

OCTOBER

THEORETICAL JOURNAL OF THE REVOLUTIONARY COMMUNIST LEAGUE



***A Special
Issue on
Women....***

***A Marxist~
Leninist view
from Norway***

***Historical
Perspectives***

***The Left &
Feminism in
India and
Sri Lanka***

***Reproductive
Rights***

***Women &
Socialism***

AUTUMN 1990: £1~25

Contents

SISTERS, COMRADES
by Kjersti Ericsson.....
pages 4-9

**THE BASIS OF
WOMEN'S OPPRESSION**
.....pages 11-14

**THE LEFT AND
FEMINISM**
.... pages 15-18

**REPRODUCTIVE
RIGHTS.....**
pages 19-22

**SHOULD WOMEN
FIGHT IMPERIALISM**
.....pages 22-23

EDITOR

The RCL has always paid lip service to the importance of women's liberation. But it is only over the last few years that the organisation has spent time and given priority to the development of a detailed line on the question. The women's sub-committee, active since 1981, has been the leading force in this process and at the Fourth Congress in 1989 the commitment of the whole organisation was evident and real progress was made.

At the congress, the previous line of the organisation, based on economism, was unanimously overthrown and some basic points were agreed on, together with a new and positive assessment of the role of the women's movement in this country. The specific points that were discussed and voted on are set out below. In addition, a more general discussion of the relationship of women's oppression to class and national oppression provided evidence that members considered the development of a firm line on women is of extreme importance. The points agreed on at congress, marking changes from our previous line, are as follows:

1. In our experience, women are oppressed by the imperialists; working class women suffer exploitation and class oppression at the hands of their ruling class; women of oppressed nations suffer national oppression at the hands of oppressor nations; women as such suffer gender oppression at the hands of men as such; it is no accident that the wealth of the imperialist and other ruling classes is predominantly owned and controlled by the male members thereof. Women are oppressed by means of their role in the family, domestic labour, child care; discrimination in employment; violence including rape; ideological and social attitudes. Women of different classes are affected to different degrees. The RCL was wrong in the past to see the oppression of working class women as the only women's oppression of any significance.

2. The women's movement is generally progressive. It is a spontaneous movement (i.e. not Marxist Leninist) and the class background of many of the women who identified with the Women's Liberation Movement does not make it reactionary. We were wrong to dismiss the movement as bourgeois feminist in the past.

It was wrong to characterise the movement as bourgeois both because it is not bourgeois and because its class nature is not the main issue. The oppression of women is not class based. It was wrong to criticise the movement for being feminist because feminism is a progressive ideology which we must unite with not disparage.

3. The family: the specific form taken by the family at any time or place is linked to the mode of production. It is a creation of that economic and social system, and will reflect its culture.

In Britain, the nuclear family developed as the economic unit under capitalism, based on the unpaid labour of women in reproducing and maintaining the workforce. Even in those families where women also take part in paid work, the ideology is still strong that a women's place is in the home. In Britain the main aspect of the nuclear family for women is that it is oppressive. It is a structure which

AL

meets the needs of imperialism, and is built on the isolation, oppression, and exploitation of women and on violence towards them.

4. In the past, the RCL has had an economist view and reduced the struggle for women's liberation to one for equal pay. It is vital to struggle for the right of women to go out to work on equal terms with men. Going out to work gives women an independent income, a forum for struggling against discrimination, and a social life outside the home. However, this addresses only one aspect of their oppression and other issues such as physical violence, reproductive rights, education and cultural oppression are also of great importance.

5. We need to study further how to express and build solidarity with women in the Third World and the relationship with national minority women in Britain. It is important that white women struggling for their liberation do so in solidarity with national minority and Third World women. We must support the struggles of women in the Third World and the struggles of national minority women in Britain. We must support national minority women's organisations.

6. Experience in other countries, and historically in this country, shows the necessity for women to organise separately to fight their specific oppression.

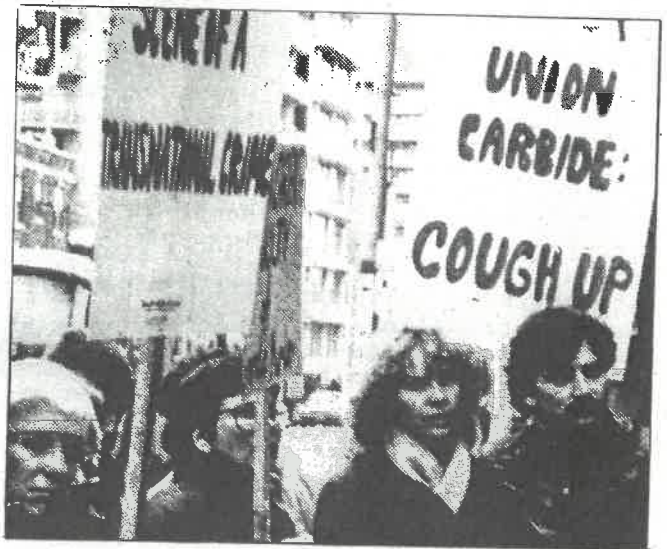
7. We need to use the Marxist method of historical materialism as a basic tool in theoretical analysis on the question of women's oppression, as with other subjects. We need to apply Marxism to conditions today and to look at the original analysis of capitalism critically from the point of view of its analysis of women's position. Existing Marxist theory is insufficient.

The general discussion which followed left some questions unresolved. This issue of 'October' is in part an attempt to further the discussion about the basis of women's oppression and its relation to imperialism. The main area of uncertainty in the RCL concerns the relationship between the struggle of women against their own specific oppression and the task of overthrowing imperialism and establishing a socialist system. Whilst seeing women's struggles on a world scale, and gaining inspiration from the strength and success of women in national liberation struggles such as Eritrea, we must primarily address the question of how women in an imperialist heartland such as Britain should fight for their liberation.

The article 'Sisters, Comrades' is a summary of a book written by Kjersti Ericsson, chairperson of the Workers' Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) of Norway. It is of special interest because as well as being a leading communist, Kjersti Ericsson has considerable experience of practical work on women's issues, mainly through the Women's Front in Norway. We are aware of our own lack of extensive involvement in women's practical struggles. The combination of theory and practice shines through this article. We can both learn from and criticise sections of it. But most of all, we await the publication of the whole book in English.

The article 'The basis of women's oppression' is of a more theoretical nature, attempting to understand the basis of women's oppression both from a historical perspective and from an economic one. It re-examines the Marxist model of political economy and proposes one way in which it may explain the economic basis of women's subordination. It is hoped that the article will promote further discussion on the political economy of women's oppression within the imperialist system.

The contribution 'Should women fight imperialism?' originates from discussions at the Fourth Congress on the relationship between women's fight for their own liberation and their fight for liberation from imperialist oppression. It puts forward a coherent line which firmly places third world women in the centre of the world struggle against imperialism. It is the only article by a male comrade.



The article 'The Left and Feminism' relates to the women's question in India and is written by Kumari Jayawardena and Govind Kelkar. Govind Kelkar is a woman political activist employed by the Nehru fellowship to do work on women's history. She is working in Jharkhand communities who are struggling for recognition of their land as an autonomous region. She recently toured this country to address meetings on the political situation in India and her own work there. This article is reprinted from the 'Economic and Political Weekly', September 1989.

The article on 'Reproductive Rights' traces women's struggles for this basic and vital demand through different historical periods up to the present day. The new reproductive technology and the escalation of attacks internationally on reproductive rights makes

the issue one where activity and vigilance is vital in the coming period. It is an issue which at times has divided women from different classes and from oppressed and oppressor nations, but is also one where great unity has been forged and where we can learn from women around the world.

The aim of this issue of 'October' is to concentrate some of the basic points and clarity that we have, and at the same time provoke discussion on areas of uncertainty. The line on women that emerges will need to be tempered by experience in practical struggles and ongoing study. We welcome all responses, letters, articles, from readers of this October and hope that the work will take us one step nearer women's liberation. ■

SISTERS, COMRADES!

by Kjersti Ericsson

Do not offer us a trifle

The shame
insinuates itself on the victims
the one who is beaten
has committed a crime
the blood that drips from the wounds
is unclean
the abused body guilty.

The shame
insinuates itself on the victims
centuries upon decades
millennium upon centuries
will this never end?

Sisters, comrades, women
our anger rises now
it rises and rises like the tide
up from the innermost darkness in us
carrying with it the glowing ash
from all of the fires
carrying with it the blows, the screams
the boot-tramplings of the heart
and those countless used-up, unlive lives
for which there can be no consolation.

The anger rises and rises
it is our mighty gift to the world
together with the love never requited
that found it too cramped
to be confined to a man's breast
we give it to each other now
and to this earth
with the people who live on it
black, white, yellow, brown
to the young reindeer
unprotected against fallout-bearing rain
to the sea that breathes so heavily
and to the nameless, unseen flowers
deep in the Amazonian jungle.

Do not offer us a trifle
something halfway
Do not ask us to be grateful!
We come here
with the blaze from all of the fires in us
the pain from all of the blows
and the boot-tramplings of the heart
with the hunger of unlive lives
and that terrible heat
from our unrequited love.
Do not stand in our way
When we come to change the world
with vehement strokes
When we come to cultivate it
in our own way.
Do not stand in our way
for we are the owners of tomorrow.

Kjersti Ericsson
(translated by Francesa M Nichols)

A SUMMARY

(From the Introduction)

This book attempts to argue that the economic system which dominates the world today, namely, capitalism and imperialism, is a disaster for women. It sucks work and vitality out of them, binds them in a powerless position, and cripples them as human beings. The book attempts also to argue that women's struggle is an enormous force in the struggle to overthrow the existing system and create something new and better. It is important that all those who want to "save the world", both women and men, understand this. It is important to know how. We must have a strategy. This book tries to say something about that.

I, myself, belong in the classic Marxist and communist tradition. In this tradition one can find both good and bad in relationship to the women's struggle and the liberation of women. This book is also meant as a contribution to developing and changing the communist tradition's viewpoint on women's struggle.

The struggle for women's liberation is so encompassing that it takes your breath away. There is hardly a question which is gender neutral. Oppression of women is woven into capitalism's economic basis, in the system by which the bourgeoisie rules, and in the most intimate relationships between people. The women's struggle, therefore, cannot be a strictly limited question. We must include women in all analyses of society and in all attempts to change it.

This book has not been written on a foundation of thorough theoretical studies and does not pretend to present a complete theory on the oppression of women under capitalism. The questions which are raised and which it attempts to answer, are first and foremost, such that have turned up in the practical struggle in which I and many others have taken part. The day-to-day struggle breeds contradictions and problems which it is important to clear up in order to progress. The book, therefore, is meant as a contribution to a discussion, and to an on-going process of daily struggle and the summing up of experience.

The book is written in three parts:

Part 1 (5 chapters): How oppression of women is woven into the capitalist economic system and power structure: How capitalism uses "the femininity" of the female labour force to make extra profit from production. How capitalism exploits women's unpaid domestic labour to keep their own costs down. How the bourgeoisie retains a safer position when ordinary men have power over women. How the family functions as an institution where the many ties that bind women in an oppressed position are brought together. How imperialism profits by the hard work and poverty of the female peasant in the Third World.

Part 2 (3 chapters): How to fight here and now: The relationship between class struggle and women's struggle. How we must be on our

guard against letting the women's movement itself begin to oppress women, by rendering invisible women who are not white, do not belong to the majority nations, are not heterosexual, or are not married or living with a man and children. How we must organise in order to struggle today and win tomorrow.

Part 3 (2 chapters): What we must do under socialism: When capitalism has been overthrown, we start on the next stage in the struggle for women's liberation. At this stage too, we will need a conscious strategy. An attempt to work out such a strategy now, must necessarily be an armchair product, but some problems can be raised, and this I have tried to do. It will be a struggle on many fronts. We must change the economy, we must change the organisation of society. And last, but not least, we must change people's hearts.

Women need a determined fury. And our earth needs women's determined fury. I hope this book will contribute both a little more fury and a little more determination.

1. The 'Female Person' as Wage-Earner

Women workers are squeezed between job and family. In every area, their lives are marked by the fact that they are not only workers, but also belong to an oppressed sex. The "female person's" social qualities make it possible to use her in other ways than men.

Why are women concentrated in jobs with low wages? It is not only true that women are excluded from qualified jobs, it is also true that the work women do is considered unqualified because they are women. Feminine qualifications appear as "natural".

Women's labour power has a lower value than men's, and this is one side of society's sexist system. According to Marx, the value of a commodity is decided by the amount of work used to produce it. But the value of labour power also has an historical and moral element, a certain historical standard for what are considered the necessities of life. It is here we must look for the reason for the difference in value between women's and men's labour power.

Capitalism has developed from a society in which the oppression of women was already established. The power relationship between women and men was expressed, among other things, by the differences in availability of, and control over resources. This power relationship was "translated" by the capitalists into a difference in value in women's and men's labour power. Women can be exploited more.

The other factor which affects the value of women's labour power is the organisation of society in families. Bringing up a new generation of workers is included in the value of labour power and it must therefore encompass whatever is needed to support a family. This means that when more than one member of a family works, each person's pay sinks. Women's low wages mirror the pattern of the man as the major labour power and the woman as a supplementary labour power.

Women can also be exploited more because they can be driven harder and their labour power is more quickly worn down, since they are "girls waiting to get married". Women workers who are mothers, and therefore working part-time, can be driven harder because they have a shorter working day. Women are victims of the increased flexibility of labour power, an

important aspect of modern capitalism. Women can also be exploited harder because they may be subjected to methods of discipline which cannot be used over male workers.

2. Capitalism and Domestic Labour

This chapter discusses the different viewpoints in the domestic labour debate

Part of the problem in the debate on domestic labour has been the lack of understanding of the fact that capitalism's commodity production is not the only form of production in capitalist society, and that waged work is not the only form of work.

Capitalism lives in symbiosis with other forms of production and finds them useful. In fact, the economic advantage of domestic labour for capital lies in precisely this, that domestic labour exists outside the sphere of capitalist commodity production. This can most clearly be seen in the Third World's "subsistence production".

The dilemma has, for many, seemed like this: If we use the Marxist concepts in a strict and orthodox manner, domestic labour disappears from view. In order to make unpaid domestic labour visible, we should rather stretch Marxist concepts a little further than they were meant to go.

When a married woman enters the labour market, two tendencies appear: first, that the value of labour power rises as a result of having to buy more products and services on the market, instead of the wife doing them free of charge. The main tendency, though, is that the value of labour power sinks when several family members enter the labour market.

Domestic labour keeps "production costs for a working class family" down and saves large wage costs for the capitalists. Domestic labour is a fundamental condition for capitalist production which helps to keep profits up. This is the main point: it gives domestic labour a place in capitalism as an economic system, without violating the Marxist concept of value.

Besides keeping the value of labour power down, domestic labour makes it possible for capital to keep up a reserve labour force without paying very much for it. Unpaid women's work helps to minimise the awful effects of unemployment. Modern capitalism has managed to find a favourable compromise, where women are exploited as waged workers, as suppliers of free domestic labour and as a flexible reserve labour force.

Since domestic labour is separated from the capitalist production process in time and place, takes place in other institutional forms and is submitted to another logic, its economic importance for the reproduction of capital is mystified. Domestic labour appears as something a woman does, not for the capitalist but for her own family, in the private sphere, out of love and consideration for her relations.

Capital also needs domestic labour in order to make sure "the female person" is created again and again. A feminine rationality of caring, fitted not to her own, but to other's needs.

3. The Bourgeoisie Rules when a Man Rules a Little

The oppression of women draws the male part of the working people into the bourgeoisie's exertion of power. Ordinary men bear a part of the dominance on behalf of the rulers. The oppression of women gives all men some objective advantages. Already from birth, male children receive a larger part of the material and non-material resources.

At the same time, men of the working people are the victims of class oppression. On the whole, it is, therefore, in their interest to unite with their feminine class counterparts to overthrow bourgeois rule. But it is difficult to unite with those one oppresses because it is difficult to see them as "worthy" partners in an alliance, and because the alliance demands that one must partially forego one's privileges. Oppression of women makes it harder for the feminine part of the working class to rise up and it makes it harder for the male part to rise up because men waste their strength on oppressing their feminine class fellows.

When men win their feelings of identity and dignity by oppressing women, it means that they take over part of the bourgeoisie's values and outlook on people, and that they lose their ability to fully see through capitalism's degradation and oppression of people. Male workers are blinded by capitalism's light.

The author now surveys some historical examples from the Norwegian trade union movement showing the tragic consequences of the split between women and men.

(Translator's note: The Norwegian trade union movement is, and has been, dominated by a large "umbrella" organisation covering the majority of trade unions in the country. This organisation is referred to as LO, short for Landsorganisasjonen. It is dominated by the social democrats.)

If one doesn't grasp the LO leadership's special role in maintaining and forwarding male chauvinism, it becomes difficult to work to bring the organised women's movement and the grass roots of the trade union movement closer together, which is of great importance to the working class and to women.

The dangerous consequences of stereotyping women as an inferior group are that it creates social distance, lack of identification and opens the way for new attacks. The anxiety shown by progressive men for the debate on the male role shows where the greatest fountain of men's importance and strength lies. Men's dignity is dependent upon their having someone beneath them in rank. Pornography is an example of men's dream of subjecting women. Another example can be seen in a sequence from Amiri Baraka's "Madheart".

Men both win and lose by being "useful idiots" for the ruling class.

4. The Crossroads where All Ways Meet

The family plays a key role in maintaining oppression. This does not mean that we can simply "abolish" the family, and get rid of the whole mess that way. But the family organises those mechanisms in society which oppress women and hide them beneath an ideology of voluntary togetherness based on love.

The family is first and foremost an economic unit, although this is concealed. For capitalism, the family is useful in many ways: in the necessary reproduction of labour power; in taking care of that which, from the viewpoint of capital, is "social refuse" - and in the buffer function (in that women's unpaid work deadens the effects of wage cuts and unemployment).

Changes in family patterns in the last years, in Norway or internationally, have not abolished the principle of private provision. The most important change is that women increasingly carry these responsibilities alone. Although there have been changes in the power relationship between the sexes in the family, this does not mean that men are not still the "head of the family". This fact, though, has become more concealed. It is part of the "contract" in modern couples that the woman herself contributes towards making her relative subordination seem like equality.

The development of the family has meant that this institution has been given increasingly greater emotional tasks. This is a real development, not just a concealed ideology. The isolated, privatised family is expected to fulfil our needs for beneficial human relationships. There are few good alternatives. Living in a family can be terrible, but living without one is often worse. Research shows that it is often men who suffer the most when relationships are dissolved. This is a sign of how much men's "strength" lies on the woman's shoulders. The difference in psychic structure between men and women, which is caused by socialisation, also means that women's needs and longings can only with difficulty be satisfied in their relationship to men.

The family survives because women "sacrifice" themselves and live as half human beings. The family is an institution where power is systemically exercised under cover of voluntariness and love. Family therapists often see the family as something given "by nature itself". They were the last to discover phenomena like wife-battering and incest. Their job is to try to get their client families to function "normally" on sick premises.

5. Imperialism and Women

Imperialism has forced a "model of developments" on the Third World, which serves imperialism's economic interests. Imperialism combined with male power is lethal.

Here the author gives us a chapter about women in the subsistence sector with examples from Ghana, Sudan and Morocco. She concludes:

The subsistence sector contributes to reducing the costs of reproducing labour power. Imperialism's grotesque exploitation of producers outside the capitalist mode of production, is far and away an exploitation of women as a sex.

The chapter on the informal sector gives examples from Mexico, Nicaragua and India.

Some of the factors which turn women in our part of the world into low-paid, part-time workers with inconvenient working hours, turn women in the Third World into "independent tradeswomen" in the informal sector, which in many ways can be seen as the modern variety of the subsistence sector. It contributes also to keeping wages down in the formal sector.

"The new proletariat" is the title of the chapter about the Free Trade Zones' exploitation of young, mainly female, labour power.

A particularly crass form of imperialistic repression of women is to be found in the development of certain South Asian countries into what we may call pimp states.

The conclusion we must draw, from all these different forms of oppression, is that imperialism does not function in a gender neutral manner. Nor can, therefore, the struggle against imperialism be gender neutral. Women have not "been left hanging by developments". They are an integral part of the economy, in such a way that it is part of the problem for women, and part of the solution for imperialists in our part of the world. Women's struggle demands more radical solutions than men's. Anyone who doesn't grasp this will have difficulties in being a truly revolutionary anti-imperialist in practice.

6. Women's Struggle and Class Struggle

Women in the working class and the working people meet pressure from two directions. Their men warn against letting "the sex struggle become more important than the class struggle". The bourgeois and higher petit bourgeois women wish to mobilise them for women's struggle unsullied by class struggle. An example of this can be found in the discussions between Domitila and Betty Friedan.

The bourgeois women's movement has had, and has, as a goal the attaining of equality of the sexes within the framework of the capitalist system. Although it is possible for women to fight for, and to gain, real improvement under capitalism, the tendency is for the foundation of oppression of women to remain, often in new and more veiled forms. It is difficult to imagine a women's liberation movement, in practice, that does not have elements of both aspects (women's struggle and class struggle). When those who are trampled down really rise up, it will spring from the total situation which oppresses them. They will not analyse on the basis of what is "pure" class struggle, but will instead rebel against the interwoven reality in which they live. The movement among working class women and working women all over the world today, has this character.

A class standpoint without a perspective on women's struggle is a sort of "socialist colonial policy". And just as a "socialist colonial policy" supports imperialism as a system, a class standpoint without a perspective on women's struggle is a support to capitalism as a system. It isn't true that too much weight put on the question of women will split the working class. On the contrary, too little weight put on women's interests is hindering the whole of the class struggle today. The fight for weighting in favour of women in the trade union movement and the fight against pornography and sexual harassment at work are necessary for unity in the working class, even though they are directed at male colleagues.

Consideration for the unity of the working class (a unity for which men dictate the premises), has often made the proletarian women's movement a little tame in the struggle against the specific oppression of women. It has been faced with a demand to direct the struggle against "society", not "men". To struggle against the oppression produced by "society", or "the system", or "the bourgeoisie" without touching on the oppression practised by "men", is an impossible task. Oppression practised by men is included in a total sexist system which contributes to maintaining the class hegemony.

Many of these contradictions still set their stamp on the women's movement. It is no coincidence that it was the Women's Front (the largest independent "new" Norwegian women's organisation, supported by WCP(M-L) and with many members from this party) which was at the forefront in raising international solidarity as a cause for the women's movement. Just as it was no coincidence that it was not the Women's Front which was at the forefront in raising questions like wife-battering and rape.

7. The 'Stereotype' Woman

The "stereotype" woman in Norway is white, heterosexual, married or living with a man, and has children.

Bell Hooks shows how this line of thought has led to making black women in the American women's movement invisible.

The idea of an encompassing sisterhood which unites "all" women can't be developed far before it turns into invisibility and oppression for women who do not fit into the prevailing stereotype. Fellowship between women must build on that which is specific for the different groups of women, if it is not to become oppression.

"You are lesbian" is sometimes used as an argument against women's struggle. That this can happen, seems to tell us that there is great strength in the idea that "natural" sexual love and an "inferior/superior" relationship between woman and man hang together, so much so that only a woman who doesn't direct her sexual love towards men, can question this subservient relationship. One of the positive aspects of the lesbian participation and struggle for visibility in the women's movement is that heterosexual women are forced to reflect on the nasty ideas they still carry around.

8. From Here to There - PART 1

How does one attain a society where oppression of women does not rule?

When the modern working class was made, a class consciousness developed which became a mighty force in the struggle for better conditions and a different society. Both in Norway and the Third World, a large women's proletariat has emerged. Women have not been seen as, nor seen themselves as, a common social force in the same way as the male part of the working class. Women's experiences, whether they are workers or peasants, are a source of a double consciousness: worker, but also mother and housewife, etc. This women's consciousness binds women together all over the world and is a mighty force in the struggle for a better society. It also gives women a special place in the struggle. Women have two wars to fight.

These conditions have consequences for the actual class struggles which are waged, for example, in the struggle for the six-hour day. Women's situation "squeezed between a job and family" leads to a broadening of traditional trade union activity and opens the way for more encompassing alliances. Women stand to gain most in the struggle on working hours, on the minimum wage guarantee, against lay-offs and privatisation in the public sector, etc. We register, too, that they lead the movements in these areas.

Earlier, the working class had one spearhead, the traditional core proletariat. They played, and play still, a leading role by virtue of the

value they produce, by virtue of being organised at large factories, by virtue of being well-organised and having strong fighting traditions. Now something new has happened: the working class has been given yet another spearhead. This spearhead is the women workers, who play their part by virtue of the fact that, as an oppressed sex, they are forced to start many struggles of fundamental importance for the whole working class.

Women workers often feel strange in the male-dominated trade union movement. When they actually play an increasingly important role in the struggle of the working class, it springs as much from their common experience as an oppressed sex, as from their identity as workers. The problem today is that women are not organised on the basis of their roles as workers and women. Therefore, it is important to fight for the development of organisation of women inside the trade union movement, but that is not enough. Women cannot be "constituted as a class" only through the trade unions. They can only become conscious of their role if they are also organised as women - on the basis of women's total situation. The organisation of women is not only necessary for the day-to-day struggle, but also in order to develop women's ability for self-determination.

The struggle against pornography is yet another example of why a special organisation of women is necessary. Pornography is concentrated propaganda for maintaining the power relationship between the sexes. The big fights we have had against pornography in Norway have given impulses to other areas of women's struggle, in joining together the different fights and in showing how oppression of women is systematic. A narrow trade union organising of women is therefore not even enough to strengthen women's trade union struggle.

The character of the proletariat is changing in many ways. One of these is the development of "core" and "peripheral" labour power. Increasingly larger groups will begin to work for small companies, sub-contractors etc., with unregulated working conditions. One example is the large shopping centre, Aker Brygge, (a newly-built conglomeration of small shops in Oslo - translator's note). Perhaps we have to think along totally different lines in order to organise the girls there. Perhaps we have to start off with the fact that they are girls. Can the traditional trade union movement meet this challenge?

Developing the alliance between the two spearheads of the working class means, at the same time, breaking with and fighting against the social-democratic hegemony in the labour movement. But male chauvinism can, of course, also be found at the grass roots. In the struggle to unite the two spearheads, the task of winning over the grass roots stands out as the foremost condition. In this struggle, one needs the "women conscious" man in the traditional core proletariat who can fight systematically for support for the women's struggle and against male chauvinism among his comrades. The most important condition for this alliance, however, is that the women workers show strength and fight their way out of invisibility.

The growth of the women's struggle has mainly consisted of politicising increasingly many sides of women's lives, which originally were considered "individual" and "personal" problems, and treating them as social questions.

WCP(M-L)'s "tough lady" course which has been in enormous demand, takes as its starting point that women's "personal traits" such as little self-confidence, perfectionist self-demands,

etc., can be fought through collective support and work. By creating an understanding of the fact that mastering a task is a collective responsibility, these courses sow the seed of a new and more collective perception of leadership characteristics and leadership.

There is also oppression of women within the communist party. Knowledge and theory carry here, as in other areas, the mark of being embodiments of men's lives and relations. Women's struggle for getting women's perspectives into political theory and practice is a practical political struggle against the power relationship and the habitual patterns of behaviour between the sexes. This presentation is built on experience in the WCP(M-L):

Within the party one can find all degrees of male chauvinism, but the main tendency is not the aggressive or open form. Bringing women into the light requires a programme. Among other things, one has to do away with the idea that one should only fight against oppression out in "society", not oppression exercised by "men". Since many WCP women have been members of the Women's Front, the party has been supplied with woman-consciousness from the outside. The main method used by the women in the party is political argumentation, written, oral and in figures. Men have been treated as rational, political human beings. Yet, the woman question is still not "real politics" for many. It is as though it isn't necessary to know much about it to remain "well-versed". This is because men measure themselves against each other and in this area most are equally stupid. This "blind spot" contributes to hindering the woman question in gaining importance and it gets drowned in a series of systematic coincidences.

The unconscious social play between the sexes functions in such a way that men more easily prevail with their ideas, while women see to it that things don't become too unfriendly along the way. Women, as leaders, are often trapped here. She is evaluated on the premise that she is a leader, but treated and behaves, on the premise that she is a woman. The pattern of behaviour between the sexes must be constituted as a political theme.

Another phenomenon can sometimes be seen when the woman question becomes an area with a certain prestige: the woman question becomes an arena of rivalry between men.

To fight a political struggle with political arguments for a political platform is a necessary, but incomplete condition for winning through. Women must and should take part in groups and use women's fellowship as a tool in moving forward. The best arguments are the practical ones, by showing strength in practical political work. In the WCP women have many formal positions, half of the district and central leadership, chairperson and vice-chairperson in the central committee. But formal positions are not the same thing as power. Let us say that we are in a good starting position for our opposition.

9. From Here to There - PART 2

Why haven't the socialist countries solved the question of the oppression of women as they promised? Does this mean that it makes no difference what sort of social system we have? In the socialist systems, we have seen, up till now, the party and the state bureaucracy has ruled on behalf of the working class. It has also been up to them to define "people's needs" as a foundation for the plan. Socialism must be looked upon as a compromise, or a struggle

between contradictions. Its task is to remove the division between manual-intellectual, worker-expert, ruler-ruled. This is a long process, where one of the most important early steps must be a reduction of working hours. This will lay a material foundation for people to take part in political life. The political struggle is important. Things that are arranged automatically are usually arranged wrongly.

Class oppression cannot be overthrown while the oppression of women survives. The division of labour according to gender places women mainly among the manual-worker-ruled. As long as women do double work and serve in the family, it is unthinkable to abolish the division of labour. The oppression of women will, on the contrary, help to preserve class divisions.

Engels attempted to show in 'Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State' that oppression of women was an integral part of class society. The problem was that women's struggle was not seen as a driving force in the abolition of private property, classes and the state. Instead, the liberation of women was seen more as a result of the other struggles. In the socialist countries, there has been an abolition of, rather than a development of, theory on the woman question. The tendency has been to make women's struggle, and women themselves, tools for socialist construction; women became useful "economic animals". Women were brought into industry on a large scale, while they retained their workload at home. The Stalin era returned to strict family legislation and ideological underlining of the family as society's basic unit, which was a clear contradiction to Engels' line of thought.

There was a glaring disproportion between women's economic and political participation. Women's organisations were supposed to be supporting organisations for the party, not independent organisations for women's struggle which gave women power and strength. This pertains to China and Nicaragua today as well.

An economic model which serves women's interests must be productive (highly technological) and must have a large public service sector (free/cheap). It must break with the division between women's work and men's work, on a short term basis by equal wages, on a long term basis by abolishing the system of wage labour. It must stress breaking down the division between "public" and "private" in capitalism's infrastructure of everyday life.

The alternative to the family is not hellish institutions with no personnel and urban loneliness. What form living together will take is difficult to say. The family will not dissolve, either as a social or economic unit until we have fought our way to alternatives which we experience as better. A developed socialist society will in every area be distinguished more by "action as activity" than by "action as calculation".

How must women organise under socialism in order to gain their goals?

We must have a programme for what we wish to achieve, for economic development, changing of social institutions, sex roles etc. We also need to analyse at which "levels of command" it is important to conquer positions; in the communist party (which unlike earlier experiences must be a leader of class struggle more than a governing party); in a strong and independent trade union movement and in the formally elected governing organs. Other important positions are in planning commissions, the army, the media, research and education.

10. The Struggle to Change People's Hearts

If we are to fight our way to a new relationship between people, we must first understand how this society locks both women and men in "femininity" and "masculinity".

What consequences does capitalism's sexist system have for men and women's "hearts"? Rousseau played an important role as the bourgeoisie's originator of their ideology of sexual roles. We find here a contradictory, tense relationship between the romantic and emotionally liberating ideals and the repressive conditions under which they were to be realised. This contradiction between voluntariness and force can be found in many areas of bourgeois society, for example, the "voluntary" contract between worker and capitalist.

The intertwining of power and love brings the power struggle into the sexual arena and leads to estrangement in sexuality for both sexes. It can become a source of power for women in a powerless position. In the erotic war, women exchange sexuality for "true love", while men exchange "true love" for sexuality. In this picture it is easy to see that lesbians and homosexuals become a threat to the "established order".

Rousseau also shows himself to be a pioneer on sexual roles in the way he states that Sophie must "read men's hearts". Research on men and women's moral perception suggests that women often consider the consequences a given act will have for specific people and relations between people, while men give more weight to abstract principles of right and wrong.

Behind the stereotype "the castrating woman/cold mother" and "the martyr/victim", we may glimpse two feminine strategies. The one represents more or less open resistance to the feminine role, the other uses the feminine role as a platform for indirect power. Both have a high price.

The male role carries a demand to not let yourself get trampled. This also leads to contempt of whoever subordinates himself. Contempt for weakness and submissiveness is the source of a gruesome game between the sexes. A man is sentenced to despise the one he loves and love the one he despises. A woman can only win love and interest by submitting, but when she submits she also gains contempt. Under these conditions, love between man and woman becomes a bitter draught.

Hope, and a solution, lie in the development of a human identity. Why not use our experience and analyse the contradictions in today's people to create dreams, and, in time, science, about the new human being? The struggle to change people's hearts will become easier, too, when we know where we want to go. ■

(This summary was written by Helga Moss and translated by Anne Louise Midsem.)



BASIS OF WOMEN'S OPPRESSION

It is one thing to describe the many different aspects of women's oppression in different societies, but quite another to be able to answer questions like: "Well, what's at the bottom of it?", "Why are women oppressed?", "What is the basis of women's oppression?". In an attempt to at least partially answer this, it is useful to tease the central question apart. This article will start to address the following questions:

1. Why and when did the division of labour between women and men become a relationship of dominance and oppression?
2. How did the development or evolution of society, social production and social relations, affect this relationship to make it a permanent one, rather than a temporary stage of human history.
3. Following through historical stages, how and why has this oppression been deepened? Have there been times or societies where it has been weakened, leading onto the question of the impact of imperialism.
4. How has class oppression interrelated to women's oppression?
5. To what extent was it a fundamental and all pervasive oppression before the capitalist era became dominant?
6. What is the material basis of women's oppression within the capitalist economic system. Is it explained by Marxist analysis of capitalism?
7. In what way has imperialism affected women's specific oppression? Is equality between men and women possible within an imperialist world system?
8. Would such equality be a step forward for women?
9. In what way would socialism or communism change the material basis for women's oppression?

The Origins of Women's Oppression

The division of labour between men and women is not in itself an unequal or oppressive arrangement and only seems inevitable due to the difference in biology. However, we should question at what point and why this division became a relationship of dominance and oppression. Why have women, with their superior bodies which enable them to bear and to feed babies, become the underdog? It is important that we should define carefully what it is that women are "naturally" or biologically built for - giving birth to and suckling young.

We must reject other attributes said to be naturally feminine, like the ability to care for babies, change their nappies, nurse them when they are sick, oversee their development and education etc. These things, men are just as capable of performing. However, many women are physically unwell and unable to labour during some of pregnancy, lactation and during times of other menstrual problems. This vulnerability must have played a part in their subjection.

Maria Mies, in her book "Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World scale", has collected much information from women-centred research in anthropology on this question. This evidence leads her to put forward the thesis that it was men's role as hunter which led to his expertise in simple weapons of aggression and capture. In addition, within nomadic pastoral tribes, men's work involved breeding the animals with a lessening role of gatherer for women and an increasing pressure on women to breed and be controlled along with the animals by men. Man the hunter was then able to hunt and capture women and young men, both of other agricultural tribes and nomads, when they came into his territory. He was thus able to take the first steps in accumulation of property, surplus and power.

Maria Mies stresses that evidence suggests that it was women who were the early agriculturists, not only making vessels for gathering surplus food but also cultivating crops by means of early tools, such as digging sticks and hoes. At this stage, hunting for meat was a peripheral activity, which only men could afford to experiment in, women being involved in the day-to-day feeding of herself, her milk-producing capacities and her young children. But, of course, societies developed differently in different parts of the globe, depending on vegetation, climate, and animal species. Grasslands were more suited to nomadic life, fertile plains and river valleys to settled agriculture.

The accumulation of surplus and private property, by pillage and force, not only made one section richer and more powerful than another, but was notable in that this powerful section was almost entirely men.

It would seem that men did not become more rich and powerful because of their superior strength, but because they were not tied by the hour-to-hour work of providing for the foetus and young children, and were indeed supported by women. This freed them for other things.

This analysis places the beginnings of oppression of women by men, and the oppression of one group of men (slaves), by another, in the same historical epoch. The predatory mode of appropriation transforms autonomous human producers into conditions of production for others. However, this analysis does not see women's oppression arising because of class oppression, and therefore can encompass examples which separate the two. For example, from descriptions of aboriginal societies in Australia, it would appear that these societies are not based on class oppression, but are, nevertheless, societies in which women have no democratic rights and are treated more like animals than humans, (Robert Hughes, "The Fatal Shore"). Thus although in many places the two processes went together they were, in fact, independent.

The analysis of Engels, on the other hand, in "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State", did not see the oppression of women as a separate form of oppression with its own history and causes. His analysis, based on anthropological evidence now largely discredited, situates women's oppression only as class oppression which arose because of the accumulation of surplus and private property.

It would seem that Engels was blinkered by the Eurocentric and male-dominated view which was inevitable at the time.

The societies which built on man the hunter, conquest and war, for example, the Jews, the Aryans, the Arabs and the Chinese, by their very nature expanded and overran other styles of society and pushed forward what Maria Mies calls the patriarchal system. For example, Europe was not invaded by Africans, but Africa was invaded by predatory Europeans.

These early forms of human organisation, however, must have left women with much power, especially within the domestic sphere. There are many examples from early history of powerful women, African Queens, warriors, female gods.

Women's Oppression Through History

In following through the development of societies from this very early time, we in the West have continually to beware of Eurocentrism. Inevitably, it is easier for us to find out about our own history in Europe and much can be learned from that. However, we must accept that lessons learnt from that will not have universal relevance and will need re-thinking as we learn more of other societies. To view history through eyes wide enough to see both women and to see globally is an immense task that we are only just beginning.

The work the women's movement has done in discovering some of their own history is important in trying to understand why this early oppressive division of labour became more and more all-embracing, rather than being a temporary phase of history. Feminists such as Sheila Rowbotham, Elizabeth Fisher, Barbara Ehrenreich, Marilyn French and many more have traced women's history and found it rich and full of struggle. They have documented the fightback of women in all aspects of their lives against oppression by men, and by the state.

A single example of this is the sustained and brutal attack on the sexual and productive autonomy of European women under early capitalism, by means of witch hunts. Hundreds of thousands of women were tortured and killed, including any woman peasant or artisan showing independence of spirit, and especially women healers and midwives. The modern state required absolute sovereignty, especially over reproduction of the future labour force, and the confiscation of property fed the early processes of capital accumulation.

Of much more importance in primitive accumulation of capital was, of course, the conquest and plunder of the colonies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Here too women got special treatment, but quite the other side of the coin. Many studies have shown that while white women in the "motherland" were being forced to breed within strict family structures, women in the colonies were used as labour, not breeding stock, and their family structures and children were destroyed.

A study by Rhoda Reddock of Caribbean slave women describes how, in the early slave period, they were forbidden to marry or have children, as it was cheaper for the planters to import more slaves than lose women's labour during pregnancy and suckling. Later, however, Africa was being exploited differently and slaves more difficult to trade. Caribbean women were then encouraged to breed again. The women showed their resistance to slavery by a long birth strike causing severe labour problems.

Underlying all the various examples there are of how women are bludgeoned and coerced in different ways by early capitalism, is the fact that the oppression of women of the exploited classes is shaped not only by their participation in wage labour but also by relation to their reproduction of the labour force.

Material Basis of Women's Oppression and the Reproduction of Labour Power

The basis of women's oppression lies in her vulnerability during pregnancy and childbirth. During some of this period she is unable to work, except for the work of childbearing itself, and during much of it, she is able to work at partial strength only and feels both mentally and physically weaker. This varies from woman to woman, and pregnancy to pregnancy, but is nevertheless universal to some degree. In a class society, this creates a major contradiction between classes. The capitalist class requires the next generation of workers and therefore needs women to perform this reproductive role, the so-called reproduction of labour power. However, at the same time, the very existence of the capitalist class depends on being able to extract profit out of working class men and women as workers. In the case of working class women, these two needs are incompatible, at times giving rise to a major contradiction. This vulnerability and this contradiction is resolved by different societies in different ways. Under capitalism, it is a contradiction on which the whole variety of women's oppression has been built, with the connivance of working class men at some stages, and with the establishment of male dominance and male benefit.

In her book "Marxism and the Oppression of Women", Lise Vogel explores these concepts in more detail. She is careful to point out that in a class society, it is necessary to analyse women's specific oppression in each class separately before being able to see the whole. For working class women, it is the differential role in the reproduction of labour power that lies at the root of their oppression. Women in the ruling class are also subordinated to the men of their class because of their role in childbirth, or breeding, and this is involved with property and heirs. In addition, and very importantly, all women are oppressed by their lack of democratic rights and this is especially acute for black women.

Lise Vogel bases her analysis on the Marxist concepts of labour power, reproduction of labour power, and necessary and surplus labour, all of which she explains very clearly. She summarises as follows:

"Human beings have the capacity to produce more use-values than they need for their own immediate subsistence. In a class society, this potential is organised to the benefit of a ruling class, which appropriates the surplus labour of a subordinate class according to some determinate set of social relations. For this class society to survive, an exploitable labour force must always be available to perform surplus labour. Workers, however, do not live forever; they suffer 'wear and tear' and death and must be continually replaced by, at the very least, an equal amount of fresh labour power. Where replacement is through generational reproduction, the fact that human beings fall into two distinct biological groups, women and men, comes into play. Women's

somewhat diminished capacity to work during the childbearing period potentially creates a contradiction for the ruling class. Out of the class struggle over resolving this contradiction, a wide variety of forms of reproduction of labour power has developed in the course of history. In virtually all cases, they entail men's greater responsibility for provision of material means of subsistence, women's greater responsibility for the ongoing tasks of necessary labour, and institutionalised forms of male domination over women."

The contradiction which women's childbearing role produces is between the ruling classes' immediate need to appropriate surplus labour from women and its long term requirements for the reproduction of the workforce; while women are bearing and rearing children they are not fully available as labourers. Reproduction of labour power does not always entail generational replacement. The workforce may be kept up by immigration, migrant labour, or by employing other members of society such as children or the old. Families are not the only places where workers renew themselves on a day-to-day basis. There are also barracks, workers' hostels, etc. However, different arrangements bring their own problems.

During the industrial revolution in England, women and children were drawn into long hours of labour in the factories. This resulted in the breakdown of family and society so that children were dying before old enough to work, and workers were unhealthy and weak. The ruling class therefore had to accept some of the demands for reforms which, for a variety of other reasons based on male chauvinist ideas, led to the concept of the family wage and the woman being partially returned to the home. Another example can be found in countries such as the Phillipines, where young women in Free Trade Zones are housed in hostels far from home, and paid so little that the wage does not reach the rest of the family. Here, women have found strength and political rebellion in being housed together. These are just small examples of how the attempted resolution of the contradiction in any one society gives rise to class struggle.

In Europe, and many other parts of the world, the reproduction of labour power, and the differential female and male role in this, takes place in the variety of social structure known as the family. And within the family, it is the provision by men of means of subsistence to women during the childbearing period that forms the material basis for women's subordination in class society. Division of labour does not necessarily constitute a source of oppression. But in class society, women's childbearing capacity creates contradictions, from the point of view of the dominant classes' need to appropriate surplus labour. Although women in different classes have, in many respects, a shared experience of oppression, the difference lies in the lack of this contradiction for ruling class women. Their men are not after their wage labour. However, those women are still exploited by men of their class because of their role in childbirth, more acutely because of the issue of property and family wealth. As we shall see later, they meet oppression in every aspect of their lives, due to a lack of democratic rights.

Domestic Labour

Women trying to understand the basis of their oppression usually know, from their own experience, that domestic labour plays a central role, especially within a family with children. In much of the Third World, women toil ceaselessly on domestic and subsistence

work, such as carrying water, growing food, preparing food, making clothes. Although, in this country, domestic labour is much less gruelling and time-consuming than this, it is still an area of drudgery from which most men are almost entirely free.

In order to make some sense of domestic labour, it is necessary to re-examine Marx's concept of labour, of necessary and surplus labour. Within any class society, when a waged worker puts in a day's work, some of that labour must pay for the maintenance and reproduction, i.e. necessary labour, and the rest of the day's work is making profit for the boss i.e. surplus labour. In class societies based on agriculture, feudalism for example, a serf would work some of the day for his lord, and some on his own land for survival. Under capitalism, however, these two parts of labour are hidden by the concept of a daily wage. In addition, there is an artificial separation of the necessary labour component into work and home.

Necessary labour is made up of several components. Firstly, it contains the means of subsistence of the worker, and other non-working family members such as the old, the sick, or a non-working wife. These are the commodities bought with the wage. But in order to turn these commodities into actual maintenance, some supplementary labour is required: meals cooked, washing done, etc. In order to not only maintain, but also reproduce, the labour force, some necessary labour is involved in bearing and rearing children. All this is necessary labour, and is paid for by the wage(s). However, much of this labour takes place outside the wage situation, in families for example, and this is called domestic labour.

Socialist Feminists have done much work and study on the question of domestic labour which is of such importance to women, especially European and North American women today. Lise Vogel describes it in detail in 'Marxism and the Oppression of Women,':

"In capitalist societies, the burden of the domestic component of necessary labour rests disproportionately on women, while the provision of commodities tends to be disproportionately the responsibility of men, fulfillable through participation in wage labour. This differential positioning of women and men with respect to surplus labour and the two components of necessary labour, which is generally accompanied by a system of male supremacy, originates as a historical legacy from oppressive divisions of labour in earlier class societies. It is then strengthened by the particular separation between domestic and wage labour generated by the capitalist mode of production. Domestic labour increasingly takes place in specialised social units, whose isolation in time and space from wage labour is further emphasised by male supremacy. These conditions stamp domestic labour with its specific character.

"Experientially, the particular nature of domestic labour in industrial capitalist society gives rise, for both women and men, to intense feelings of opposition between one's private life and some public sphere. The highly institutionalised demarcation of domestic labour from wage labour in a context of male supremacy forms the basis for a series of powerful ideological structures, which develop a forceful life of their own."

Of extreme importance with regard to domestic labour is the reality that most women take part in wage labour as well. Many women would see the balance of work between women and men as much more one-sided than is expressed in the above quote, and even when men are not in waged

work they often do little domestic labour. Certainly in the Third World, women commonly bear a heavy burden of work, compared to men.

Welfare State

Also of importance in this country is the role of the welfare state. Through the payment of taxes, some of the necessary labour is taken off individual women. This is an advantage to the working class as a whole, and something it fought for, although there is much evidence that the welfare state was built on the exploitation of women, especially black women. It is also in the interests of capital, in that it frees working class women to be more involved in wage labour and therefore the production of surplus value. At different times, such services will be increased, for example, during war when workers were needed, or cutback as in the early 80's when high unemployment made women workers redundant. The provisions of the welfare state are closely connected to necessary labour and the real value of a wage. Cutting back the welfare state results in an increase in necessary labour (tasks such as nursing the sick and elderly at home), and when not associated with a wage rise is an increase in exploitation, especially of women.

Democratic Rights

The other fundamental aspect of women's oppression in capitalist society, and one that has roots in earlier systems, is the lack of democratic rights. This affects women of all classes. In social systems, such as slavery and feudalism, the mass of people had no democratic rights and were in fact owned to a great extent by other humans. Early capitalism extended an inspiring pledge of freedom from all feudal restrictions, this equality of persons having material roots in capitalist relations of production. All persons must be free and equal to sell their labour power and the ruling class to buy it. Wage labourers must be free in a double sense. Not only are they free owners of their labour power, not serfs or slaves, but also free of any other way to put their labour power to use for their own account, for example, as they do not own land. In reality, however, capitalism is compatible with a stratified labour market and an undemocratic political system. The separate article on reproductive rights gives some indication of how women have been specifically oppressed in this way. The American Declaration of Independence offered equal rights to all but the Constitution excluded slaves, women and the propertyless from equal citizenship.

Given the contradictory character of equality in capitalist society, struggles for democratic rights potentially have serious revolutionary import. The more democratic rights are extended, the more the oppressive economic and social character of capitalism is revealed. Lack of equality as a group constitutes the basis for the women's movement that unites women from different classes. Most women involved in such a movement develop insight into the difference between bourgeois equality and real, socialist equality which gives rise to a women's movement orientated towards socialism.

Women's special position in capitalist society therefore has two defining aspects. Firstly, women and men are different in respect to the material aspects of social reproduction. This affects women of different classes differently. Secondly, women, like other groups, lack full democratic rights, and this affects women of all classes. So long as capitalism survives,

domestic labour will be required for reproduction of the workforce, disproportionately performed by women and most likely accompanied by a system of male supremacy.

Women and Socialism

In a socialist society, where a small class will not be extracting profit from the majority, there will not be an antagonistic contradiction between the labour of women, which contributes to the reproduction of labour power and the labour of women in producing goods. However, although the material basis may be removed, the whole structure of male domination and privilege will not crumble without an earthquake! Domestic labour must be transformed into an integral component of social production in a communist society and must be shared between men and women. This process will give rise to momentous changes in the way society is organised. The issue of domestic labour is likely to be the main obstacle in affording women true equality and is something that legislation and the changed economic basis alone will not greatly alter. However these, together with the planned socialisation of some domestic tasks, will lay a foundation on which women can continue the demands and struggles with men to share domestic and childcare tasks.

Although it would appear that socialist systems in the world so far have made little inroad into the inequality of domestic labour, the world also provides examples of revolutionary struggles where women are winning equality during rather than after the establishment of socialism. In the Eritrean liberation movement, it appears that women have not only transformed their previously extremely exploited position in society, but are now taking the leadership of the national struggle. This orientation of women within a revolutionary movement needing to deal with their own specific oppression alongside national oppression in order to then join in the leadership of the general struggle will establish a socialist society of quite a different type than seen in China, for example.

In trying to take an overall view of women's oppression, this article has been sketchy but has drawn on many writings by socialist feminists which can be studied in greater depth. History is of importance only in as much as it helps us understand the present and make changes towards a better future. Women's own experiences, the women's movement and feminist writing have all raised women's consciousness about their oppression, but led to no clear way forward. To make further progress towards their liberation, women must grasp the basis of their oppression within a class society and the necessity of working in an organisation which will lead a combined fight against sexist, class, and racist oppression, with the long term goal of a communist society. ■

THE LEFT AND FEMINISM

by Kumari Jayawardena
and Govind Kelkar

Reprinted from an article in 'Economic and Political Weekly', 23.9.89.

The spectre of western feminism has been used by many left party leaders and left ideologues to attack local feminists as bourgeois, westernised and influenced by "white" feminism. In such campaigns against feminism, the left often finds itself in strange company along with the Ayatollahs and other fundamentalists who whip up xenophobia about western "decadence".

As a preamble, it is necessary to ask ourselves why we are discussing the question of the left in South Asia and feminism. Some may ask why even bother about the left because the left, whether in socialist countries or in the states of India with communist ministers, does not have a brilliant record on women's issues; or because the left is not an electoral force and has been soundly defeated at the polls in some countries of the region; or because the left, steeped in the jargon and issues of an earlier period, has failed to adapt itself to the new movements based on gender, environment and other issues. We are struck by the left amnesia where women are concerned and, hence, their failure to insert the women's question into existing work or revolutionary practice and transform it.

It is therefore necessary to state that we are discussing the left because we are not merely feminists but socialist feminists, and that our vision of 'a total transformation of society' is not a change from patriarchy to matriarchy, but a transformation to a socialist society where all forms of exploitation and oppression have ceased. Of course, we may all have different visions of what constitutes socialism, or what a socialist feminist society would be. But that is another topic. For the present, we feel that the women's issue is part of the democratic struggle which is central to the left parties and groups, and is a struggle they have theorised about for decades. We also feel that a movement calling itself socialist, and not taking up the oppression of women as a question at the core of democracy and socialism, is hardly living up to socialist ideals. Evidently, a correct analysis of feminism cannot be provided by the left unless the left itself is transformed through an attempt to understand and come to terms with patriarchy in its historical setting and its complex and problematic relationship with dominant relations of production.

Arguments Against Feminism

In South Asia, the left parties, from their inception, have mobilised women of all classes in the freedom struggle, in trade union activity, in peasant agitation, student and youth movements. There have also been women revolutionaries who have played key roles in organising workers and peasants, participating in some of the historic anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist struggles, such as the Chittagong armoury raid, the Telengana and Tebagma uprisings, armed peasant uprisings or

the 'Naxalite' movements and numerous militant trade union actions. The left parties in India for example, have also led protests against rape and harassment of peasant women by upper class landlords, and have been active in denouncing sati and fundamentalist laws harmful to women.

The left has also been involved in annual celebrations of women's day, sometimes on a joint platform with feminists and also in the celebration of the UN year and decade of women. A conference backed by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) was held in 1975 in Trivandrum, Kerala, on the women's issue and on this occasion, the 'Social Scientist', (journal supported by the CPI(M)), brought out a special issue on women. It is interesting to note that the articles in this issue included one by the party leader E.M.S. Namboodiripad, followed by articles by Carol Brown, an American feminist, on 'Patriarchal Capitalism', and Gail Omvedt on 'Rural Origins of Women's Liberation in India'. The various left parties of south Asia have also organised women on international issues such as the campaign to free notable women revolutionaries and freedom fighters such as Angela Davis.

However, the women's organisations of the CPI or of the CPI(M) have not used words or concepts like feminism and patriarchy. During a discussion with a leading member of the National Federation of Indian Women, she explicitly stated that: We are not a feminist organisation, we are not anti-men. We are not the only ones who are exploited. Harijan men are no less exploited, of course, their women are doubly exploited. Since 1971 in the CPI, the two women-specific points of debate have been: 1) how to draw or attract more women to our struggle or movement, and 2) how to change the attitudes of male comrades to encourage women to join the political struggle or the party. One has to be a good, sympathetic husband to allow woman to join the struggle (Govind Kelkar's interview with Vimla Farookhi).

While there are some ideological differences among the left parties and organisations on national and international issues, they have areas of agreement on feminism. For instance, the CPI(M) document, 'Feminists and Women's Movement' (undated) stated that feminists are the urban middle class women having a desire to divide the people, particularly the working class; they would like "women of all classes should come together to fight against men", (p.3); "women's organisations, particularly autonomous groups, are responsible for keeping

women out of politics and would not like them to join struggle against the state" (p.16-17). According to the document, it is important to realise that the subjugation of women is part of the class society and "when the property relations are abolished, conditions for women's equality as in a socialist society are automatically created" (p.28). At the same time, the document makes a contradictory but candid observation that "the patriarchy or male dominance which does exist in the political parties, trade unions etc., is to be consciously fought by the leadership of the

party and trade unions and also by the women's organisations" (p.10).

Similar arguments against feminism, though perhaps not so crudely and confusedly presented, were stated in another document entitled 'The Material Basis for Women's Liberation'. The three writers were in the political range of CPI to CPI(ML). Commenting on the "heinous crimes" of dowry and dowry deaths and how the question is to be taken up from the point of view of a movement for the emancipation of women, the document states:

"The question of dowry is intimately related to the ownership of property; and it exists in a situation where without a hold on private property, men cannot hope to gain any self respect and economic status. Given that in our society acquisition of wealth by whatever means is given economic and political recognition by the rulers and the state, there is a general degeneration of work and human values in relation to this institution of private property. Bride-burning is just one end of this spectrum of "whatever means" and the women's movement has to address itself to whatever in our social order and the problem related to the acquisition of property and social status" (p.5).

The document concludes on a prescriptive note to the feminists not to divide the working class families along sex lines. "Hence any women's movement pitted against the oppression of family on women must first learn to fight against the property relations in that society" (p.14). These crude statements and shoddy analysis of feminism in India did not permit even a relationship to be posed between class and women's subordination, or the question of "the domestic enslavement of women", "the first class oppression of the female by the male" which are so evident in Marxian analysis and explicitly stated in Engels' 'Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State'. The left has failed to make a deeper analysis of Engels' thesis on the family or the woman question.

Feminist anthropologists and social scientists like Eleanor Leacock (1971), Karen Sacks (1975), Gayle Rubin (1975), Christine Delphy (1986) and Gerda Lerner (1986) have reclaimed Engels' work for its attempt to produce an historically specific account of sexual inequality to counter the universalistic assumption about women's subordination. Their anthropological works went further than Engels, to say, first, that female subordination and appropriation of women's labour preceded and played a crucial role in establishing the basis for the emergence of private property and the state (and not the other way around as Engels had assumed). Second, marriage is not just a matter between individuals or at most between the conniving parents, but a relationship between larger groups, such as households, families and kinship groups and depends to a large extent on the relationship of these groups to property. Third, they have questioned a Marxist criteria in attributing to women the class of their husbands, which is wrong and un-Marxist too. While it is true that upper class and caste women tend to share some of the privileges with their men, they nevertheless have no direct access to and control of the means of production (land, property, technology). Women, therefore, have only a derived status or class-caste membership which is not equivalent to that of the male members. Besides, patriarchal oppression, the sexual subordination, the familial duties in the form of child-rearing and care of the family members run across through class-caste situations which tends to unite them with women of the peasant, working class and reinforces their alienation.

Those left parties involved in parliamentary politics, however, have been mainly active in mobilising women voters for electoral politics at local and national level and in trade union activity. Equal rights of participation in class struggles have been in doubt, but the question of "women's liberation" as opposed to "workers' liberation" or "national liberation" has been subsumed under "class struggle". It was argued that, with the overthrow of capitalism and private property, women should be liberated.

Nevertheless, the left being dogmatic, and glued to the 'books' has ironically also had to accept and quote the classic texts of Marxism on women. All the people's publishing houses in the region carry both English and local language translations of Engels' 'The Family, Private Property and the State' and Lenin's collected essays on the Emancipation of Women; and the Maoists, if and when they discuss the women's issue, have inevitably to quote from the classic text of Mao on the four ropes binding Chinese women, the fourth rope being the authority of the husband.

Organisationally, the left has always had women's associations, clearly linked, controlled and organised by the party, with little or no autonomy. There has been a resistance in the left to autonomous women's organisations. For example, when women of two left parties came together in 1947 to form an autonomous women's group in Sri Lanka, in spite of their successes in raising issues concerning working women, the parties which had never been too happy at this show of unity among women, ordered its dissolution after a year.

It is also probably true that neither the left leaders nor the women in left parties have seriously debated the woman question. They have often made self-criticism on right or left deviations, on their failures in mobilising minorities, intellectuals and other groups, but criticism of the failure to highlight women's oppression has not been made. Yet there is no doubt that party leadership is involved at the highest level when decisions are made to attack feminists and women's studies. In Sri Lanka, the secretary of a small Trotskyist party was taken to task by the party for publishing an offensive article denouncing Women's Day; the article not only attacked feminists as middle-class 'canaries' who think that men should be scraping coconut in the kitchen, but also claimed that too much fuss was being made about violence against women which was only fun and games between husband and wife.

Uneasy Relationship with Feminist Movement

The left in South Asia since the 1970's has an uneasy relationship with autonomous feminist movements which arose in that period. On the one hand, these movements included women socialists and Marxists, and on many of the issues and struggles of feminists, the left was in agreement. But on the other hand, the groups were not controlled by the party, and many of the demands were thought of as extremist or subversive.

Autonomous groups are further criticised by the left as 'apolitical', having a narrow world-view, not being interested in seeking state power. What is important is to recognise that like many other social movements, the women's movement too, is critical of the state, and asks greater self-determination for itself or autonomy from state itself. By no means does this mean that feminism or the women's movement is apolitical, not interested in transformation of the character and nature of the state. However, a large section of feminist

organisations tend to the view that the very notion of state or political party power for them would negate most of their grassroots aims and essence. Importantly, feminism is indeed anti-systemic in the sense that it challenges the basis of the system and tries to protect its members physically and emotionally from familial and extra-familial violence as well as other vagaries of political economy in South Asia. In an analysis of women's movements in the countries of South Asia, it was repeatedly pointed out that the stands taken by feminism in theory and action, have taken into account class, caste and ethnic issues, for example:

- South Asian feminist movements have been active in raising issues of women's subordination, economic exploitation and social oppression, including restoration of democracy, against militarism and extreme brutalisation of society, e.g. gang rapes of masses of women, parading of naked women.

- They have been active against growing communalisation of society, religious fundamentalism, Hindu and Buddhist chauvinism, Islamisation and ethnic or nationality violence.

- They have struggled against the growth of anti-people science and technologies, green revolution and white revolution technologies, destruction of forests and other natural resources and against attempts to reduce the status of women, in agitations against bonded labour.

- Feminists, individually and collectively, have mobilised people (both women and men) against discrimination against women, the absence of women in political process, agitation for equal pay and equal opportunities, population control policies, against sexism in the media and the textbooks and crimes against women (eg. dowry murder, sati, etc.)

Feminist theory has made efforts to deconstruct the family as a natural unit and to reconstruct it as a social unit with an ideology, an institutional nexus of social relationships and cultural forms or meanings. Besides, feminist organisations have demonstrated more participatory, democratic and mutual support, rather than hierarchical social relations. The feminist critique of the family and the open-ended discussion on sexuality and morality initiated by some feminist groups led to the widest controversies. Feminists were depicted as ultra-left, petty-bourgeois, anarchist or worse. The 'worse' was that they were foreign agents, dependent on foreign money, in the pay of foreign governments. In South Asia, sections of the mass media have been particularly prone to use such arguments against the women's movement. In Sri Lanka, for example, March 8 has been the occasion each year for attacks on feminists, the most recent example being an editorial entitled 'Female Chauvinism' in 'The Island' of March 8, 1989, where stale old stories of western women burning their bras were repeated once again. When such views are put forward, left intellectuals do not come to the defence of the women's movement, leading us to conclude that on the issue of feminism, the right and the left are more or less in agreement. Here one may add that armed groups of youth, defined as 'ultra-left' who are active in the region, along with ultra-nationalist armed groups, have shown no greater awareness on the woman question, and some of them have, in fact, been conspicuous for their orthodox and puritan approaches to women, frequently pronouncing on 'women's duties' and giving orders on their behaviour and dress. The left organisations in Bangladesh and India, for instance, have repeatedly demonstrated and urged the state employers and the public administration that

they should enable working women to fulfil their roles as 'mothers' and 'wives' in the family. No effort was made to see any connection between the struggle against patriarchy and the struggle against capitalism and imperialism.

Many of us have also had personal experience of male chauvinism among left intellectuals and scholars of the region - the experience often being that the greater the 'eminence' of the 'important male' the worse his position on feminism. The level of ignorance on the women's issue is a cause for concern; few left intellectuals have bothered to read or understand the theory and practice of feminism, choosing, like their 'bourgeois' colleagues, to dismiss the movement as a western fad of upper-class women which has no relevance to the local situation. A typical example was the recent review of 'Women of Pakistan' (by Fareeda Shaheed and Kanwar Mumtaz) made by Babar Ali, a Pakistani left intellectual, who stated that the book was "the westernised affluent bourgeois Pakistani women's story of 'struggle' for essentially westernised bourgeois women's rights".

Today we have to ask why there is such a reluctance to support the struggle for women's liberation among left intellectuals. One may argue that all males, including those of the left, do not want to lose the benefits of patriarchy in the home and in society. It may also be that there is a high degree of conservatism within the left - perhaps due to the largely petty-bourgeois origin of many South Asian left party leaders and cadres.

The underdevelopment of political theory within the South Asian left may also be seen as a major factor impeding a correct understanding of the woman question. The dogmatic approach preferred by many left political leaders and intellectuals often means that nothing is 'correct' if not supported by a relevant quote from Marx or Lenin, Stalin or Mao, Castro or Ortega, as the case may be. This, of course, leaves little or no room for questioning: nor does it encourage discussion on those new areas of philosophy and political theory opened up, not only by the feminist movement but also by the ecology movement.

The spectre of western feminism has been used by many left party leaders and left ideologues to attack local feminists as bourgeois, westernised and influenced by 'white' feminism. It is alleged that in raising feminist issues in South Asia, feminists are causing disruption in the family, dividing the working people along gender lines, and disrupting the party. In such campaigns against feminism, the left often finds itself in strange company along with the Ayatollahs and other fundamentalists, who whip up xenophobia about western 'decadence'. Thus internationalism, which should be an essential element of left thinking, is replaced by narrow nationalism.

However, it would be wrong and unwise to portray the left movements as organisations that have failed to take up women's issues. In recent years, there has been some perceptible change in shaking off the patriarchal bias in the treatment of women members and women's organisations, though they still don't call them 'feminists' or use the word 'feminism'. A majority of left organisations (in the South Asian region) have set up women's wings or cells to deal with the women-specific issues. They have organised 8 March meetings, demonstrations against wife-burning and other forms of violence against women, have helped feminist groups to organise conferences on issues like familial violence, patriarchy and so on (for example Patna, Jharkhand, Assam Nari

Mukti Sanstha). However, in these mobilisations, they still tend to see women in the wife and mother roles, essentially having a patriarchal attitude. A few of the CPI(ML) activists have written a mild critique of Engels' view on the family and private property. Yet they did not go far enough to see the significance of housework, the gender construction, women's sexuality, and other issues raised by feminists. Nevertheless, it was also noticed that some of those who became vocal and active on women-specific = feminist issues, were expelled from their parties.

Welcome Note of Criticism and Self-Criticism

A welcome note of criticism and self-criticism of the Indian left on the woman question appeared for the first time on 8 March 1989 in 'Mass Line', (a CPI(ML) party organ), stating:

"Although women were in the forefront in various struggles and movements erupting across the country, this circumstance was never made use of either to politically develop cadres from among them or to develop a mass-movement against the oppression of women. Instead, backward ideas of male supremacy and the like were peacefully co-existed with and even fostered by the party, whose actual role in the struggle against women's oppression was far from positive. In the name of the centrality of class struggle, the leadership stubbornly brushed aside the question of women's oppression. The revisionist leaders were thus in fact guilty not just of mechanical thinking but of kowtowing to orthodoxy, of downright rightism. No wonder the lofty goal of the working class movement - the bringing into being of classless, oppressionless society grew more and more distant".

However, such 'theoretical' statements are seen as inadequate by feminists or women's movements in India, as they have failed to locate the sexual division of the social relations generated by the child-bearing role of women as being structured in such a way that relations between men and women are relations of domination and subordination.

The left has given little attention to the issue of land rights for women and to rectify the existing agricultural wage system where women wage workers are lower paid than men. Moreover, there is no explanation given for the specific political and ideological oppression of women, the system of male control in the family and outside, the male inheritance of productive resources in connection with either land or factory production and the economical subordination of women in wage labour. Like the sexual division of private property these things are regarded as natural and therefore not to be questioned. A woman's relation to productive property or land is always mediated through her relation to her husband, father or brother, precisely her existence in the household where her husband is the head or in the natal family where the father or brother plays such a role.

In view of the above, what then is the status of 'unconscious feminism'? Can we call some women feminists who would reject such a description of themselves? Or, can we ascribe to them a feminism of which they are unaware? Let us see what some of the poor peasant women of Bihar have to say about their marginality in politics. These women critically questioned the sexual division of work in politics and the present-day responsibility of the 'wholetimers' (fully engaged in political work) in maintaining themselves and putting the entire burden of the household on the wife. They grudged that their husbands did politics at the

expense of women and as a corrective measure suggested that a wholetimer should (1) share equally and fully the responsibilities and burden of household work and child care; (2) participate in production in order to support himself as well as the dependants of the family; and (3) participate in political work and make full efforts to help women in the family, e.g. wife, sister, mother, daughter to actively participate in mass organisation or political work. Seemingly, only then would it be possible for women to accept ungrudgingly and support the husbands' mass, political work and for the women themselves to participate in the political process of social transformation. Women spoke in the vein of leading Marxist leaders, like Rosa Luxemburg and Mao Zedong and suggested a sharing and responsible role for male political workers.

Feminism is thus related to the fundamental restructuring of society with a women-centred approach; something that challenges the basic structures of oppression and inequality. However, organisations, including most of all women's organisations, have not yet conceptualised or defined for themselves the specificities of alternate processes or socio-political system or what they should be doing in order to bring about such a change. Accepting the mode of a protracted and organised struggle, and realising well that their struggle is the hardest, women activists and researchers have often betrayed anxiety about a wide base of support and identification with peasant and working class women. That women engaged in the struggle for feminist liberation did need more conceptualising and knowledge of problems of the movement, of history, as well as investigative research and interaction with each other to build up strength through solidarity action, i.e. advocacy of their rights and providing support to each other in the women's groups. This has to be expanded regionally and internationally too. More important, women's solidarity action has to be extended to all progressive groups of women and men who question patriarchy and/or are connected with class organisations or other popular organisations. ■

Alternatives

1. The question of taking feminist issues into mass movements which include left and other organisations.
2. Supporting democratic, progressive women's organisations or groups and their struggles.
3. Coming together with other groups on issues of human rights, peace, ecology, against communal violence, anti-fundamentalist agitations, and for worker, peasant action.
4. Taking the issues of feminism to woman students, the women's sections of political parties and women's political groups.
5. Raising men's consciousness that the women's struggle and feminism are part of democratic and socialist struggles.
6. Raising the issue of political activism and the need to activate the families of political workers in sharing of political work and household responsibility.
7. Recognition by feminists that the left is an ally in the process of social change, based on an awareness of the importance of a class analysis.
8. Recognition of sectarianism and insularity by both feminists and leftists and to continue the dialogue on differences which may exist and on issues which are crucial to both feminists and leftists.

REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

It is one of the ironies of women's position that their one superior and extra human function, the ability to bear and suckle babies, is the one thing above all others which holds them back from equality. Many women experience comparative equality (except for lack of educational opportunities, unequal pay, sexual harassment, pornography, etc. etc.!) until they have their first child. Once this has happened, they find themselves defined as mothers and housewives and everything, from personal relations with men, to job and leisure opportunities, is immediately restricted. It is because of this that the demand for reproductive rights - the right of women to choose if, and when, to have children - has been one of the main demands of women's movements, both here and worldwide.

It is obvious that, in the past, women knew much about the functioning of their bodies and reproduction which allowed them to make use of herbal remedies, abortion or infanticide, to control their reproduction. Women researchers such as Elizabeth Fisher have uncovered evidence of very early knowledge. Even as the human species was learning to make tools and act on nature to change it, women were making reproduction a truly human, that is conscious, social activity. Of course, the knowledge was only gained slowly and was, in many respects, basic and imperfect. But we know of various plants and herbs used as contraceptives and to induce abortions in addition to the very effective use of a prolonged period of breast-feeding. Examples include the Ute Indians who used litho-spermium; women in Egypt who used a vaginal sponge dipped in honey and the use of acacia tips, which contained a spermicidal acid. Evidence suggests that women had the knowledge to control their own bodies, and that this knowledge was passed between themselves and not controlled by men or the state.

Later history confirms the effectiveness of these methods in that women resisting colonialism were able, in several different areas, to go on effective birth strikes. For example, the Herero women in South West Africa rebelling against German rule, reduced their population from 80,000 to 20,000 between 1892 and 1909. Women in Sumatra and the Caribbean also took similar measures. Discussion of contraception with African women today uncovers a wide knowledge of traditional forms which are practised as much as colonial and neo-colonial rule and laws allow. There is much still to be acknowledged about the ways colonialism and the missionary movement affected women's traditional health-care.

Witch Hunts

In Europe, the rise of early capitalism gave rise to a horrendous and widespread attack on women's independent knowledge and spirit. In the fifteenth century, it was common for women to be craftsmen, traders and artisans, healers and midwives. Prostitutes in medieval times were not necessarily despised and, in many cities, prostitutes had their own associations. These women, peasant and artisan, constituted a threat to the emerging bourgeois order, by their economic and sexual independence.

One of the mechanisms used to control them was the massive witch hunt that raged through Europe to the seventeenth century. The scale of the torturing and murder was immense. One prosecutor, Benedikt Carpzov, in Leipzig, for example, signed 20,000 death sentences against women. At Toulouse, four hundred were put to death in a day. In the Bishopric of Trier, in 1585, two villages were left with only one female inhabitant each. Many writers have estimated the total number killed to have been in the millions. Women healers and midwives were under special attack. But any women showing independence seem to have been at risk, and once suspected, unlikely to be spared.



Three "witches" hanging. From the title page of a contemporary pamphlet on the third Chelmsford witch trial, 1589.

Women, as witches, were accused of three things. Firstly, of female sexuality: on the one hand, of lust and every conceivable sexual crime against men, and on the other, of making men impotent and of giving contraceptive aid and performing abortions. The attack was largely orchestrated by the medieval Catholic church which taught that in intercourse the male deposits in the female a homunculus, or "little person", complete with soul, which is simply housed in the womb for nine months, without acquiring any attributes of the mother. The homunculus is not really safe, however, until it reaches male hands again, when a priest baptises it, ensuring the salvation of its immortal soul.....

Secondly, witches were accused of being organised. It is unknown how connected this organisation was to the peasant rebellions of the time. Thirdly, they were accused of magical powers affecting health, both harming and healing. Witch-healers were often the only form of healthcare available for the vast majority who had no doctors and no hospitals and were bitterly afflicted by disease and poverty. In particular, the association between witch and midwife was strong. Many of the herbal remedies developed by "witches" are still used today: ergot for the pain of labour (when the Church held that pain in labour was the Lord's just punishment for Eve's original sin!), belladonna, digitalis.

What the church said was a sin, the emerging state said was a crime. On the one hand, the sadism and hysteria were used as a safety valve for all the problems and unrest of the poor people and to divert their wrath. On the other hand, the whole campaign was directly

concerned with the emergence of the modern capitalist state that required absolute sovereignty and the production of enough workers for the new economy.

The central role of the Church has not greatly changed over the centuries, especially where the Catholic Church remains influential. This is illustrated by the testimony of women in the North of Ireland, in the book 'Only the Rivers Run Free'. Until 1979, Southern Irish women could not even obtain contraception, and in practice many are still unable to. Under the Censorship of Information Act, even books and pamphlets about birth control are, in theory, still banned.

The attack on women as healers and health-providers for the poor continued after the witch trials petered out. In England, there were women surgeons, for example, up to the seventeenth century. But the rise of modern scientific medicine, with its long training at university and its control by male institutions, made medicine a reserve for the sons of the rich.

Women's Health and Birth Control

The history of the Popular Health Movement in America, detailed by Ehrenreich and English, in 'Witches, Midwives and Nurses' is a clear example of struggle in this area. In the 1830s in the USA, a rebellion against restrictive medical licensing laws by feminist and working class movements gave rise to the Popular Health Movement which set up preventive and "know your own body" courses, as well as opening its own medical schools. Birth control was part of this teaching. However, by the end of the century, the state and the new fortunes of capital imposed medical training as we now know it, closing down those it did not approve of, including six out of eight black medical schools. At the same time, upper class Victorian women, such as Florence Nightingale and Dorothea Dix, were establishing nursing as the proper place for women. The Nightingale nurse embodied the very spirit of femininity as defined by sexist Victorian society. To the doctor - absolute obedience, to the patient - the selfless devotion of a mother.

When we come to the present century, the issues of birth control and women's health are being struggled over by women all over the world. The insight into our history in this country gives us only one view on this. But even this is unknown to most women as their history is denied them within their education.

The fight for access to birth control in this country was hampered by its association with eugenic policies. Malthusian theories of population control as an alternative to social reform prevented the working class from seeing birth control as a necessary and progressive demand in the inter-war years. Socialist feminists such as Stella Browne, Dora Russell,

Rose Witcop, Annie Besant were in conflict with the male-dominated left as much as the right. Many of the early birth control campaigners were indeed reactionary with racist ideas: Drysdale wanted strikes made illegal and was anti-immigration; Harold Cox was against rent control and maternity benefit, and Marie Stopes argued for birth control on the grounds that overcrowding in towns meant that "we have been breeding revolutionaries".

Against this background, working class women flocked to meetings and bought pamphlets. Their co-op guilds and Labour women's councils called urgently for both the legalising of giving advice and for facilities. The Workers'

Birth Control Group was formed by Dora Russell and others in 1924 and explicitly opposed the eugenicism in the rest of the birth control movement. When the issue was raised at the Labour Women's Conference in 1924, people were astonished by:

"The intense hostility shown by women to bearing children. It was regarded as the great joy of every mother and the noble work of womanhood and there they were, getting up and saying they couldn't stand it, they weren't going to have it and they must have it limited".

Despite this resounding vote by women, the Labour Party never made birth control party policy and neither did the Communist Party of Great Britain. The post-war women's organisations also dithered over it because they felt it was part of women accepting a man's world, in the same way as they saw family allowances as a means of strengthening the family. The birth control movement actually advanced through people such as Marie Stopes who saw it as a means of stabilising capitalist society. Thus it remained firmly in the control of the medical profession and the state. A far cry from Stella Browne's vision of it as one aspect of women's sexual self-determination.

Abortion

Stella Browne was one of the earliest fighters for legalised abortion, much moved by the agony and deaths caused by illegal abortions that women were forced to seek. A public health report in 1933 estimated that one in seven pregnancies ended in abortion. Stella wrote:

"What is this ban on abortion? It is the survival of the veiled face, of the barred window and the locked door, burning, branding, mutilation, stoning, of all the grip of ownership and superstition come down on women, thousands of years ago".

The women's movement of the 1960's in this country, fought fairly successfully on the issue of legal abortion with the passing in 1967 of the Abortion Act. Although the National Health Service has never provided the facilities women need for early quick day-case abortions, and in many regions, it remains difficult to get an abortion on the health service, the Abortion Act has provided the legislative base for some degree of choice for women.

The 'Pure White Race'

The early days of the abortion movement were blinkered to the needs and experiences of national minority women in this country, and even more to women in third world countries, who were suffering a lack of reproductive rights of an opposite kind. These women were being forced into sterilisation, or to have abortions against their wishes, or were given long acting injectable contraceptives without informed consent. Eugenic principles within the family planning movement were ensuring that the British imperialist system prevented black women from breeding and encouraged white women in stable heterosexual relationships to breed "the pure white race". These principles were explicit in writings by early family planning experts as well as in the Beveridge Report which heralded the welfare state. Women in third world countries, and black women here, were able to educate and unite with some white women on these points, especially in the campaign against the injectable contraceptive Depoprovera. As a consequence, the National Abortion Campaign split into two, giving rise to the Reproductive Rights Campaign which has been active ever since.

The Reproductive Rights Campaign demands a woman's right to choose in the matter of having children and the provision of freely available contraception and abortion, together with the safeguarding of the rights of national minority women. The campaign against giving injectable contraceptives without informed consent is by no means over. The World Health Organisation has been prioritising research in this area and smoothing the path for testing them, by changing its guidelines to make women in the Third World human guinea pigs. Multinational drug companies are making big profits from this.

Women in the Third World have also exposed and fought back against the huge amount of overseas "aid" which has been tied to population control. The continuing eugenic attacks on black people worldwide through so-called population control programmes or family planning aid is an ongoing problem. An increasing number, but still a minority, of people in the West are recognising that it is their Western societies which are using up the world's resources, for example, by eating large quantities of beef which require huge tracts of good land to produce. Third world population and family size is inextricably bound up with colonialisation, racism and oppression. It is not an accident that the one Asian country which has been most successful at limiting population growth has been China, at a time when the ordinary people there had a government which put their interests first.

In the West, the anti-abortion, anti-woman lobby remains strong and influential. These forces have recently made some gains in the USA where certain states have made abortion illegal again. There is evidence that the anti-abortion grouping is organised internationally, with parties travelling from the USA to demonstrate outside clinics in Britain and the rest of Europe. In Britain, there have been continuing attempts to restrict abortion. The last two serious attempts were the Alton Bill and the more recent attempt to put amendments restricting abortion to the Warnock Bill on Embryo Research. The women's movement mobilised against the Alton Bill in large numbers and it was eventually defeated. The next attack on abortion rights through amendments to the Warnock Bill concentrated on reducing the upper limit for abortion to 24, 22 or 18 weeks of pregnancy. This most recent attack was also defeated.

Also imminent is the new abortion pill which has been used for some time in France and will be introduced, if possible, to this country very soon. The pill, which requires the addition of a prostaglandin injection to work, will only be available in hospital but will avoid the need for an anaesthetic and not be dependent on theatre time thereby making abortion theoretically easier in underfunded regions. In the third world also, where resources are short, it will be a benefit and will be much safer than illegal and unsterile abortions. Some women, however, may still prefer the quicker operative method and a woman's right to choose must be upheld. We can expect the anti-abortion lobby to throw all its emotion and venom against this pill.

Reproductive Technology

The other aspect of reproductive rights which is increasingly affecting women worldwide is the new reproductive technology. This is the technology which allows scientists to remove human eggs from women, fertilise them with sperm outside the body, grow the embryo for a few days and then reimplant the embryo into a woman's womb to grow normally into a baby. The

birth of so-called "test-tube" babies are the best known offshoot of this. This technology is of immense significance to us all, but especially to women, who have thus become objects for science to remove bits from, and experiment on, without any control or input by the women. Women are already experiencing the early effects of these techniques.

Women in the Indian sub-continent are already feeling the negative effects of advanced technology because of the pressure to have male children only. By a sex determination test of the embryo, the sex of the foetus can be discovered early. The abortion of female foetuses, as a result of such tests, is already a widespread practice.

Women are increasingly getting involved as "patients" in in-vitro fertilisation research which enables a few couples previously labelled infertile to have a baby (approximately one in ten of those undergoing the full programme). This treatment requires extreme sacrifice of women, in time, health and emotions; and may well be diverting attention away from the commoner causes of sub-fertility and the supportive caring that the condition demands.

The technology is raising many moral, ethical and political issues which are receiving no democratic attention. These include the whole concept of "good motherhood", concepts of "the perfect baby", the use of the research in non-medical fields such as biological weapons, animal breeding, and perhaps most importantly the rapidly growing view of the embryo as a separate entity from the woman of which it is a part, and the conflict of interest between them. The government set up the Warnock Committee to investigate these issues but the committee did not consult any women's groups nor any group representing the disabled.

History seems to be repeating itself with the advances of science taking control of reproduction ever further out of women's hands. It is important that we do not deny the possible benefits of our increased understanding of the world and our bodies; nor idealise the past. In the 1920's, around 39,000 women died in childbirth in England and Wales. Now, maternal deaths are so rare that each one has an individual enquiry. The contraceptive pill, for all its problems, has revolutionised women's lives. The new technology holds hope for infertile women and the possibility of totally preventing some serious congenital diseases such as cystic fibrosis and muscular dystrophy. However, in a world dominated by imperialism and male domination, women will need to redouble their efforts to take back control of their own bodies and reproduction.

There is no doubt that women have increasing expectations and demands in this field and are organising together around these issues in every country. There is also evidence of increasing solidarity between women in different countries. Women in the West have a special duty in this respect to learn of and from their sisters in the Third World and national minority women in their own countries. In this way, stronger links can be forged and we will become even more determined to fight for control over our own bodies, a vital aspect of our specific liberation as women. ■

Reading List

Woman's Creation, Elizabeth Fisher, Anchor Press, New York, 1979.

Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale, Maria Mies, Zed Books, 1986.

Witches, Midwives and Nurses,, Ehrenreich and D.English, Feminist Press, New York, 1973.

A New World for Women: Stella Browne, Socialist feminist, Sheila Rowbotham.

Only the Rivers Run Free. Northern Ireland:the Women's War, Eileen Fairweather, Roisin McDonough and Melanie McFadyean, Pluto Press, 1974

Beyond Conception, the New Politics of Reproduction, Pat Spallone, Macmillan Education, 1989.

Imperialism and the Control of Women's Fertility, Sumati Nair, published by The Campaign against Long-Acting Hormonal Contraceptives, 173 Archway Rd., London, 1989.

Womens Reproductive Rights Campaign, York Women's Centre, 11 Holgate Rd, York YO2.

SHOULD WOMEN FIGHT IMPERIALISM?

Historically the oppression of women by men pre-dated the development of class-divided society. That oppression, in different forms, is still widespread in a world dominated by imperialism. Today, women are divided amongst different classes and different nationalities. Some are in oppressor nations; some (the majority) are in oppressed nations. A small number are part of dominant classes; the vast majority are to be found as part of the exploited classes. The majority in the oppressor nations suffer class oppression. The majority in the oppressed nations suffer both class and national oppression. All women in the oppressed nations suffer national oppression. All women, wherever they are, suffer from male domination to varying degrees.

Class exploitation and national oppression are products of imperialism. Thus, women who suffer class exploitation and national oppression have a vested interest in overthrowing imperialism in order to rid themselves of those two types of exploitation and oppression.

A separate question arises as to whether women, as a group oppressed by men, have a vested interest in overthrowing imperialism as part of the struggle to rid themselves of male oppression.

The new era of capitalism, and its subsequent development into imperialism, was built on pre-existing sexist societies. The form they took mirrored those sexist societies. The forms of male domination may have changed but the new systems perpetuated that male domination. Indeed, it is clear that capitalism and imperialism were male-dominated from the outset. Through the "family wage" system, capitalism formalised a new type of economic subordination of women to men. In other respects, capitalism increased the forms of the oppression of women. A system based on a one-sided emphasis on individual competition and inherent violence was to the disadvantage of those already at the bottom of the system, i.e. women. The development of mass communications and advertising under capitalism has enforced a stereotyped image of women and turned them into commodities. Women as women have been manipulated and exploited in the labour force. "Women's work" is traditionally low-paid. Women have, at specific periods of history, either been encouraged into or excluded from

the workforce. It has to be recognised that women have struggled within capitalism to win various reforms (for women). They have done this despite opposition from both capitalism and male attitudes.

The key area in which imperialism will be defeated is in the oppressed nations of the Third World. The women in the Third World are the largest group of the most oppressed and exploited people in the world. Women make the largest contribution to the agricultural sector of the pre-capitalist forms of society, incorporated into the imperialist system's peripheral sector. That sector is essential to the production of superprofits from the peoples of the world. Women's subordinate role in pre-capitalist society was taken on board by imperialism, integrated into it and perpetuated by it. Women's work was made harder, further split from male activities. The form of integration destroyed and devalued specific tasks that were traditionally women's role, without replacing them with other roles that were valued. Women's role was further marginalised. Women's role in the family and agriculture was excluded from wage labour in general. Men were used in wage labour which was recognised by the system as valued labour. Women, specifically, are exploited by imperialism in special economic zones (where the value of labour falls below the minimum world value of labour). Also the massive expansion of prostitution and pornography in the Third World was a product of imperialism. Young women are sent to the big cities as prostitutes by their male-dominated families, to supplement the incomes of peasant-based farms, and to serve Western-organised sex tours. It is women in the Third World that bear the brunt of all the aspects of imperialist domination of their countries.

It is clear that the very nature of capitalism and imperialism has perpetuated various forms of women's oppression by men and has created new forms of that oppression. Men, in general, have allowed that to happen. Indeed, the male oppression of women is a real safety valve for the oppressed and exploited male under imperialism. Men gain real short-term advantages from the oppression of women.

It is also clear that although women played a significant role in various national liberation struggles and attempts at socialist revolution,

once those stages of struggle were successful, the women's issue was not taken up in a significant way. This seems to be a result of not fully grasping the particular nature of women's oppression, but just seeing it as a part of other struggles (national and class).

The vast majority of women have a vested interest in overthrowing imperialism in order to rid themselves of class and/or national oppression. To take a purely feminist position and ignore class and national oppression is irrelevant to the daily situation that the vast majority of women are in. In many specific situations, imperialism has created new forms of women's oppression. This is a concrete link between women's struggle for their own liberation and their involvement in the more general struggle against imperialism. Equally it has to be recognised that imperialism took on board much of the oppression of women by men from previous stages in society. That

oppression was created by men, and perpetuated by men, for their own advantage, under imperialism. It must be recognised that the destruction of national oppression and the ending of class exploitation do not automatically lead to the ending of male domination.

The struggle of women against male domination must go on now under imperialism, continue throughout the struggle to overthrow imperialism, and remain a major issue in the period of striving to build socialism. Obviously, in the real world, areas of struggle will always have aspects of class, national and women's struggles. The emphasis will differ from struggle to struggle. Men must always recognise that they are oppressors of women, and that women have the right to decide their own priorities in fighting their particular oppression.

'Women do two thirds of the world's work, earn less than five per-cent of the world's income, and own one per-cent of the world's assets.'



PUBLICATIONS

Class Struggle

'Class Struggle' is the political paper of the Revolutionary Communist League.

SUBSCRIPTION RATES

Inland: 6 months: £3.00
12 months: £4.50

Overseas: 6 months: £5.50
12 months: £8.50

('Class Struggle' is dispatched second class post or surface post unsealed. If you would like a subscription for more than one copy, or would like to receive the paper by first class inland post or airmail sealed, then please write for a quote.)

October

The RCL hopes to produce a more regular theoretical journal, as we recognise the importance of debating key questions of our theory and practice.

The last issue of 'October' is still available priced £1.50. It contains a major article on the Dublin Lockout, documents on Kampuchea, India and the Philippines and a review of a book on Stalin.

We welcome comments and criticisms, or contributions to the theoretical journal from readers. Please send them to RCL, 203 Seven Sisters Road, London N4 3NG.

AVAILABLE FROM:

new era books

203 SEVEN SISTERS RD.,
LONDON, N4 3NG



CLASS STRUGGLE
Political Paper of the Revolutionary Communist League of Britain

AZANIA WILL BE FREE!

香港
MATTER OF HONOUR
a nationality question
Hong Kong

WHAT VALUE IN A BRITISH PASSPORT FOR THE PEOPLE OF HONG KONG?


INSIDE:

opting in
NHS doctors at their patients' side

palestine
temperatures rising

IRA inter-viewed

South Africa an illegal regime - BCM(A)



CLASS STRUGGLE
Political Paper of the Revolutionary Communist League of Britain

FORCE

Armed forces - market forces - nationalist forces
»»»» CAN GORBACHEV KEEP THEM ALL UNDER CONTROL? ««««

BRAGG
the 'Kylie and cake' antidote

Inside

labouring under false illusions
Kinnock's policy review

getting men's minds off women's bodies
the women's front fighting porn in Norway