UNIT 3 RESISTANCE AND STRUGGLE

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Structure

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3.1 INTRODUCTION

The relative position of women and men in the social structure is fundamentally linked to the debates on class and gender which is articulated by several scholars including Silvia Walby. She argues that the household itself comprises of a class relationship between the husband as the bread earner vis-à-vis wife as the provider of labour. Therefore, women within the household are placed in a class category different from the class position of their husbands. Women as a separate class in the social hierarchy can be theoretically referred to as one form of women’s resistance to the fundamental class division that exists in the labour market. However, resistance and struggle can primarily be understood by analyzing women’s struggle in the global and grass-root movements. In this unit, we will focus on various movements in a cross-cultural perspective to capture the forms and nature of women’s resistance and struggle as a class. With this background, this unit will discuss how struggle and resistance are expressed by women of different class to question capitalist patriarchy.

3.2 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:
• Understand and discuss the meaning of resistance and struggle;
• Comprehend resistance and struggle from both theoretical and empirical positions; and
• Connect the concepts of gender, class and struggle in the light of empirical observations.
3.3 GENDER, CLASS AND STRATIFICATION

As you have seen in the previous two units, the analysis of class was primarily based on the studies of men who are located in the class structure. The recognition of women as ‘productive labour force’ and its simultaneous reference to the category of class have come with the expansion of feminist work on class and gender. Theoretically, ‘resistance’ was conceptualized by feminist writers from the day they started to analyse gender as a valid category in the analysis of class. According to S. Jackson and S. Scott (2002), the reluctance of sociologists to accept anything other than class as an essential social division must be challenged. Feminist sociologists have made it clear that class is one form of social stratification and gender is an essential component. The interface between class and gender needs to be investigated and analysed. For instance, analyzing class without including women can provide a skewed picture of class which did not include the gender hierarchy in the labour market. The bottom level of the labour market is over represented by women workers and their class position is completely invisible. Feminist writers such as Britten and Heath (1983), Delphy and Leonard (1986) and Sylvia Walby (2002) have questioned the conventional way of analyzing class and delimiting the potential of women to constitute a class category.

Let us now understand the forms and nature of women’s struggle and resistance with the help of narratives, stories and empirical studies. In the late 1970s, black feminists raised the issues of gender and race, and their impact on the occupational hierarchy in the Western countries to bring an intersectional approach in the study of social structure. To quote Jackson and Scott, “the history of slavery, and of forced and voluntary migrations of various kinds, has created a racially stratified society. Different forms of stratification—class, race, and gender—impact on each other so that gender cannot be assumed to operate independently of other factors influencing women’s position in the labour market” (2002, p. 86). Further, from the 1980s onwards, feminist sociologists began to explore the nature and causes of gendered segregated labour market in the West in order to challenge such pre-existing gender stereotypical perception.

Gender based division of labour has been a reality in the context of the global economy. The economic restructuring process created a polarized labour market having a larger number of peripheral workers in combination with a handful of core workers. The peripheral workers are flexible workers, casual workers and temporary or part-time workers who are often women. Even today, a majority of women are working as peripheral workers in big and small-scale industries. This is not because of their lack of commitment towards work but because the working conditions of women are severely informalised in the labour market (Mitter, 2002).
According to Swasti Mitter (2002), the division of labour in the West was regulated by the principle of ‘Kan-ban system’ of management. The kanban system was based on the idea of delivering the product ‘just in time’ but not ‘just in case’ what you may be observing in fast food centres or Macdonald outlets. This principle was adopted by the management of various companies to maximize profit by producing surplus and addressing the expectation of the customers to deliver the products on time. This change in organizational functioning required labour at the lowest cost. As a result, the labour market in the West witnessed a change/shift in the gender composition. Mitter (2002) refers to this process as the ‘approach of manpower planning’.

In spite of the growing working class or factory workers, they remained outside of the labour market. These changes had serious implication for women who formed a large part of the new working class. To quote Mitter (2002), “this new working class is largely ignored not only by the mainstream labour movement but by most writers on economic and political issues (P. 113). Therefore, women are always treated as casual labourers and unable to fight for their rights through political struggle.

On the other hand, women’s movement in the West demanded wages for women’s unpaid labour and worked towards creating social security measures such as child care facility and facility for old people. This is how women in the West gained some political space in the labour market. Largely, women’s contribution to unpaid labour and invisible work in the family has created a class consciousness among women in the labour market. Further, Mitter argues that the rise of ‘women of colour’ as workers in the labour market has given a shape to the new working class category comprises of women of different classes, races and regions. Later on, various feminist academic works came to focus on the issues of labour market and its segregation in forms of gender and race.

The emergence of the black power movement in the United States of America in the 1960s further revealed the inherent gender-race segregation of the labour market. The micro-level data revealed that the white men are the highest earners and the black men constituted the second highest earning groups in the American labour market. Further, the labour market revealed widening wage gap between the women workers (both white and black) and the black male workers (Lewis 1977, refer Nain, 2002). According to Gemma Tang Nain (2002), the employment trend in the labour market in the U.S.A. revealed the aspect of sexism and patriarchy which determined the earnings of all women workers. Thus, patriarchy and class can go hand in hand to restrict women’s access to productive resources and can control women’s class position. Resistance and struggle have been a continuous strategy for women to gain access to paid form of employment or productive
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resources. Let us now look at the struggle as a strategy of social groups (women) to gain access to power and decision-making.

**Check Your Progress:**

*What is capitalist patriarchy?*

### 3.4 CONCEPTUALISATION OF STRUGGLE: WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES

Anne Witz (2002) in her chapter on *Patriarchy and Profession* expanded Frank Parkin’s concept of closure to explain the nature of women’s exclusion from the medical profession. Parkin’s theorization of closure will be useful to explore women’s resistance to gender-based exclusion and patriarchy in the male-dominated profession. Parkin makes a distinction between ‘exclusionary strategy’ and ‘usurpationary closure’. According to Parkin, usurpationary strategy refers to the methods of collective action or mobilization which is used by the subordinated social groups to counter or challenge their exclusion. On the other hand, exclusionary strategy is adopted by the dominant social groups to exercise power on the subordinated group. Witz (2002) used this distinction to explain the gendered dimensions of occupational closure. In the model of occupational closure, men represent the dominant social class and have privileged access to rewards and opportunities. Women use gendered strategy of inclusionary usurpation to challenge the male monopoly that exists in the labour market. Here, women simply do not face the patriarchal closure in various occupations, but struggle to occupy the male-dominated arena in the labour market. Let us look at
the example of medical profession in the U.S. to analyse resistance from a feminist perspective.

The mid-nineteenth century reflected male dominance in the medical practice. The strategy of gender based exclusion was never codified in any Act, but was operating in universities, medical houses and teaching hospitals. To quote Witz (2002), “the exclusionary mechanisms were embedded in the institutional spheres of civil society, operating in the modern university and professional corporations” (p.126). She argued that the male power to control medical practices was organized in the sphere of civil society and created an occupational closure for women. The usurpationary struggle began with an individual struggle by Elizabeth Garrett in Edinburgh University. Thereafter, a group of women challenged the male dominance in medical practices and struggled to gain access to medical education and examination (Witz, 2002). The initial struggle of aspiring women doctors concentrated on gaining access to medical education and training, later on they challenged the norm of governing midwifery practices by the medical men. There is well documented history of destruction of female midwifery and widespread killing of female midwives in the 17th-18th centuries in Western Europe. Some of these practices were challenged by women through creating formal systems in the sector of medicine. For instance, the women’s campaign for a state-led nurse registration system was initiated in 1888. The British Nurse Association was formed with an aim to provide legal status to this profession. As part of the campaign, women struggled to challenge the power relations in the medical profession and secured autonomy to determine the quality and duration of nurse education and improve women nurses’ pay and working conditions (P. 130). This case explained women’s both individual and collective struggles to enter into the so called male dominated occupation. The conceptualization of relationship between gender, class and struggle was informed by these case studies and can not be analysed in isolation from each other.

Johanna Brenner (2006) focused on the relationship between gender and labour in the context of labour movement. She questioned how and why working class men systematically marginalized women from participating in trade-unions in the labour movement. Brenner used the concept of ‘survival project’ to explain women’s different forms of resistance in the labour market. Survival projects refer to the ways and means people organize to live in the capitalist market. Survival projects include strategies of mutual support, solidarity within the neighborhood and kin groups and creating social network. Therefore, women workers like men develop their identities as workers and employ different strategies to be included in the labour market. For instance, in the nineteenth century, women workers were organized on the basis of craft exclusion/segregation rather than on industrial organizations. Registered nurses were not willing to accommodate less
credentialed hospital workers in their union, unionized school teachers often negotiated with the school administration with different contract and waitresses developed feminine identities with the craft in food service industries. In the context of food service industry, in the 1960s, young waitresses in alliance with the women’s movement resorted to court and demanded their access to jobs in the food service industry (Brenner 2006, p. 89). The discussion on women’s resistance and struggle needs to document some of the historical moments where women fought for their rights collectively. Let's us now look at the analysis of women’s self-organisation in the U.S. history.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century America, women were the agents for institutionalizing social welfare mechanisms in the state. To cite Skocpol, in the Progressive Era of America, middle-class women were effective in implementing social protective measures. Programmes such as mother’s/widow pensions, maternal and child health care were introduced in America due to women’s struggle as political actors. Feminists were critical of these programmes as they were perceived as public charity for women promoting women’s dependence upon the men as the breadwinners of the family (Brenner, 2006 p. 60). However, the introduction of these social protection measures was based on women’s organized and effective struggle as political actors.

The new generation of women activists and feminists criticized this model of social welfare and argued for the need to recognize women as workers. These movements can be seen as examples to show how women across class, race and culture possessed the capacity for political self-organisation. The political activism of women was based on and emerged from their own life experiences as ‘mothers’, ‘wage earners’ and ‘women of colour’. African American women formed their own organization and fought for their rights and entitlements. These struggles eventually opened up new possibilities for women to position themselves as agents and individual actors in the modern economy.

Check Your Progress:

Give an example of occupational closure in the contemporary context.
3.5 WOMEN AND POLITICAL SELF-ORGANISATION: FORMS OF RESISTANCE

Women’s increasing participation in paid work immensely contributed towards their self organisation as political actors. Some feminists argued that women in the West started to work in paid employment without challenging the existing gender ideology within the family. However, their participation in paid labour facilitated their access to resources and new experiences of labour which supported their political participation. According to Brenner and Laslett (2006), the increasing number of married women and their daughters in paid forms of employment and attending college respectively, created the structural base for the women’s movement. Each country has its own history of working women’s movement. During 1900 to 1910, the working women’s movement was on the rise in Germany. The movement comprised women working in sweatshops, home industries and in the sector of household labour. Different forms of struggle and organisations were instrumental in expanding the base of the working women’s movement in Germany. The foundation of the movement was laid by the women wage labourers in Berlin and in 1885 the Women’s Workers’ Association was formed. Proletariat women’s movement adopted practical methods like forming independent associations or joining the union to fight against capitalism and patriarchy. According Karin Bauer, in the middle of 1890s, women workers were a minority in the trade union organisations in sectors of textile and tobacco. By the year 1896, there was substantial growth in the women worker’s membership into these unions (see Custers, 2014). Apart from this, different organizational structures such as women’s organisations and complaint commission for female workers were created to expand the struggle. Another form of struggle was strike. Strikes were used as weapons to reach out to the female workers in the formal and informal economy. Peter Custers (2014) reported that the major strike had happened in 1890s and paralyzed the garment sector in Berlin.

In the United States, the women’s movements of the 1960s and 70s were the consequence of the changing workforce participation between women and men. Let us understand women’s capacity for political self-organisation in the context of U.S. history. Towards the late nineteenth century, white middle-class women played an important role in bringing social reforms in the United States. Their access to education, research and lobbying was instrumental in organising themselves as active political actors. Different movements such as women’s club movement, settlement house movement and welfare and mother’s groups created a separate sphere for women’s self-organisation.

During this period, the underlying gender division across public and private spheres provided white middle-class women the structural base to organise
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politically. For instance, women's experience of unpaid labour including managing homes and raising children made them conscious of their collective action (Brenner and Laslett, 2006). They were collectively organised for two reasons: 1. their demand for political equality and 2. their demand for social protection as mothers. Therefore, women's social position as mothers provided the base for the white middle-class women's access to political power. Middle-class women participated in various campaigns for establishing institutions. They argued that women's participation in the paid forms of employment like school teaching, social work, public health and nursing could provide all women a sense of social protection vis-à-vis the institution of marriage. The Progressive Era movement was criticised due to its class and race biases, however, the movement played an important role in bringing new public policies for women. Similarly, women's capacity for self-organisation remained strong in the African-American communities. Prior to 1960s, there were working-class movements in the United States in which women played a key role in both community and labour movements. In spite of having different social situations, women's rights organisations and women trade union activists were able to fight against the ban on married women's employment, the exclusion of unemployed women form social protection, under representation of women in the paid work and the exclusion of women's jobs from Fair Labour Standards Legislation (Brenner and Laslett, 2006, P. 72). In different capacities, women organised to streamline their needs in the labour market.

As argued by Johanna Brenner and Barbara Laslett (2006), the working-class women were more concerned for their survival and maintaining class solidarity which in turn prevented them from engaging with the middle-class women's struggle for equality. In all these movements, the social situation of women debarred them from participating in political self-organisation. Therefore, women's needs were largely ignored in the class struggle and the social reforms were primarily based on the assumption that "families were or should be supported by male breadwinners" (P. 72). Different movements of 1930s such as the white middle-class women's movement, working-class women's movements and women in trade unions faced different social constraints to be aligned with each other. Brenner summarised various reasons behind the lack of women's participation in collective action:

a) women in the organised sector were not successful in mainstreaming their demands because the vast majority of married women were not working for wages.

b) In the working-class movements, women were doubly burdened with their domestic responsibilities.

C) In the absence of organizational base, women activists in trade union remained limited in challenging patriarchy within the labour movements.
With increasing labour force participation of women during the war period, women workers started to collectively organise and compelled the Congress of Industrial Organisation (CIO) to address their needs in the labour market. Even though working women were able to form their unions, their unions functioned in political and social spheres which were dominated by the gender hierarchy. There was an absence of a broader social movement in the 1930s United States which placed women’s resistance and their organised struggle in an isolated political space.

However, in the Progressive Era, the socialist-feminists emerged as an organised struggle but largely functioned under the Communist Party. Therefore, the hierarchical structure of the party provided women a limited space to include their concerns in the agenda. For instance, male blue collar workers were hardly paying attention to women’s questions. Women in the Communist Party accepted women as workers and members of working-class. Women in the socialist-feminist movement questioned the gender discrimination at the work-place, but were unable to challenge the gender division of labour within the family. To quote Bernner (2006), “while defending women’s rights to work and demanding help for women workers to negotiate a double day, the Communist Party never questioned that home and family remained primarily a woman’s responsibility” (P. 74). It is therefore important to study these movements historically, as they reflect different frameworks under which women struggled against male dominance and gender differential ideology that prevailed in the labour market.

**Check Your Progress:**

*What is the significance of ‘Progressive Era’ for working women’s struggle?*
Women’s participation in the paid work has been increasing in all the parts of the world and they are more or less accommodated within the informal economy. It was often argued that women’s engagement with paid work will become the primary source of their emancipation, still they remained outside the trade union movements and collective action (Engels, 1884, 1942, In Kabeer et.al, 2013). The trade union movement which came into existence with the growth of assembly line production remained in the hands of men workers. Trade union as a collective action failed to reach out to women and men in the informal economy characterized by easy entry, low wage and absence of employee-employer relationship (Kabeer, 2013, p. 3). “The attitudes of mainstream unions towards informal workers were, and still are, often characterized by fear and hostility, since they perceived such workers as a threat to the privileges they had won through organized action” (Kabeer, p.3-4). As a consequence, a very low percentage of women were part of the trade union. Poor women workers found it difficult to organize collective strategy in the informal economy due to the perception of fear and their survival question.

In the discussion on struggle and resistance, the methods or collective strategies of SEWA in organizing working women in the informal economy are exemplary. Byoung Hoon Lee and Russell D. Lansbury (2012) in their work on varieties of unionism discussed the key strategies of SEWA in organizing working women. SEWA used innovative organizational strategies such as transnational linkages and incorporation of women workers’ agenda in the policy framework to build resistance. There are different experiences with regard to working women’s resistance in relation to class, organizational structure and occupational sectors. Angela Hale discusses forms of resistance in a deregulated global economy and argues that the Self-Employed Women’s Association is the model for resisting exploitation against women in the home-based industries and informal economy. In the year 1995, in Indonesia, women workers of the Great River Industries Corporation went on strike for asserting the issue of basic labour rights. Similarly, in Philippines, women workers of British-owned Intercontinental Garments Manufacturing Company brought the production a standstill due to the issue of minimum wage (Hale, 1996).

Women work in the informal sector live under a constant fear which doesn’t allow them to go for any organized strike. Therefore, women in the informal economy often resort to the local and individualized protests, described as ‘weapons of the weak’ (Kabeer, 2013). Let us look at some of the strategies which are adopted by women in the informal economy in resistance to patriarchy, working conditions and negotiating the bargaining power.
The trend towards feminization of agriculture has been experienced by many developing countries including Brazil. Ben Selwyn (2013) undertook a study to understand women’s resistance in the horticulture sector of north-east Brazil. In the San Francisco Valley, women were working in the grape vines constitute the majority of the labour force. STR was the principal trade union working for the rural workers and their rights. Within the grape sector, women are increasingly employed on the basis of temporary contracts due to expansion of export agriculture and lower-wage for women workers. Initially, women worker’s issues were largely not addressed by the STR. With the revival of trade union movements in Brazil, campaigns for the rights of women’s workers were taken up by various unions like Regional Confederation of Rural Trade Unions (FETAPE). As a result, STR began campaigns for women worker’s rights and addressed issues such as: promoting women in trade unions, providing crèche facilities, a paid day per month for women workers to visit doctor, paid maternity leave for two months, reserve right to return to employment following such leaves and improving the transport facilities by providing company-based transport (Selwyn, 2013, p. 60). It was reported that women workers found significant changes in their working lives after being involved in the trade union. Let us look at the narrative of one woman worker’s experience with trade union in Brazil.

**Box No. 3.1**

**Experience of women workers with trade union**

Women had no experience of trade union prior to their work in the grape sector. Once they became employed in vineyards, women developed contact with the rural trade union organization like STR and became the change agents for their lives. One woman narrates her experience of getting involved in trade union as follows:

“The delegado syndical (trade union representative) began talking to us to go to meetings about the conditions of work in the valley, and how the rural worker’s union had a vision of improving our lives as workers. With the campaign around the collective agreement, I learned more about our rights and I joined the trade union.............I began working in the union when I learned about our rights in the convention. Every time the employer did something wrong, or failed to implement an agreement within the convention I got in contact with the delegado syndical and the trade union to try and rectify the situation (Selwyn, 2013. P. 63).”

The Box No. 3.1 narration depicts the struggle of women workers in the grape sector. Women being aware of their ‘own rights’ and ‘working conditions’ can enable themselves to consolidate in a class position. The interaction between women workers and the trade union reflect women’s
struggle for recognition them as professional workers and as equals to male workers. Colette Solomon (2013) looked at the inter-linkages between struggle, class awareness and women’s empowerment through the experiences of organizing farm women in South Africa. Woman on Farm Project (WFP), a registered NGO in South Africa, took up issues of farm women with regard to their right to education and capacity building. It informed women about their rights and assisted them to access their entitlements including social security grant, child support grant and so on. Eventually, the programme began to fight for worker’s rights which were severely violated in the commercial farms. However, the programme operated in an isolated way without organizing farm women in a politically motivated way. When individual farm women began to know about their entitlements as workers, citizens and women, they started to mobilize and organize into a collective/group.

Solomon (2013) argues that women’s experience of political motivation and consciousness raising itself constitute a struggle and slowly results into an organized strategy or movement. For instance, in South-Africa, the WFP as an NGO couldn’t resolve the related issues of labour disputes as it required the farmers to resist with a trade union. To create a larger impact on the lives of farm women and to fight for their rights from a political-legal discourse, WFP collapsed into new trade union, SikhulaSonke. Within the context of class, resistance and struggle began with the individual woman’s experience and slowly resulted into collective actions or social movements. In a similar sense, Sikhula Sonke represented farm women in labour conflict, negotiating with employers, strengthening membership, enabling member’s access to training, initiating fundraising to address farm women’s financial need and so on.

Through these case studies, you will be able to comprehend the need for women workers’ experience of class consciousness to survive in the labour market. There have been similar experiences of organizing women workers working in the informal sector in countries like Thailand and India. Let’s us look at some of the cases of organized strategy in Indian context. An interesting study was done by Narayan and Chikarmane (2013) on organizing women working in waste-picking and scrap-processing industries. The Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakan Panchayat (KKPKP) was a trade union organization established in Pune with the aim to improve and regulate the livelihood aspects among the waste picker communities of Pune. Within the waste-picking and scrap-processing units, hierarchy is maintained along the gender lines and women are at the bottom of the ladder, picking waste at municipal bins and landfill sites. They constitute 92 percent of workers in this category, are paid low wages and live in the constant fear of losing their jobs. KKPKP recognized that in the absence of an employer for the waste pickers, women struggle to negotiate for better wages and control of the resources,
i.e. scrap. Since most waste pickers are women, they are further marginalized within the community. According to Narayan and Chikarmane (2013), “each time the technology of waste picking changes— from sacks to handcarts to trucks, for example— there is a real danger waste picker women will lose out to new entrants— mainly men entrepreneurs— attracted by new opportunities as the process changes” (p. 210).

To tackle these issues, KKPKP started organized efforts including doorstep collection service with the authorization from Municipal Cooperation of Pune, offered training to upgrade skills on waste management and securing women’s position in the waste-processing chain. The trade union has been successful in organizing women waste-pickers who were at the bottom of the hierarchy and striving to get recognized as workers. KKPKP used trade union tools such as rallies, struggle and mass mobilization in a systematic way to mobilise women waste pickers in the organization. In this particular case, the significant change is to accept women waste-pickers as workers in the supply chain.

As you have seen in the previous paragraphs, the experience of Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) has made significant change in the lives of poor working women. SEWA was made functional in 1972 and since then has been in the process of organizing poor working women to become conscious of their own labour. SEWA is running hundreds of cooperatives of women who are working as weavers, waste pickers, vendors, and midwives. Ela Bhatt (2013) writes that one of the biggest challenges that SEWA faced was the contesting set of notions that prevailed among the government officials, experts and academicians. For instance, women workers as forest gatherers, rag pickers, midwives and cart pullers were never recognized as workers by the trade unions. Without an employer, these women were never categorized as workers and therefore could not form any union. Contesting/challenging these perceptions can also be seen as a struggle for SEWA. The experiences of SEWA in mobilizing and organizing poor women workers can be viewed as a collective power of women workers organizing through women’s cooperatives.

**Check Your Progress:**

*Write one case study on women’s resistance in labour market.*
3.7 LET US SUM UP

The unit discusses the inter-relationship between gender, class and resistance within the context of social stratification. It discusses resistance and struggle of women workers who are engaged in both formal and informal economy. It discusses how resistance and struggle can be observed through women’s experiences of improving their working condition and securing livelihood within the wider context of patriarchy and capitalism. The unit concludes with some of case studies of women workers and their struggle to negotiate with power structures and perceptions. Struggle may be individual or context specific in nature but it eventually leads to resistance through collective mobilization.

3.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) Define resistance and discuss it with the help of case studies.
2) Analyse the inter-linkages between women, class and struggle.
3) Discuss resistance and struggle from a feminist perspective.

3.9 REFERENCES


### 3.10 SUGGESTED READINGS
