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Pakistan

World March of Women May Day march

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“Pakistan’s informal sector has grown about 20 percent in the last one decade, giving rise to exploitation of poor workers, especially home-based women workers by the business class. The informal sector workers are invisible, highly vulnerable and at the mercy of middlemen, contractors and sub-contractors. Millions of workers are engaged in informal economy and their wages are shamefully low. Government must provide social protection to these workers.”These views were expressed by speakers at May Day demonstration and rally, organized by Coordinating body of World March of Women (WMW) in Pakistan at Regal Chowk, the Mall to mark the International Workers Day on 1st May.

Dozens of women activists, workers from different sectors and representatives of civil society joined the demo and rally. The demonstrators were holding banners and placards, inscribed with demands to show solidarity with the excluded workers of the informal economy, especially the home-based women workers, domestic workers and peasant women workers. They were shouting slogans against the IMF, WB and IFIs dictated anti-worker policies of the government, fanaticism and rising religious extremism. Among the main slogans were; stop domestic violence; stop economic exploitation of the women workers; end discriminatory laws against women; down with imperialism, down with IFIs and neoliberalism.

The demonstrators also marched on the Mall and expressed solidarity with passing processions of workers and laborers. At the end of the march, WMW national coordinator, Bushra Khaliq addressed the demonstrators. Highlighting the issues of the women workers, she said women’s labor rights particularly in the informal sector have long been neglected in Pakistan and almost remained invisible, having no access to labor rights or other social security schemes while private investors are only interested in doubling profits at the cost of these workers.

She said Pakistan is one of those developing countries where a large number of women are engaged in home-based informal work due to poverty and to supplement family income. Over 20 million women in Pakistan are engaged in home-based work. She urged the women to forge unity for organized struggle for their rights.

Talking about the plight of the informal sector workers, she said though their contribution to economy is about 60 percent, still informal women workers are the most unprivileged part of the society, but have no right to claim themselves as workers. Their daily incomes range between Rs 10 to Rs 50 (less than one dollar) despite the fact that they worked between 12 to 16 hours a day. They have no social and legal recognition of their work. Working in isolation, they have no rights as workers by law. This teeming labor force is at the mercy of contractors, sub-contractors and middle men.

Rabbiya Bajwa, a Supreme Court advocate and social activist, speaking on the occasion criticized the government for the anti-workers policies. She said women unity is key to resolve their problems. She said every year on May Day, these women workers take to roads across the country to tell the decision-makers that they are workers, count them and give them their rights. They are in no mood to disappear and fade away. They will keep on their struggle till their demands are met.

Rukhsana Naz, women rights activist, said women workers do not want charity like the one being doled out under Benazir Income Support Program. They want to be recognized as workers under labor laws. Recognize them. She demanded of the government to ensure implementation of labor laws, just wages that comply with the minimum wage regulations and lowering of prices. She also talked about the tough challenges being faced by the workers communities in Pakistan.