforms increasingly monitor workers’ performance, speed, and behaviour. For women, this surveillance intersects with patriarchal control, often extending into their personal lives.

Digital Divide

Women face barriers to digital access: device ownership, mobility, cost of data, safety online, English-language dependence, and family restrictions. This



exclusion pushes women further behind in an economy that is rapidly digitalising.

If we do not intervene, the digital future of work will become another site of extraction, dispossession, and control.

But just as AI can expand exploitation, it can also expand possibility—if shaped by democratic, feminist, worker-led values.

A feminist approach to technology demands:

- « Workers must have a voice in how technologies that govern their work are introduced.
- « Digital transitions must be participatory, transparent, inclusive, and decentralised.
- « Data and algorithms must be regulated to prevent discrimination and corporate capture.
- « Digital skills must be treated as a right, not a privilege.
- « Public investment must ensure that technological transitions do not leave women behind.

Reframing Safety as Freedom

For generations, women have been told that safety means protection—protection by fathers, brothers, husbands, employers, the State. Protection has been offered not as a right, but as a privilege that can be



withdrawn. Protection has kept women dependent, silent, and confined.

The feminist movement offers a different vision: safety as freedom.

Safety is not the absence of danger—it is the presence of dignity, autonomy, and power. Safety is the ability to move through the world without fear of violence, hunger, humiliation, or retaliation. Safety is the right to rest, to choose, to organise, and to refuse.

A feminist understanding of safety is rooted in five dimensions that shape a woman's ability to live a free life:

- « **Economic Safety:** A steady income, fair wages, job security, and freedom from exploitation, debt, and poverty.
- « **Bodily Safety and Autonomy:** Freedom from harassment, control, and abuse, and the right to make decisions about one's own body and reproduction.
- « **Psychological Safety:** The power to speak, question, negotiate, unionise, and demand rights without fear of punishment or shame.
- « **Social Safety:** Access to childcare, healthcare, housing, sanitation, mobility, and community support systems—without which work is unsafe.



« Ecological Safety: Work cannot be safe if the planet is on fire, if water poisons our bodies, if storms destroy livelihoods. The climate crisis is a workplace hazard.

Safety built through protection reinforces dependence however, safety built through power and rights creates freedom.

Freedom requires redistribution of power—at home, at work, in unions, in community, and in the State. It requires shifting from charity to justice, from personal resilience to collective rights.

Building a Feminist Future of Work: A Just Future for All

The world of work today stands at a crossroads. Climate change, economic inequality, technological disruption, and the global crisis of care have exposed the deep fractures in our current systems. The world of work, as we know it, is changing—bringing with it both fear and possibility. In this uncertainty lies an opportunity: to reimagine not just how we work, but why and for whom.

A feminist future of work cannot simply mean including women in the existing order. Inclusion without transformation only extends injustice. What we need instead is a rethinking of work itself—its value, its purpose, and its power structures. A feminist transformation of work envisions a world where:



- « Labour is rooted in dignity, not merely survival.
- « Care is valued as central to society and shared among all.
- « Economies prioritise the well-being of workers, not the profit of a few.
- « Workers have a say in the decisions that shape their lives.
- « Communities, not corporations, hold power over technological and ecological transitions.
- « The planet is protected as the foundation of all life and labour.

Such a future cannot be built by policy alone—it must be built through struggle, solidarity, and imagination. It calls for alliances across borders, sectors, and identities, and demands that we confront patriarchy, capitalism, caste, and colonialism together. Across our region, we already see glimpses of this transformation: women farmers practising agroecology, domestic workers organising across borders, ASHA workers striking for recognition, garment workers challenging global supply chains, climate activists linking labour and ecology, and young feminists asserting their rights in digital spaces. These are not isolated acts—they are the seeds of a new world of work built on care, community, and justice.



Ending patriarchy in the world of work is essential not only for women's equality but for the liberation of all. Patriarchy imposes hierarchies that devalue women's labour, restrict mobility, and normalise unequal pay and unsafe workplaces. But it also harms men—forcing them into narrow, competitive roles defined by control rather than cooperation, by breadwinning rather than caregiving. When these systems are dismantled, workplaces become spaces of fairness, creativity, and collective purpose.

A gender-just world of work is one where all forms of labour—paid and unpaid—are recognised and shared. Women gain freedom, respect, and leadership; men gain the ability to live beyond the pressures of rigid masculinity, to nurture, to care, and to participate fully in social and emotional life.

True justice in the world of work is inseparable from gender justice. Ending patriarchy allows societies to move towards economies grounded in equality, solidarity, and care—where every worker, regardless of gender, can live and labour with dignity. In building a feminist future of work, we build a more humane future for everyone.



A FEMINIST CHARTER TO END PATRIARCHY IN THE WORLD OF WORK

Preamble

Across Asia and the Pacific, women workers sustain economies with their paid and unpaid labour—yet their work remains invisible, under-valued, and under constant threat. From the garment lines of Bangladesh to construction sites in Nepal, from India’s Anganwadis and ASHA networks to the domestic workers in Malaysia and Hong Kong, women hold up the world of work without enjoying its rights or rewards.

The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2023) reports that 66% of all workers in Asia and the Pacific are informally employed, and a majority of them are women. They are clustered in the lowest paid, least protected, and most precarious forms of work. Women in informal wage employment earn, on average, only 42% of the wages of men in formal employment — a gap rooted not in skill or merit, but in patriarchal and capitalist structures that profit from women’s devaluation.

ActionAid Association asserts that ending patriarchy in the world of work is not a slogan—it is a political, economic, and moral imperative. Safety, dignity, and equality cannot be achieved through piecemeal reforms. They require dismantling the patriarchal and capitalist systems that treat women’s labour as cheap, flexible, and disposable.



This Charter is an invitation to movements, workers, unions, and allies to collectively re-imagine the world of work—grounded in feminist ethics, social solidarity, economic democracy, and freedom from violence, exploitation, and fear.

A. Dismantling Violence and Harassment

We demand that states and employers:

- « Ratify and implement ILO Convention 190, guaranteeing a world of work free from violence and harassment.
- « Extend protection to all spaces of labour – homes, streets, markets, farms, and digital platforms.
- « Establish survivor-centred grievance systems ensuring confidentiality, redress, and non-retaliation.
- « Mandate gender audits and independent safety committees in all enterprises, formal and informal.
- « Recognise that the denial of fair wages, rest, and voice are forms of structural violence.

B. Redefining Health and Occupational Safety

We affirm that women's bodies are not incidental to labour, they are central.

- « Expand Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) frameworks to informal and home-based sectors.



- « Recognise menstrual, reproductive, and maternal health as occupational rights.
- « Guarantee access to toilets, drinking water, rest zones, crèches, and breastfeeding facilities in every workplace.
- « Include mental health, stress, and gender-based violence as OSH concerns.
- « Integrate climate resilience and ecological safety within labour standards – safe work cannot exist on an unsafe planet.

C. Revaluing Labour and Redistribution

We affirm that care work sustains the economy – it must no longer be invisible.

- « Implement equal pay for work of equal value, extending to domestic, agricultural, and care workers.
- « Recognise unpaid care and domestic work in national accounts and public policy.
- « Establish publicly funded childcare, eldercare, and care collectives as essential labour rights.
- « Guarantee universal social protection – covering health, maternity, pensions, and unemployment – independent of formal employment.
- « Build green and care-based economies that create sustainable, dignified livelihoods for women and marginalised workers.



D. Power, Voice, and Representation

We affirm that democracy must extend into the workplace.

- « Ensure at least 50% representation of women and gender-diverse persons in unions, cooperatives, and policy-making bodies.
- « Recognise self-organised collectives, cooperatives, and SHGs as legitimate economic actors.
- « Protect women human rights defenders, trade unionists, and feminist organisers from retaliation.
- « Institutionalise feminist leadership and capacity building across all sectors, linking gender justice with ecological and labour rights.
- « Foster alliances between feminist, labour, and climate justice movements, recognising their shared struggle against extractive patriarchy.

E. Transforming Patriarchy in Policy and Practice

Governments Must:

- « Ratify and enforce ILO Conventions 155, 189, and 190.
- « Extend labour law coverage to domestic, informal, migrant, and platform workers.
- « Conduct Gendered Labour and Safety Audits across sectors.



- « Integrate care, ecological, and labour justice into all economic policies.
- « Invest in public, gender-responsive infrastructure – safe transport, housing, and green livelihoods.

Employers Must:

- « Embed gender equality and OSH in their business practices and supply chains.
- « Provide childcare, sanitation, and safe transport for all workers.
- « Ensure transparent wages, grievance mechanisms, and anti-discrimination policies.
- « Move towards sustainable, solidarity-based business models, rejecting exploitative profit systems.

Unions and Movements Must:

- « Build cross-sector feminist alliances among workers, farmers, and care providers.
- « Challenge patriarchal norms within unions and leadership structures.
- « Embed feminist and ecological demands within collective bargaining frameworks.

Civil Society and ActionAid Association Will:

- « Strengthen grassroots feminist organising and local leadership.



- « Document and expose gendered labour injustices and ecological harms.
- « Facilitate cross-border solidarity among movements in India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Fiji, and Vanuatu.
- « Advance a Feminist Green Agenda – centring care, equity, and sustainability in the future of work.

F. A Call to Reimagine the Future of Work

We believe another world of work is not only possible – it is necessary.

To end patriarchy in the world of work is to end the logic of extraction and domination – over women, workers, and the Earth itself. It is to build an economy grounded in care, cooperation, and sustainability.

We call upon governments, employers, unions, and civil society to join this transformation – not as an act of benevolence, but of survival and justice.

We envision a world where:

G. Collective Call to Action

We, women workers, organisers, and allies across Asia and the Pacific, affirm that ending patriarchy in the world of work is the unfinished task of movements in our region.



We call for:

- « Equal wages, safety, and equal dignity for all workers.
- « Recognition of care work as the foundation of every economy.
- « Freedom from gender-based violence and harassment.
- « Shared responsibility for care, health, and community well-being.
- « Transformation of institutions that reproduce gendered hierarchies of power.

To end patriarchy in work is to end the division between labour and life — to affirm that every woman's right to safety, rest, and respect is inseparable from her right to justice.

The world of work will be free when every woman's labour is recognized and valued, every woman is safe, and every woman's voice is heard.



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