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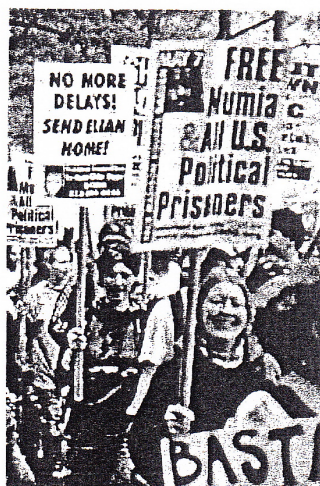
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## Women Protest the IMF

Activists in Washington, D.C., this weekend said women have extra reasons to fight the IMF.

by Jennifer Barrios and David Harris | april 18, 2000

Looking at the tens of thousands of protesters in Washington, D.C., this weekend, it was impossible not to notice the overwhelming presence of women demonstrating against the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

These mostly young, white female activists traveled in droves to the nation's capital to voice their concern over a broad range of issues including Third World debt relief and the unequal flow of global capital.

For Nicole Lueschow, an 18-year-old high school student from Tacoma Park, Maryland, the protest in D.C. was a chance to voice solidarity with youth activists critical of the power given to the corporate and government elite under IMF, World Bank, and World Trade Organization (WTO) policies. And although nearly 700 protesters had been arrested by the end of the weekend, Lueschow's resolve didn't waiver.

"I really feel it's important that women express themselves here," she said. "In the past, women weren't always able to express a view. Now we have a chance to come and fight for what we believe."

Lueschow and her friend, 18-year-old Nicole Riley, sat patiently at a police line on the outskirts of George Washington

overtly recruited women to work for a variety of factors, in part because they thought women could be hired cheaper, be less likely to unionize, and also because they were an available labor pool to tap."

SAPs can reach into the home lives of women as well: Food subsidies decline, making it harder for women to feed their families. "When the World Bank comes in, and says subsidies are a no-no, often who gets hurt are the poor, and the United Nations has estimated that 70 percent of the poor are female," Sparr said.

Schools are often made fee-based under SAPs — and the mark left on a generation of women is indelible. "As soon as families get hit with user fees, it's invariably the daughter that gets pulled out of school first," said Jason Mark, a spokesperson for the San Francisco-based fair trade group Global Exchange.

However, the IMF counters it has no authority to cause governments to cut social spending — and in fact, the IMF says it encourages countries to maintain services and is disappointed when governments "ignore this well-intentioned advice," according to an IMF publication.

### **Dealing with Debt**

Many of the protesters also demanded an immediate forgiveness of the debts of impoverished countries. The IMF — in which the US has a controlling interest, holding 18 percent of the vote — has taken steps toward this goal with their Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative, launched in 1996. The HIPC program covers 41 developing countries, and does relieve a portion of their debt, but critics say it doesn't go far enough. One protester carried a sign that said developing countries spend four times as much paying back debt as they do on health care.

Latin America owes 36 percent of its gross national product (or GNP, the sum of what it produces) to other countries and financial institutions, while sub-Saharan Africa owes 83 percent of its total GNP to debt. Nicaragua is one of the world's most indebted countries, with each citizen owing the equivalent of three times her annual income. A country must comply with repayment plans, which includes adopting SAPs, in order to qualify for HIPC debt relief.

But even those who advocate debt relief know that it is only the first step toward alleviating these countries' problems. Debt relief does not automatically mean that governments, free from the burden of interest payments, will go back to spending funds on health and welfare. Also, debt relief could just mean another bailout for a country's investors.

"Debt forgiveness is the first step in a bigger puzzle," Sparr points out. "Unless we work with more than just trading relationships and restructuring the international market,



university near the site of the meetings. Like many young women out protesting, both girls wore bandannas to protect them from the 80-degree-heat — and the potential sting of tear gas, should events from last November's WTO protests in Seattle repeat themselves.

"A lot of mothers and daughters are affected by the IMF and the World Bank," said Riley, whose mother once worked in a match factory in Iran while her brothers received an education.

Another woman, who would only identify herself as Khtay, said knows firsthand what Iranian women must endure. Dressed in jeans and a blazer — clothing she said she would never be allowed to wear in her homeland — she said she felt solidarity with the thousands of other women at the protest as she collected petition signatures for an Iranian activist facing deportation from the United States.

### **Don't be a SAP**

Activists argued that IMF-mandated Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) often create the social forces that push families to send young women to work in foreign-owned factories instead of to school. In order to receive financial support from the IMF and emergency "bailout" loans from the World Bank, SAPs are imposed on these developing countries to make them more attractive targets to foreign investors. This is accomplished through a regimen of cuts in social spending, slashes in tariffs, a devaluation of the currency and an orientation to an export-dominated economy. In other words, the money is only granted if the country can prove it is on the path towards a capitalistic market model, thereby becoming a full-fledged partner in the global economy.

The resulting disparity between rich and poor nations, and the effect of SAPs on the lives of the people in the global south, is a primary target of the scores of protesters who converged on the nation's capitol this weekend.

According to Amanda Vender of the Filipino Worker Center in New York, young women in the Philippines who work in export processing zones are seen as expendable labor, and are often only used for several months at time. "The IMF and the World Bank enact policies that allow for the exploitation of women by multinational corporations," argued Vender.

"The electronic and garment industries focus on recruiting women because they have small hands, and are seen as more efficient in operating equipment or assembling electronics. Women working in department stores are forced to wear short skirts so they can't hide stolen money," Vendor continued.

The exploitation of women in an export-oriented society is not uncommon, according to Pamela Sparr, head of the Women's Division of the Office of Environmental Justice and author of a book on globalization and women, "Mortgaging Women's Lives." She points out that in export-oriented zones, "Companies

countries that are highly indebted today will immediately become indebted once again because of the way the international economy works.

"If we're serious about promoting sustainability, we need to work hard to challenge the WTO and trade in investment," she said.

### **No Shut-Down in Sight**

Although the protesters did not shut down the spring meetings of these two organizations, they did manage to sweep the welcome mat out from under the powerful ministers' feet. Activist Page Hawley from New York City says she's gained a new perspective from her experiences.

"The cops were really vicious," explained a flustered Hawley, who said she was handcuffed for six hours and held on a bus without legal representation after attempting to protest Saturday night. "They blocked us in from two sides of the street and started moving in and not letting people out. Everybody got arrested."

Fellow protesters Lueschow and Riley were split on how far they were willing to go in the name of global justice. Lueschow said her solidarity with other women and the movement was strong enough to risk arrest, and her "political" parents were supporting her all the way. But Riley, who is considering politics as a career, said she didn't want a blemish on her record.

"Besides," she added, "my parents would kill me."

*Jennifer Barrios is a freelance writer and the editor of a community newspaper. David Harris is a freelance writer and documentary filmmaker from San Francisco.*

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