

Women and Socialism

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Introduction

Sexism is a word that has entered our vocabulary only fairly recently although the concept to which it refers has been around a lot longer. It means discrimination against women for reasons of gender alone. What it means in practice can best be illustrated by an outline of what many women in recent years have seen as the female role in contemporary society.

From her earliest years the female child is conditioned into a 'feminine' role: she is likely to be dressed in 'pretty' clothes encouraged to play quietly with dolls or to 'help mummy' with the household chores. Her brother, meanwhile, will be dressed in clothes appropriate to the rough-and-tumble games considered normal for little boys; he will be given cars, trains, and other toys that require manual dexterity and technical skills. He will be praised for being clever, brave and strong, his sister for being pretty, good and quiet. These 'masculine' and 'feminine' roles, instilled in early childhood, will then be further reinforced throughout life regardless of whether or not they suit the personality or preferences of the people concerned. Even if in later life there is a conscious attempt to overcome this early conditioning and to break out of the stereotyped roles, it may leave scars: thus the woman who rejects motherhood and hopes instead for a 'career' may feel that she is forced to adopt the 'other', masculine role and become the hard-nosed businesswoman. Likewise, the woman who attempts to combine both full-time paid work and motherhood may feel guilty because she is neglecting her first responsibility to her children. For men too, early socialisation into a 'masculine' role may create difficulties in later life: some men become locked into the 'tough' role. This leaves them incapable of expressing themselves emotionally and fearful of allowing the gentler sides of their characters to emerge in case they are labelled 'soft'. Men generally seek status and a sense of personal fulfilment through their work; as a result, when unemployed, they frequently experience a sense of having failed because they are not fulfilling the role for which they have been psychologically prepared throughout their lives.

As the child progresses through the education system. she or he is exposed to further pressures to conform to stereotyped gender roles. For example, boys are more likely to be encouraged to do sciences and girls to do arts. Boys take more and higher examinations - after all they will, in theory, spend a large part of the rest of their lives in paid employment where qualifications are an important means of 'getting on', i.e. earning more or getting a more interesting job. For girls this is felt to be of less importance since it is still widely believed that most girls will eventually get married, that this will be their 'career' and any paid work they do outside the home will be secondary. Besides, much women's employment is unskilled and low paid and so does not require any formal qualifications.

Adolescence brings with it more pressures to conform to what is considered to be natural. The teenage girl is intent on attracting the opposite sex and learns that to do this she should model herself closely on the image of what is currently deemed to be beautiful - she

must be the right size and shape, wear the right clothes and use the right make-up. These images confront the young woman from advertising hoardings and stare up at her from the pages of glossy magazines and from television screens. The message is unambiguous: 'Come on girls, look like us and men will find you irresistible. They'll sweep you off your feet and carry you away to true love and happiness!'

With the approach of adulthood and entry into the labour market, boys and girls are again likely to find their respective opportunities circumscribed. Many young women will go into the 'caring' professions like nursing, teaching and social work. They are well suited for these by virtue of their early social training. Many more women, however, will enter low-paid, unskilled or semi-skilled work in manufacturing and offices. Despite recent Sex Discrimination and Equal Pay legislation a sexual division of labour continues to exist and on the few occasions when that divide is crossed we read about it in the newspapers (the first woman judge, crane driver, astronaut, etc.).

The nature of much women's work - the fact that it is often carried on in isolation from other workers and is subject to interruption for child-bearing - is such that women are frequently not in trade unions and therefore lack the necessary muscle and organisation to enable them to protect their pay and working conditions. Many trade unions have been historically reluctant to admit women members or to take action on their behalf. Sexism can still be found within the trade union movement. Also, for many women, to enter the world of trade union activity is to enter a world where it is necessary to be assertive and vociferous, types of behaviour which are not encouraged in women and from which many women shy away.

For the woman worker, marriage and children bring new roles and new problems. Most women continue in paid work out of financial necessity after their marriage and will return to work as soon as it is possible after having children, provided they can find child-minders. But now they have the additional burden of caring for their home and family on top of work outside the home. The domestic chores of childcare, cleaning, cooking and shopping are still generally considered to be the woman's responsibility, even where the man does 'help' around the house. For the woman who does not go out to work, small children are not the most stimulating of companions if they are the only people you see for most of the day. That 'dream house' on a modern housing estate can quickly turn into a nightmarish prison for the young mother who is forced to stay there all day. It is no wonder that so many women prefer the companionship of the factory production line despite the boring nature of the work.

As her family grows, so will the demands made on the woman's emotional and physical energies. Her life is likely to be spent almost entirely in the service of others - employer, husband, children - until in middle-age with the approach of retirement, her children having left home, she is left without a role. Small wonder that some women of this age become depressed unless they are able to pick up the threads of their own lives again or find themselves usefully re-employed looking after their children's children so that their daughters can go out to work.

Clearly this is only a generalised picture of women's lives today. Not *all* women experience *all* these aspects of sexism. But most women have experienced at least some.

Now let us imagine something different. Let us imagine that our children have been born instead into a society where life is not organised around the need to produce goods for profit but where people co-operate freely, irrespective of sex, to produce the things they need in such a way that everyone contributes what she or he is able. In such a society children, both boys and girls, are given adequate opportunities to develop their skills and abilities, whatever these might be, without consideration of what is or is not 'natural'. Thus girls who show an aptitude for, say, metalwork are encouraged in this direction while a boy who shows an interest in the care of young children has the opportunity to participate in that. Education is organised not on the basis of competition and the acquisition of a narrow range of skills of use to the labour-market but rather as a continuing and life-long experience of giving and receiving skills and knowledge which enable people to pursue whatever kind of life they think most likely to result in their own happiness.

Work in this kind of society - socialism - will not be wage-slavery. People will not have to sell their energies to the minority who own the means of production and distribution - the factories, offices, transport systems, shops, etc. - in return for a wage or salary. In socialism - a society based on common ownership - people will co-operate to produce those things which they need as a community- useful things, which will be freely available to all members of society. With the profit motive removed, men and women will be able to choose their work in accordance with their talents, skills and preferences, contributing as much or as little as they feel able. The criterion for choosing one kind of activity rather than another will no longer be which one pays the most, has the best perks, the best prospects for promotion or the most job security. All these considerations will be obsolete in a moneyless socialist world. Work will no longer be the activity we do to obtain the wage packet or salary which enables us to survive.

In socialism women will not be forced to choose between children and paid employment or to work out unhappy compromises between the two. Children will no longer be seen as the sole responsibility of the mother or even of both parents, but of the community as a whole. Women, if they wish, will be relieved of having to care for small children twenty-four hours a day, freeing them to pursue other interests as well as being mothers. Men too, freed from the tyrannical demands of wage-slavery, will be better placed to participate equally in the raising of children. Those men and women who care for children in socialist society will do so because they want to. Socialism will have no need for marriage in the sense of the property relation which, in essence, it is.

Men and women will not be bound together by pre-determined roles and notions of what is or is not 'natural', or out of economic necessity. Rather they will be free to enter into relationships which are suited to the emotional needs of the particular individuals concerned.

In the course of this pamphlet we shall show that the above picture of a non-sexist, socialist society is not a dream or an unattainable utopia but could begin to be a reality now if there were a majority of people who wanted it and were prepared to take the kind of political action necessary to achieve it. We shall show that the idea of current gender roles; as 'natural', and therefore unchangeable, is mistaken. Indeed important changes have already taken place. In Chapter 1 we shall discuss how and why they have occurred. In Chapter 2 we will show why the feminist movement, despite some significant insights into women's condition, is wrong to believe that sexual equality is a goal worth striving for within the context of capitalism. Chapter 3 looks at the experience of women in Russia since the 1917 revolution. Why is the position of women in the so-called communist countries not significantly better than in the West and, in many ways, considerably worse? In the final chapter we shall consider the case for socialism, its particular relevance for women and why it is important that women recognise, together with men, that the path to liberation, not only of women, but of the whole human race, lies in the struggle to bring about socialism rather than in vain attempts to try to achieve liberation within the confines of capitalism.

CHAPTER 1:

WOMEN'S CHANGING ROLE

The origins of sexual inequality

To attempt to chronicle the historical changes that have taken place in women's role in society is not easy: evidence of what it was like to be a working woman in earlier times is scarce. History has traditionally been written from the point of view of 'Great Men' (Kings and Queens, rulers, members of government) charting 'Great Events' (wars, constitutional crises, major disasters) rather than the effects of those events on the lives of ordinary working people. Nevertheless women's lives have changed over time and it is useful to try to understand not only the nature of the changes that have taken place and their significance, but also why they occurred when they did.

Hunter-gatherer society

The earliest form of human social organisation was hunting and gathering societies: small nomadic groups who obtained their food by hunting, fishing and gathering wild plants and insects. Some such cultures have continued to exist until fairly recently and, by studying these groups, anthropologists have managed to put together a picture of what life was probably like when this was the commonest form of social organisation.

In general, a division of labour existed based both on age and sex. The dominant pattern was that men hunted large animals, especially where this entailed long expeditions away from the camp, and women gathered insects and plants and hunted small animals. However, this division was neither rigid nor the same everywhere. Variations occurred due to availability of food and other ecological considerations. So, for example, in Inuit (Eskimo) society when almost all of the diet was derived from hunting, both men and women took part in the hunt. Some attempts to explain this sexual division of labour have concentrated on what has been seen as men's inherently more aggressive behaviour, which makes them better equipped for hunting. However this cannot account for the fact that different cultures have valued very different behaviours in men and women: such as aggressive behaviour in women and gentle behaviour in men. For example, the Arapesh people of North Eastern New Guinea believe that both men and women are naturally gentle and compassionate. While their neighbours, the Mundugumor, value individualism, self assertion and physical aggression, characteristics which are expected as much in women as in men. A more plausible explanation is that since it was women who gave birth to, and suckled children (often for several years), their mobility was more restricted than men's. So it was generally a more efficient division of labour for men to be responsible for hunting and women for gathering.

The members of a hunter-gatherer band were often highly interdependent but individuals had considerable personal autonomy. Decision-making was dispersed widely throughout the group and both sexes took decisions about the activities for which they were responsible. Marriage was usually a loose arrangement and either partner could effectively terminate the relationship by leaving the band and joining another.

Although a sexual division of labour did exist in hunter-gatherer societies, this did not necessarily imply inequality between the sexes. Rather it represented a division of responsibility. Nobody held institutionalised positions of power or authority and indeed there was little basis for such positions since there was no accumulation of wealth or property.

Horticultural society

The next 'phase' of social evolution was horticultural society. (But it should be stressed that social evolution has not been the same universally, nor has it been linear - so for example in some parts of the world external factors such as colonisation have accelerated or changed the pattern of social evolution.) Horticultural society was characterised by domestication of certain plants and animals, the use of the hoe and the digging stick (but not the plough, fertilisers or irrigation which were typical of settled agricultural cultures) and 'slash and burn' techniques of land clearance which necessitated the community moving on regularly as the land became exhausted. Domestication of plants and animals meant higher yields from the land so that it was possible to support higher population densities. This growing size and complexity, together with the need to allocate land for cultivation, led to more institutionalised forms of political authority.

With the move from hunter-gatherer societies to horticulture there was a shift to forms of property ownership. In general there was either a system of land rights whereby the land was owned by a corporate kin-group and use-rights were then allocated to individuals or households within that kin-group, or clearance of land itself represented a form of ownership. Because of the possibility of disputes arising over land rights, warfare became more common, as did the need to cement alliances with neighbouring kin-groups. This had important implications for the nature of marriage relations.

Beyond these broad characteristics it is difficult to make generalisations about other aspects of horticultural societies. There were wide variations in the division of labour: in some societies men cleared the land and both sexes cultivated it, or sometimes men cultivated crops for trade and exchange while women produced staples. Another pattern was that women cultivated the land and men looked after domesticated animals (especially where those animals had to be moved from pasture to pasture), or in some cases women looked after certain animals and men others. However, in general men were more likely to be responsible for clearing the land and women for cultivation.

With regard to other economic activities there was no absolute division of labour such that men and women consistently did one task or another. This was especially true of crafts like weaving, pottery and woodwork which might be assigned to either sex in different societies. Child care was usually the responsibility of women although mothers frequently shared this activity with other kin members and their own older children of either sex. Food preparation and processing was predominantly a female activity although not exclusively so. The particular division of labour adopted by a society usually came to be rationalised and reinforced by cultural and religious statements about what was 'natural' or 'right' male and female behaviour.

Horticultural societies supported diverse forms of social and political organisation. As a result there was considerable variation in the degree to which power and authority was centralised and hierarchical, and the extent of co-operation. This is partly because 'horticultural society' embraces a range of different types of productive activity. Some societies were really only settled hunter-gatherers producing what was needed for immediate subsistence, while others produced a wide range of goods including a surplus for trade and exchange.

To some extent there was a relationship between the degree of egalitarianism in social and sexual relationships and the production of a surplus. But production of commodities for trade did not inevitably lead to a more dominant role for men. In cultures where women retained control of both production and distribution of surpluses (a notable example of this is the market traders of West Africa), their status was relatively enhanced. Where women's responsibility was exclusively that of the household, this was not to her disadvantage so long as the household economy and the public economy were synonymous. With the production of a surplus that could be traded or exchanged, even where the division of labour remained unchanged, there was the possibility that the status of the owner of the surplus would be enhanced.

Settled agriculture

As agriculture became more developed with the use of the plough, draught animals, fertilisers and irrigation techniques, so communities became more settled, more complex and larger. The complexity of agricultural communities and the huge variations that existed between them (and still exist) in various parts of the world mean that generalisations are difficult to make.

However, it is true to say that the sexual division of labour appears more rigid and uniform in agricultural societies than was the case in horticultural communities. In general, even where women did most of the actual work in the fields, the land was still considered to be the man's responsibility and he owned the produce from it, including any surplus that could be sold. Women often maintained a kitchen garden and some animals for subsistence use, and in some cultures women's economic (and hence political) power was considerably enhanced by her ability to produce a surplus from this kitchen garden, to process it and to sell it on the market. So, for example, it was not uncommon in

such societies for women to develop entrepreneurial activities such as brewing and baking.

Residence patterns in agricultural cultures were less rigid, but pressure on land tended to encourage residence away from the parents' home after marriage. At the same time there was a general decrease in both family and household size as the family unit became focused on parents and children. This increasing privatisation and isolation of the family had consequences for women's lives in that the burden of child-care now tended to fall almost exclusively on the mother.

Women's declining economic role and the corresponding increase in her reproductive role were reflected in power and authority patterns. In agricultural societies there was a clear tendency for men to occupy positions of power and authority in both economics and politics, although women were often able to exercise considerable indirect influence over public events.

What explanations can be given for this significant shift towards male dominance? Firstly, it should be stressed that the move towards an agricultural mode of production was paralleled by a shift towards more complex forms of political authority. These new institutionalised forms of political power tended to be both more centralised and more hierarchical. Secondly, more intensive farming methods meant that there was a much greater possibility for surpluses to be produced and sold on the market, and wealth to be accrued. Why did men take control of this wealth by and large? Because they had generally taken over the bulk of the work of cultivation, or at least had responsibility for it, and this was further reinforced by legal title to the land.

Once women's work on the land was no longer seen as their first responsibility, their 'value' to those with power - husbands and fathers - was increasingly measured in terms of their reproductive capacity which had an effect on marital and sexual relations. It led to the protection of women from the sexual attentions of men other than their husbands and the tendency for women to be confined and chaperoned. Once more these practices were reinforced by religious and cultural ideology which depicted women as bad, polluting, inferior, etc.

All in all women became increasingly powerless both inside the home and outside. Economically dependent on their husbands, they were in no position to leave, especially since they were likely to be regarded as an economic liability if they returned to the parental home. Outside the home they had no status of their own. Their social position was determined by that of their husband.

So with the establishment of settled agriculture we see a more rigid division of labour along sexual lines than had been the case before, with men as the economic providers and women and children as their dependants. In most cases women moved in the 'private' world of the household which was increasingly separate from the 'public' world of economic activity and decision-making. This distinction between home and the productive economy was further accentuated with the rise of wage labour, as we shall see later in this chapter.

The origins of inequality

The pattern of social evolution described above might then be summed up as follows. The sexual division of labour was initially a means of fulfilling human needs most efficiently and constituted little more than a division of tasks into areas of responsibility. Who did what took account of both biological factors, such as women's reproductive and suckling functions, ecological factors such as scarcity or abundance of food, hostility of the environment and density of population, and traditional practices in a particular society at a particular time. In such societies social relations in general were likely to be characterised by a high degree of egalitarianism and mutual cooperation. The basic unit of production and consumption was not the nuclear family but the whole group. Although within a particular culture at any one time the sexual division of labour may have been fairly rigidly applied, this did not necessarily have implications for the relative power and status of women and men. Distinct sex roles may not have implied inequality. In fact that concept may not even have had any real meaning.

With the shift to horticulture, men increasingly took responsibility for those areas of productive work which yielded a surplus. It is possible that this occurred as a result of an elaboration of economic relations that already existed rather than indicating a new sexual division of labour: men's predominant role in trade may originally have been a function both of their relatively greater mobility and of their tradition of absences from the home site to hunt or fight. Women's work was largely unchanged, being concerned, in the main, with the subsistence activities of growing food for consumption, food preparation and processing, and child care. However, these activities became relatively devalued once the possibility of production for exchange developed, and also became increasingly privatised. At the same time women's authority was undermined by the development of more complex, extra-domestic, centralised political structures from which they were effectively excluded because of their confinement within the household.

At the same time these developments were reinforced by cultural practices which rationalised the distinction between men's and women's roles in terms of statements about women's 'natural' frailty, emotionality, and nurturing attributes. By contrast the attributes increasingly assigned to men - aggression, competitiveness and toughness - were precisely those valued by the emerging market economy.

This seems a much more satisfactory account of why relations between the sexes have developed in the way that they have than those explanations, common in much feminist anthropology, which base themselves on Frederick Engels and assume a phase of universal matriarchy. In *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), Engels tried to explain the development of the contemporary 'bourgeois' nuclear family by describing social evolution

as passing through four distinct stages, each with its corresponding family form. At each stage prior to the final one ('civilisation' and monogamy) households were, he claims, communistic and 'group marriage' was practised, which meant that it was impossible to know for certain who was the father of an individual child. Although in primitive society there was a sexual division of labour, Engels argues, there was no evidence to suggest that one sex was held in higher esteem than the other: men were responsible for food production and women for the communal household. But because society at this stage was matrilineal, women derived power from the fact that lineage was traced through the female line. This began to change once human labour power began to yield a surplus beyond the immediate needs of the household. Because of the division of labour, the man was responsible for the procuring of food and so owned the tools necessary for that task. The man was also the owner, therefore, of any surplus that was produced. This surplus gave him the means to engage in trade and to increase both his wealth and status above that of women. But individual wealth also raised new problems of inheritance: the man wanted his goods to be transferred to his own children on his death (although Engels nowhere explains why), and so the tradition of 'mother-right' was overthrown.

The overthrow of mother-right was the world-historic defeat of the female sex. The man seized the reins in the house also, the woman was degraded enthralled, the slave of the mans lust, a mere instrument for breeding children. (Frederick Engels, Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State, Marx and Engels, Selected Works, Lawrence and Wishart, 1968, , p 488)

So, according to Engels, monogamous marriage and women's oppression arose as a consequence of private property and the need to establish undisputed paternity.

Unfortunately Engels drew heavily for his anthropological evidence on the work of Lewis Henry Morgan (particularly *Ancient Society* published in 1877). Morgan's work has since been found to have contained serious flaws: in particular there is no evidence to support the idea that there was once a universal stage of matriarchy as suggested. This mistake arises in part from a confusion between matrilineal societies and matriarchal societies: societies may trace descent through women rather than men, but this does not necessarily mean that women are the dominant sex. Also, most of the evidence that Morgan used to support his arguments was drawn from his observations of the Iroquois Indians and more recent anthropological work has suggested that in many ways this was an exceptional culture, and not one from which it is possible to make universal generalisations.

Engels compounded the errors in Morgan's work by adding some of his own unfounded assumptions about women, most notably about the nature of women's sexuality. The result is a work that does not stand up to anthropological scrutiny. But, nevertheless, Engels' *approach* to his subject matter was correct. He, like Marx, thought that in order to understand how and why social relations change in the way they do, it is necessary to look first at the way in which men and women produce the material things they need to live. So, as we have

seen already, the relationship between men and women has not always been the same but has changed to meet the particular needs of society at any given time.

Women in industrial society

The rise of the capitalist mode of production, waged labour and the development of factories was of crucial significance for women. Although women in pre-industrial society had played an important part in the production process, capitalism meant a shift in the location of work from the home to the factory and the unit of production changed eventually from the family to the assembly line team. As technology developed there were fewer jobs barred to women on the grounds of physical strength. In fact in many industries, especially textiles, women and children were preferred because of their 'nimble fingers' and also because their labour could be purchased more cheaply than that of men. The capitalist system, in order to reproduce itself, has to pay sufficient wages to enable workers to maintain both themselves and their families - the next generation of workers. The entry of women and children into the factories meant that employers could pay the male worker less. They could argue that his wages only had to be sufficient to keep himself, since his wife and children were now earning their own keep.

Women's employment in the factories was the cause of considerable dispute within the working class. Many men were opposed to this new development on the grounds that it not only lowered wages, but also put women in physical (and moral) danger. Why, they argued, should women's health, as well as that of men, be put at risk as a result of the appalling conditions of work prevalent in most nineteenth-century factories? As a consequence there was a strong strand of thinking within the trade union movement that demanded restrictions on female labour and the payment, instead, of a 'family wage' that was sufficient to provide for the man, his wife and children.

Others, including Karl Marx, challenged this idea: they argued that the involvement of women in the process of production was a necessary and ultimately progressive development within capitalism even though women's work (like men's) was physically and mentally damaging:

However terrible and disgusting the dissolution, under capitalism, of the old family ties may appear, nevertheless modern industry by assigning as it does an important part in the process of production, outside the domestic sphere, to women, to young persons, and to children of both sexes, creates a new economic foundation for a higher form of the family and of the relations between the sexes Moreover, it is obvious that the fact of the collective working group being composed of both sexes and all ages, must necessarily under suitable conditions, become a source of humane development; although in its spontaneously developed, brutal, capitalistic form, where the labourer exists for the process of production, and not the process of production for the labourer, that

fact is a pestiferous source of corruption and slavery (K Marx, Capital, Vol. 1, Penguin, 1982, pp. 62~21)

Marx is saying that the introduction of women and children into the labour process is an inevitable development given the nature of capitalism. Within capitalism it will mean the further exploitation of a new group of workers, the more so in fact, since they are paid less than men. But under 'suitable conditions', by which he means a new socialist society, women's participation in production will become not only a necessary, but also a positive, development since the exploitative aspects of labour - production for the profit of the minority capitalist class - will have been eradicated.

Since that time the question of women and employment has continued to be a vexed issue. Various reformers following John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill have argued for equal opportunities for women in the spheres of employment and education in particular. And indeed there have been some important changes affecting women. But whether such changes have come about as a direct result of the efforts of reforming individuals and feminist campaigns is open to doubt. The extent to which other factors, such as the economic and political context, have created the environment which made new ideas and reforms necessary can be illustrated by looking at the fortunes of women in Britain between the two world wars.

In 1919 the Sex Disqualification Removal Act in Britain gave women access to professions and professional associations. This marked a recognition that there was a small minority of women with the necessary qualifications and training to engage in such occupations. As a result of the Act there was some increase in the numbers of women in professional employment, mostly concentrated in teaching. However, with the onset of economic depression in the '20s and early '30s even this small advance was halted: high unemployment among men meant that fewer women were needed on the labour market and so steps were taken to force them back into the home. The Anomalies Regulations of 1931 stopped the payment of unemployment benefit to married women, officially restoring women's position as their husbands' dependants.

Then, however, during the second world war, women's labour was again required. Suddenly women were admitted to areas of employment that had traditionally been regarded as exclusively male and it was no longer thought unnatural for women to operate heavy machinery, work as welders, engineers or construction workers. In fact the women who entered such employment were frequently hailed as heroines by the wartime propaganda machine. At the same time it was no longer thought vital for children to spend their earliest years with their mothers: nurseries were provided on a large scale to facilitate women's full-time employment in the war effort.

When the war ended, a new situation arose: demobilising led to the flooding back of men onto the labour market. New propaganda encouraged women to resume their 'rightful' place in the home, and nursery facilities were withdrawn to underline the message.

This ebb and flow of women's employment opportunities occurred in spite of the sincere efforts of feminists and liberals who campaigned for greater equality of opportunity. It shows that when capital needs women's labour power it will create the conditions necessary to enable women to work using appropriate legislation, propaganda, financial inducements or any of the other measures at the disposal of the capitalist class.

Women and employment

What has been women's position on the employment market since the second world war? In 1950 the proportion of adult women in paid employment was 30 per cent; by 1980 it was 51 per cent and there has been an ever sharper rise in the proportion of married women who work outside the home from around 20 per cent in 1950 to over 50 per cent today. However, despite this increase, women's status as workers has not improved very much and neither has their pay relative to that of men. In 1975 the Equal Pay Act was passed and yet between 1977 and 1981 the wage gap between men and women actually increased: today women's average weekly earnings are still only 66 per cent of men's. A loophole in the legislation meant that equal pay was only guaranteed for 'the same or mainly similar work' which meant that jobs could be redefined as different work, or women restricted to occupations in which men are not usually employed so that no comparison could be made.

Despite formal equality of opportunity most women continue to be concentrated in low-paid, low status employment. An Equal Opportunities Commission Report published in 1980 showed that men made up 95 per cent of foremen and supervisors, 91 per cent of skilled manual workers and 89 per cent of professional and managerial staff. Even where women attain professional status the report shows that inequalities persist: 25 per cent of doctors are women, but only 9 per cent of consultants; 50 per cent of law students are women but only 10 per cent of barristers and solicitors and less than 3 per cent of high court judges; 10 per cent of university teachers are women but only 1 per cent of professors are women.

The idea too that women only work for 'pin money' has been shown to be a myth: one out of six households now depend on a woman as the sole or main breadwinner and most families need two wages in order to keep their heads above water.

Currently economic recession is having a significant effect on women's employment prospects. Much women's work has traditionally been in the public sector and this is an area which has been especially affected by public expenditure cuts. In 1981, 30,000 women's jobs went in the school meals service alone and reorganisation due to privatisation is affecting thousands of women's jobs in local government and the health service. The effects of the recession are also being exacerbated, at least in the short term, by unemployment due to new technology. Office jobs in particular - a classic area of 'women's work' - are getting harder to find. An Equal Opportunities Commission survey, *Information Technology in the Office*, has estimated that up to 40 per cent of all clerical jobs could

vanish. In manufacturing industry too, another traditional area of 'women's work', jobs are being lost because of the recession.

Many women choose, or are forced into, part-time work which can be reconciled more easily with childcare responsibilities. Women constitute 86 per cent of all part-time workers; 41 per cent of all women work less than 30 hours a week (which is how government defines part-time work) and the number of part-time workers doubled between 1961 and 1980. Part-time workers are especially likely to suffer low pay, poor conditions of work, few promotion prospects and little job security or legal protection, nor do they qualify for sick-pay or contractual pension schemes. Part-time workers are, however, very convenient to employers since they give them the flexibility to lengthen opening hours, cope with peaks in demand, or use machinery longer. Part-time labour is often cheaper and cuts down on overtime payments to other workers. Part-timers are usually easier to sack when business drops, and many do not qualify for redundancy payments.

Where women have engaged in struggle with their employers to gain equal pay and conditions of work, they have not always been able to rely on the support or backing of their trade unions. Despite the fact that the 1970s saw women joining unions at twice the rate of men, many of the large unions like the TGWU, AUEW and GMWU were slow to abandon their hostile stance towards their fellow women workers. The TUC responded to the increase in the number of women trade unionists with caution: two delegate places out of 41 were allocated to women and this number was increased to 5 in 1981. This use of positive discrimination became the usual pattern for dealing with 'women's issues' in trade unions (and also in many political parties). It has reinforced the tendency amongst trade unionists to regard the concerns of women workers as in some way distinct and separate from those of male workers rather than recognising that they are just another facet of the condition of the whole working class. The use of women's committees and caucuses within trade unions has only served to further divide workers.

But to concentrate on the persistence of inequalities in employment is to risk falling into the trap that ensnares most feminists: that is, to assume that the achievement of actual equality in these areas would result in liberation. Even if equality were possible under capitalism, would it result in liberation for women or would it not merely result in the equal *exploitation* of working men and women by the capitalist class (also composed of both men and women)?

Women and education

One of the key determinants of a woman's (and indeed any individual's) chances of employment within the present society is the extent of their access to education. It is not surprising therefore, that this has been an area in which feminists have made the most consistent demands for equality. But progress has been slow. In the 1920s women constituted less than one fifth of all university students in Britain; by 1965 the figure was still only one quarter. The 1944 Education Act was important since it established a state grant for

everyone which allowed women to compete with men equally on the basis of merit. The expansion of the universities in the 1960s also led to more women entering higher education. Yet by 1981 they still constituted only one third of all university students, and the majority of women students are still concentrated in the arts, humanities, or teacher training rather than the scientific or technical courses which are more likely to lead to jobs with higher status and better pay.

In both primary and secondary education, the schooling which boys and girls receive has important differences. For example, until the 1960s the idea persisted that girls, apart from the most gifted, would not on the whole benefit from too much academic education since they were for the most part destined to be wives and mothers, roles to which more domestic skills were appropriate. This is reflected in official reports such as the *Crowther Report* of 1959 and the *Newsom Report* of 1963. The *Crowther Report* included the following:

... the prospect of courtship and marriage should rightly influence the education of adolescent girls.

As a consequence of this kind of thinking, many young women entered the labour market without the marketable skills and qualifications which might have improved their employment opportunities.

Since the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975, equal education for boys and girls has been formally endorsed and there has been considerable progress towards an understanding of the ways in which sexist practices and attitudes can be transmitted via the education system. There remains, however, a strong bias within education in favour of boys and this is particularly pronounced in science and technical subjects so that three times as many boys as girls concentrate their study in these areas. Similarly, recent evidence suggests that in some important new fields of study boys are gaining much more from early education. Computers, for example, are thought to be scientific and hence of greater interest to boys than to girls. To eliminate this bias requires more than just a recognition of the problem. It would take an understanding that the education system is an integral and vital part of capitalist society and, in the last analysis promotes the interests of the dominant class.

The family and divorce

Feminists ever since Mary Wollstonecraft in the eighteenth century have recognised the potentially oppressive nature of personal relationships within marriage and the family. But the family remains the basic unit of society and people continue to get married. Despite liberalisation in some areas of sexual and family life since the second world war things are really not all that different. The 'liberalisation' has been largely legislative and the extent to which such changes have altered the lives of most men and women is less pronounced.

For example, in 1969 the Divorce Reform Act was passed, making divorce significantly easier to obtain and there was indeed a sudden increase in the number of divorces. Today 40 per cent of first

marriages end in divorce. The unhappiness in many marriages is seen most explicitly in cases of wife beating which became an area of increasing concern by the early 1970s. This concern led to the development of refuges in most towns in Britain to provide a safe haven for women who had been beaten by their husbands or cohabitants. While refuges clearly offer a much needed service to women, they fail to understand or explain the reasons for marital violence. As is the case with many feminists, those involved in Women's Aid quickly latched onto an easy explanation, which is that men are naturally violent and aggressive. The solution they offer women is to provide an escape route which they might not otherwise have. While women's refuges are doing useful work within the context of capitalism, their analysis of the reasons why marital violence occurs fails to give sufficient weight to the factors outside the home that contribute to violent and stressful personal relations, such as unemployment, poverty, poor housing and the responsibility of caring for small children. Thus measures such as the provision of refuges or the Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act of 1976 (which gave women better legal protection against violent husbands and cohabitants) are only dealing with the symptoms of domestic disharmony rather than the causes.

However, despite this unhappy picture, people still continue to get married - they still 'buy' the romanticised, glossy image of marital relations that is presented to them. Why is it that people continue to accept this myth in the face of all the evidence to the contrary? Feminists have tended rightly to stress the role of conditioning and propaganda in this process. Nevertheless, it is important also to recognise that in government and official thinking the family is still the basic unit in society and that this colours the provision of such things as housing, social security and tax allowances. So for many people it simply seems much easier to get married than to complicate their lives by swimming against the tide. In fact the official picture of the standard two-parent family - male breadwinner, wife at home and dependent children - does not conform to reality: 65 per cent of households have no children; 4 per cent of households are single-parent families; 16 per cent of households have a husband and wife who both go out to work and have dependent children; 2 per cent are couples with children where the man has no paid work, but some of the women do; and no more than 13 per cent of households have a male breadwinner a wife at home, and dependent children (*General household Survey 1980*)

Birth control

Control by women themselves over reproduction has been another area in which feminists have campaigned vociferously over the years. Improvements in the technology and availability of contraception went together with more relaxed attitudes about sex. The 1967 Family Planning Act empowered Local Authorities to give birth control advice and supplies. The removal of the fear of pregnancy which reliable methods of contraception provided meant that women were free to a much greater extent than had hitherto been the case to determine when, or if, they were going to have children.

In the same year as the Family Planning Act, abortion was legalised too. This was in response to concern over the increase in the number of illegal abortions. It led to a backlash by the anti-abortion lobby which in turn resulted in a protracted battle between them and those in favour of abortion. In 1972 the National Women's Abortion and Contraception Campaign (NWACC) was set up to campaign against a series of private members bills which aimed at restricting the availability of abortion. In 1975 the NWACC became the National Abortion Campaign (NAC) whose slogan was 'A Woman's Right to Choose'. All the attempts at amending the existing abortion legislation have so far failed, and despite the fears of the anti-abortion lobby there has not been a massive increase in the number of abortions performed: by 1977, 10 years after the Act, the number of abortions had stabilised at about 100,000 per year. Although feminists have so far been successful in fighting attempts to restrict the availability of abortion that have been made at the parliamentary level, they have been less successful in challenging the restricted availability of abortion that has come about as a result of cuts in expenditure in the health service.

Clearly there are very real medical and ethical problems involved in the question of abortion and ultimately it is for the individuals themselves to decide. However these problems are exacerbated because of the nature of the society in which we live. In a sane world, probably no one would opt for abortion as a method of contraception. The fact that women are forced to do so in present society says something about that society and the conflicting pressures to which people are subjected; for example the cost and responsibility of parenthood, the ambivalent attitude towards contraception advice for young people and the lack of resources that are devoted to researching and developing new, safer and more effective alternatives to present methods of contraception.

CHAPTER 2:

WHAT'S WRONG WITH FEMINIST THEORY?

The story of the twentieth century in Britain is one of relatively small gains for women in some areas of social and economic life achieved at enormous cost to the women engaged in the struggle for them. Why is this so? A look at the women's movement will show that the failure of feminists to achieve any real or lasting liberation is a direct result of flaws in their analysis of women's oppression.

In the women's movement today, there are three more or less distinct tendencies: liberal feminism, radical feminism and 'socialist' feminism, which can be looked at in turn.

Liberal feminism

The aim of liberal feminists is to improve what already exists rather than to radically transform society. Underlying this goal is the belief that progressive reforms can lead to real and meaningful equality for women without the need for revolutionary change. Gender roles, it is argued, are socially constructed and taught - through social institutions like the family, education system and the mass media and as such are changeable. Sexual inequality is not seen as the inevitable result of biological differences or of a particular social system and so it can be overcome, the liberal feminists argue, by changing the ways in which people are socialised and by eliminating discriminatory practices through legislation. The goal of liberal feminism is therefore a more equal distribution of existing social and economic goods - status, power, wealth, etc. - between the sexes.

John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill, writing in the late nineteenth century, prefigured much contemporary liberal feminist thought in their work on women. The Mills' analysis is limited, because while they *describe* women's oppression with considerable insight, they fail to offer a convincing explanation as to *why* it is that men are in a position to impose their will on women or why women generally accept this state of affairs.

J. S. Mill argued that women were subject to men from the earliest times because of their relative physical weakness: force was the dominant element in primitive societies and civilisation has resulted in the replacement of physical force with moral sentiments as the means of social control. At a point in history when mankind was capable of a 'higher morality', unequal relations between men and women were, Mill thought, an inexcusable relic of more primitive times. This analysis permitted the Mills to espouse a programme for women's emancipation which required changes only in the legal, political and cultural spheres. Thus the existing *class* structure would remain unchanged except that *within* a class there would be greater equality between the sexes. Furthermore, it was not the Mills' intention that

women should in practice enter all areas of male activity. Rather they argued that everyone should have the *right* to work, although they believed that as long as women possess certain legal rights, such as the right to divorce, marital disobedience, custody of children, property, etc., they will probably choose not to work since they will prefer to devote themselves to child-bearing (the one occupation over which women have a monopoly) and child-rearing (which, it is implied, is a necessarily feminine pursuit). The Mills completely overlooked the fact that at the time they were writing many women were forced to go out to work from financial necessity, and that work was not a means to liberation or emancipation but was more likely to be the road to exhaustion, ill-health and an early grave. When Harriet-Taylor Mill wrote:

The power of earning is essential to the dignity of woman if she does not have independent property (The Subjection of Women and The Emancipation of Women, *Virago*, 1983, p.89,

she was addressing herself to the small minority of women whom she envisaged entering the professions rather than those who had already been forced to sell their labour power to the owners of factories and sweat-shops in return for very little in the way of wages, let alone dignity.

The Mills' arguments for emancipation were essentially moral: society has reached a point at which it is both irrational and unacceptable to regard women as men's inferiors and this should be recognised by granting them full legal and political equality with men. The motive force for such a change would be an appeal to people's moral intuition and a process of moral re-education through which people would be made to understand that women have an equal right with men to engage in whatever activities might lead to their personal fulfilment. Such prescriptions do not represent a fundamental attack on existing property relations or economic structures, which would be left intact. It was precisely this kind of liberalism which provided the main theoretical basis for the women's suffrage movement in both Britain and America.

There was, however, within liberal thought a wider spectrum ranging from those who restricted their demands to equal political rights to those who saw this as only one part of a wider programme for female emancipation which included also freedom from the restrictions of marriage and the prevailing sexual code. And within the movement for women's suffrage there was, it has been argued, in addition to the liberal element which based its arguments on the ideas of justice and equality, an element which used arguments from expedience: the essence of such arguments was that women are *different from* men. As mothers they represent the custodians of peace and domesticity, and these 'natural' feminine qualities could exert a beneficial influence on public life and government, especially since so much of what was formerly done within the home was now carried out outside the domestic sphere. So, for example, in Britain, the Women's Labour League (set up in 1906 to campaign for women's representation in Parliament in connection with the Labour Party) was described in 1910 as 'an organisation to bring the mother-spirit into politics'. (This idea is not so far removed from some contemporary

feminists such as some of the women protesters at Greenham Common air base, who claim for women a monopoly of the pacific qualities.)

As the fight for women's suffrage in Britain continued, 1903 saw the birth of a new and more militant organisation, Mrs Pankhurst's Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) which sought to focus attention on the single issue of 'votes for women'. However, neither the activities of even the most militant suffragettes nor the outrageous treatment they received at the hands of the authorities were sufficient to secure their objective. It was not until the First World War, which brought with it a changed role for many women who had been mobilised to contribute to the 'war effort', that the government had to concede suffrage, first to women over 30 in 1918 (and to all men over 21 in the same legislation) and, finally, to all women over 21 in 1928.

However, political emancipation did not bring about liberation for women. The revival of women's liberation as an issue in the 1960s and 1970s led to a new list of demands, formulated at successive British National Women's Conferences up to 1978. These were:

1. Equal pay for equal work.
2. Equal opportunity and equal education.
3. Free contraception and abortion on demand.
4. Free community-controlled childcare.
5. Legal and financial independence for all women.
6. An end to discrimination against lesbians.
7. Freedom for all women from intimidation by the threat or use of violence or sexual coercion, regardless of marital status. An end to all laws, assumptions and institutions that perpetuate male dominance and men's aggression towards women.

As suggested in the previous chapter, a certain amount of progress has been made towards achieving these aims. But what if they were all met in full? What would the new 'non-sexist' society look like?

i) Equal pay for equal work

If this were to be implemented fully, it would mean that employers would no longer be able to pay women less money for work of equal value solely on the grounds that they were women. Neither would it be possible to define some jobs as 'women's work' and thus justify payment of lower wages. What it would *not* mean is that everyone's income would be made equal. Nor would it affect the gross disparities of wealth that exist between the owners and the rest of us who have to work for a living - the working class. The exploitation of the working class would continue even if for some workers, in this case women, conditions would have improved a little. The dynamics of capitalism are such that individual capitalists are constantly forced to try to reduce their production costs so as to maintain their share of the market. So with the best will in the world, if they were forced to implement equal pay legislation, they would look for other ways of cutting costs, for example by speeding up the machines, or by introducing new technology.

ii) Equal opportunity and equal education

The consequences of the full implementation of this demand would be that there would be more women in high status jobs - lawyers, doctors, scientists, university teachers - and women would be more likely to enter traditionally masculine areas of employment like science, engineering and other technical occupations. It would also of course mean that women would not be denied the equal opportunity to compete with men in going down mines, sweeping the streets, fighting in wars, or joining the dole queue. Equal opportunities and equal education within capitalism cannot mean absolute equality throughout society. As long as we have capitalism, we will have two classes within society, the workers and the capitalists, and as long as there are two classes there will be inequality, even if within the working class there is greater equality. Equal opportunities do not mean *more* opportunities, they mean the same number but distributed more evenly. What will have changed in the lives of the majority of working men and women if it is a woman who owns the factory or company to whom we sell our labour power rather than a man? Why will society as a whole be better off if working men and women compete with each other, on however equal a basis, to sell our labour power for a wage or salary when we are still excluded from sharing in the wealth that society could produce if production was not governed by the profit motive? Why will it be an improvement if it is a woman who sits in judgement over us for breaking the laws of capitalism; or if it is a woman who sits in Parliament as our 'representative' contributing to the laws that significantly affect our lives but over whom we have no effective control; or a woman who designs and builds the weapons that are used to kill our fellow workers in order to defend capitalism? In capitalism equality of opportunity can only mean a system of distributing scarce goods - it does *not* mean the equal opportunity for each individual, irrespective of sex, to fulfil his or her own potential.

iii) Free contraception and abortion on demand

It is undeniable that within the existing social and economic framework women's decisions to bear children or not are often affected by material considerations. Can I afford to give my child a decent life? Will it mean giving up my job? Cultural and social pressures are also important: for example, the idea that unless they have children women are not really fulfilled or are not fulfilling their female role. Feminists believe that women's freedom of choice will be greatly enhanced if they can determine more exactly when, and whether, they will have children through more effective contraception and more freely available abortion. This may be so, but it will not affect the social, cultural and economic pressures that influence their decisions. It is also worth bearing in mind that capitalism needs children; they are the next generation of workers. It is possible that in the future a significant number of women in the 'developed' world will decide that the risks, responsibilities, and personal costs involved in having children are too great. But, as we will see in the next chapter when we consider the

case of Russia, such a trend will not be allowed to exist unchecked once it threatens the needs of capital.

iv) free community controlled childcare

This demand is clearly linked with the previous one. The main impetus behind it is that women want to be freed from at least some of the burdens of childcare so that they can have greater freedom to compete on the labour market. Again it is important to note that what is being sought is not an all-embracing human emancipation but the demand that the chains of motherhood be exchanged for the chains of wage-slavery. Is it really more liberating to work for eight hours a day for a wage or salary in an office or factory than it is to spend all day with small children doing household chores? Of course, it can be argued that what is really at issue is freedom of choice: that is the freedom to choose whether to spend time caring for children or selling our labour power. But, firstly, most men do not have this choice any more than women do, and secondly, what kind of choice is it when the only two options are whether to increase our standard of living, and possibly personal status, by going out to work to earn money or to spend time at home, with or without children but with no money to pay for the kind of activities that would make that time more fulfilling. For most people most of the time, there simply is no choice: the working class, men and women, have to go out to work, not because they find their jobs any more or less fulfilling or enjoyable than any other activity that they might otherwise engage in, but because they have to in order to provide for themselves and their families. Provision of the very best childcare might make this process a little easier for the workers concerned, but it would not remove the need to go out and sell their labour power.

v) Legal and financial independence for all women

It is true that the law as it stands includes many clauses which fix women's status as dependent beings. Married women, for example, cannot claim social security benefits in their own right; their husbands, their legal providers, must claim for them. The laws regarding taxation also treat women as men's dependants. These laws are, however, gradually changing and it is not inconceivable that within a relatively short period such anachronisms will have vanished. But will such legal and financial 'independence' mean that women have achieved liberation? It will in the sense that formally women will have equal and independent status. But in reality all they will have achieved will be that their status as men's dependants will have been exchanged for another kind of dependence - direct dependence on the capitalist system - to provide them with employment or benefits. How independent can anyone really be so long as they are dependent on the vagaries of the capitalist economic system to provide them with their livelihood? The illusion of freedom and independence is created during periods of 'full' employment by the fact that the worker can sell his or her labour power to the highest bidder or in return for the best conditions of work. At times of economic recession and high unemployment, this 'freedom' is revealed for the sham that it really is: the working class as a whole are chained to the capitalist class

because of their dependence on the owners of the means of production to provide them with jobs. And when capital no longer needs labour it sheds workers - how much independence do the unemployed then have when they are wholly dependent on state benefits?

vi) An end to discrimination against lesbians

This would mean a great deal to the individuals concerned. However, it is a very limited aim. Socialists seek to bring about a society in which *no* group receives unequal treatment as a result of their gender or sexual preference. To call for the end of discrimination against minority groups within capitalism will not and cannot bring about emancipation in its broadest sense, that is, the means for each individual to live a worthwhile life as defined by themselves.

vii) Freedom for all women from intimidation by the threat or use of violence or sexual coercion, regardless of marital status. An end to all laws, assumptions and institutions that perpetuate male dominance and mens aggression towards women.

This is more a catch-all statement of principle than an actual demand and includes in more general terms all the demands that have gone before, although the issues of rape and sexual violence have become more prominent in recent years especially among radical feminists.

The demands of liberal feminists are essentially demands for liberty and equality to be extended to women. Their belief is that these ideals are attainable within the existing economic structure if only there were the will to strive for them and appropriate legislation and changes in peoples thinking. They therefore engage in protracted and sincere struggles to try to bring about such changes and have indeed met with some degree of success. But how little they achieve for so much effort and how modest their aims! A closer examination of the problem reveals that true liberty and equality for men or women are simply not possible within capitalism; inequality and wage-slavery are a necessary part of the capitalist economic structure. This is not to say that all reforms are worthless, but they should be seen for what they are. They do not help to achieve the only kind of society in which the ideal of liberty and equality can be fully realised.

Radical feminism

Within the women's movement, there is a tendency which does seek a radical transformation of society. Radical feminists regard all men with at least suspicion and frequently with outright hostility: men are 'the enemy'. The characteristic feature of society, they claim, is that it is patriarchal. By this they mean that men's domination over women is pervasive, institutionalised and universal and lies at the root of all other kinds of oppression and exploitation. Men, it is argued, benefit from their power over women in every way, and therefore seek to maintain their dominant position, if necessary through violence or the threat of violence. Their vision of the society to replace patriarchy varies. The androgynous, sexless society advocated by Shulamith Firestone sees the only answer as the transcending of gender

differences through the elimination of women's reproductive function and its replacement with cybernetics, while other groups of radical feminists envisage a woman-dominated, separatist society.

Two main points arise from an examination of radical feminism. Firstly, is the analysis of society put forward by the radical feminists correct? Is it true that *all* men dominate *all* women? The answer is of course, no. In this case then we are reduced to the much weaker claim that *some* men dominate *some* women, which is hardly a strong basis for a movement built entirely on gender groupings, since the logical extension of this is that some men dominate other men, some women dominate other women and also some women dominate some men, in short, some people dominate other people.

The second point is that radical feminists are utopian in the sense that they paint a picture of the kind of society they would like to live in but give no indication of how we are to move from the here and now to that society. To the extent that they do take action it is protest of an entirely symbolic kind such as attacking sex-shops, which achieves little more than fines or prison sentences for the activists concerned. Their instructions to other women can be illiberal or dictatorial: for example at least one group of radical feminists has issued instructions to other women that they should adopt the separatist life-style to the extent of abstaining from sexual relations with men and either remaining celibate or having sexual relations with women only, no matter what their personal preferences might be.

It is not surprising that the separatist feminist society advocated by radical feminists attracts little support from the majority of women, let alone men. Most women, rightly, do not regard their husbands, fathers, male friends, brothers, sons or lovers as their oppressors. While it is of course true that some women do suffer at the hands of men, this is not a consequence of innate gender differences but rather a product of the damage done to people during their childhood and later life. As we have already seen, women are conditioned from a very early age into a role of passivity whereas men are trained for more assertive and aggressive roles. It is little wonder that women suffer when the sex role models are of the macho male and the yielding female!

It may well be the case that in a socialist society there will be some women who prefer to live separately from men and there is no reason why this should not be possible. However, what is *not* possible is that socialism could be achieved through the efforts of only men or only women. It requires the concerted efforts of both men and women working together as equals.

'Socialist' feminism

Those women who call themselves 'socialist' feminists recognise the existence of two conflicting classes within society, but also claim that there is a sexual division which wholly or partially cuts across class lines. This leads them into a number of theoretically contradictory positions.

The relationship between class and gender divisions is crucial to 'socialist' feminist theory. 'Socialist' feminists have tended to reject the idea that is a consequence of the mode of production. Such an analysis, they argue, fails to deal with the specific nature of women's oppression, which is different from that experienced by male workers. For this argument to carry any weight, however, 'socialist' feminists would have to answer the following questions:

1. What is it about women that makes their relationship to the means of production different from men's?

2. If women are oppressed in some way differently from men because of their gender, do women of the capitalist class experience the same oppression, and if so what then is their true class position?

In attempting to answer the first question, 'socialist' feminists have tended to stress the following: that socialist, especially Marxist, theory has dealt almost exclusively with male workers; that women's position is different in that many women are not engaged in strictly productive work since their main area of activity is that of domestic labour, i.e. housework; that within their own class women experience oppression from men; that women constitute a reserve army of labour which can be used at will by the capitalist class.

It is not true, however, that Marx constructs his economic theory around the notion of male workers, or that where he uses terms like capitalist or 'proletarian', he is referring only to men. It is possible to criticise Marx for failing to address himself specifically to the question of women (although in his writings he does precisely that where the exploitation of women does differ in significant ways from that of men). But to do so is to miss the important point that Marx did not disregard women but simply considered that their position as workers did not differ fundamentally from that of men.

It is true that many women are engaged in domestic labour, but does this mean that they are then in a different *class* from men? This question has given rise to a debate within certain sections of the feminist movement over the role of domestic labour in capitalism which has focused on these two related areas - the extent to which housework can be said to be 'productive' and the class position of women engaged in domestic labour.

Left-wing organisations have been criticised by some feminists for their failure to take seriously the question of domestic labour or to challenge the sexual division of labour. Historically the trade union movement has limited itself to demands for an adequate 'family wage' instead of raising issues relating to women's feelings about their economic dependency. 'Socialist' feminists have also been critical of the way in which some left-wingers have failed to recognise - housework as 'work'. This failure has arisen partly from the ignorance of many men about what is entailed in housework and childcare, but also from a misunderstanding of some of the concepts commonly applied to work. For example, in 1912, Rosa Luxemburg wrote:

This work [housework] is not productive within the meaning of the present economic system of capitalism.

But she then goes on to say:

Only that work is productive which produces surplus-value and yields capitalist profit. (Rosa Luxemburg Women's Suffrage and the Class Struggle, reprinted in H. Draper and A. Lipow, Marxist women versus bourgeois feminism, Socialist Register, 1976).

On the basis of such analyses, many 'socialist' feminists have tried to argue that the Marxist view is problematic in that the criterion for membership of the working class seems to exclude all those women who are not part of the productive process, and that women who are engaged in paid work are, in general, also responsible for domestic work and childcare and so are 'super-exploited' in a way that men are not. As a result they have tried to develop new theories to explain the apparently ambiguous status of domestic labour. However, most of these theories break down because, in placing women in a separate category of their own, they assume that the sexual division of labour is total - that is, *all* men are engaged in commodity production and *all* women in domestic labour, which is simply not true.

While most 'socialist' feminists have rightly accepted that housework is a part of the total reproductive process of capitalism and as such is economically important (and that it also serves an important ideological function), there has been considerable disagreement about the precise link between housework and the capitalist labour process. On the subject of productive labour in general, and domestic labour in particular, Marx wrote:

The only worker who is productive is one who produces surplus value for the capitalist, or in other words contributes towards the self-valorisation of capital (K Marx, Capital, vol 1, Penguin, 1982, p.644).

But to say that a person is 'productive' in this sense is to say nothing about that person's class position - a person (worker) may be productive or unproductive and still be part of the working class on Marx's definition (i.e. non-ownership of the means of production). Also, the first part of the statement is slightly modified by the second part to include those who 'contribute' to the production of surplus value. This should be taken together with Marx's comments concerning the 'collective labourer'. Here Marx observes that as capitalism develops, so the labour process becomes more co-operative in nature:

In order to work productively, it is no longer necessary for the individual himself to put his hand on the object; it is sufficient for him to be an organ of the collective labourer, and to perform any one of its subordinate functions (K. Marx, Capital, Vol. 1, Penguin, 1982, pp.643-4).

In addition to this concept of the 'collective labourer', we should also take into account Marx's remarks regarding the reproduction of labour-power:

The individual consumption of the worker . . . remains an aspect of the production and reproduction of capital, just as the cleaning of machinery does. (K. Marx, Capital, Vol. 1, Penguin, 1982, pp.717-8)

On this analysis the working class as a whole can be regarded as the 'collective labourer', and even if we then make a distinction between those who are waged and those who are not (e.g. housewives and the unemployed) both groups can be seen to be 'productive' in that they contribute to the production process as a whole.

The confusion surrounding this issue seems to have arisen because of the use of the term 'productive' in a specifically capitalist sense to mean directly productive of surplus value, and, used in this way, those who are 'unproductive' (including housewives) are, by implication, useless (in economic terms) and hence unimportant.

Some 'socialist' feminists have concentrated on upgrading the status of housework by campaigning for 'wages for housework'. While it may be true that the wagelessness of housewives increases their sense of powerlessness, it is not true that the payment of wages would resolve that situation. As Ellen Malos rightly observes:

A wage for women does not necessarily bring the power to end the rule of capital or subordination of women to men, any more than a wage for men ends their subordination to capital. (The Politics of Housework, Allison and Busby 1982, p.119).

Housewives clearly contribute to the production of surplus value but in any case can be seen to be a part of the working class by virtue of their non-ownership of the means of production. That there is a fairly consistent sexual division of labour such that women are generally seen as being ultimately responsible for housework and childcare is undeniable but this is a different issue from that of the class position of domestic workers. The feminist argument that states that this division of labour continues because it is in the interests of men (including working-class men) ignores the extent to which it is in the interests of *capital*. It is important to recognise that domestic work and childcare are not in themselves menial and uninteresting (certainly not more so than many paid jobs) but it is often the context in which they are carried out which makes them appear so.

Any strategy aimed at abolition of the sexual division of labour should stress that it is not a 'women's issue' distinct from the interests of the working class as a whole, but is a change that has the potential to benefit both men and women. Failure to do so serves only to reinforce the idea that anything to do with the home, family or children is by **definition** the domain of women.

It is of course true that women constitute a reserve army of labour to be utilised as and when capital needs them. But again, because the sexual division of labour is not total, because it is not only women who constitute this reserve army but any unemployed member of the working class, the idea that a new theory needs to be developed to

account for this specific aspect of women workers' oppression is undermined.

'Socialist' feminism therefore embraces a wide range of often conflicting ideas, but it is possible to sum it up by identifying several key elements that are basic to it:

i. The family in capitalist society reflects the class conflict of that society as a whole. However, men are not identified as 'the enemy' as is the case in radical feminism since the oppression of women is seen as part of an exploitative system in which working-class men are themselves oppressed. Consequently, simply to demand equality as do the liberal feminists is not enough since it could only result in the equal right to be exploited.

ii. 'Socialist' feminists have resisted the idea of incorporating women's demands as just one aspect of a broader political movement. Instead they have tended to organise separately, on the grounds that 'socialist' organisations themselves embody sexist ideas and practices. A separate movement was felt to be necessary because women's exploitation was considered to be deeper and more wide ranging than men's.

iii. While 'socialist' feminists accept that the root cause of all oppression is economic, they argue that women's relationship to the means of production is different from that of men in that their waged work tends to be of lower status and worse paid; it is regarded as secondary to their domestic responsibilities rendering them more likely to be hired or fired according to the dictates of capitalist economics. Unionisation is low amongst women and so they are ill equipped to protect their working conditions, and male trade unionists have regarded women workers with suspicion or even hostility.

iv. Work in the home has been a significant element in 'socialist' feminist analysis: it is isolated, privatised, of low status and outside the market economy. However 'socialist' feminists have disagreed as to whether its main importance is its role in supporting capitalism ideologically or whether its essential feature is its role in the reproduction of the labour force.

v. 'Socialist' feminists have argued that analysis of economic exploitation at work and in the family does not by itself explain all aspects of women's subordination. To supplement this analysis they have drawn on feminist sociological and psychological theories to try to show how and why women become 'locked' into their subject position in such a way that it comes to seem natural. Given the difficulty and complexity of analyses that have tried to explain the origins of women's oppression in ideological terms, women have increasingly drawn on their personal experiences to gain greater insight into the common features of their subjection, thus increasing their feeling that their oppression was in some way qualitatively different from that experienced by men.

There are some aspects of 'socialist feminist' analysis with which we can have no argument. However, where we would disagree is in

the idea that women need to organise separately in the order to achieve a non-sexist socialist society. The idea that many organisations that call themselves 'socialist' have not treated women as equals may be true but this only demonstrates the extent to which such parties cannot be truly socialist. Socialists would further argue that not only is it not a good strategy for men and women to organise separately to bring about socialism but that it is impossible to do so since socialism can only come about when a majority of people - men and women - want it and are prepared to work together to bring it about.

CHAPTER 3:

WOMEN AND RUSSIA

The experience of women in Russia and Eastern Europe is of great importance to socialists since it demonstrates how good intentions to eradicate particular social ills, in this case sexism, can be undermined by the economic necessity inherent in capitalism. The revolution of 1917 failed to do away with the system of production for profit and to replace it with a socialist system of production designed to meet human needs. In Russia, the means of production and distribution were taken over by the state which, as was inevitable, continued to produce goods and services to be sold on the market. So the inherent drive is still towards profit and this has its effect on both the economy and the social system in general. If we consider the ways in which the role of women in Russia has changed, the economic necessity behind these changes will become clear.

Changing Roles

Even before the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, there was a group of people within the Bolshevik Party's Central Committee who were committed to the idea of sexual equality within the 'socialist' society that they were working towards. They were led by Aleksandra Kollontai who was elected to the party's Central Committee in 1915 and who set up a women's bureau within the party. At the 8th Party Congress in 1919, the party pledged to replace the individual household with communal facilities for eating, laundry and childcare in order to free women from the constraints of domestic labour. In the same year, a women's section of the Central Committee ('Zhenodtel') was set up, although it was regarded with indifference or even hostility by many men on the Central Committee.

Then in 1921 the Party committed itself to the New Economic Policy (NEP) which led to conflict with certain of the party's social policy commitments. As a result of the ending of labour conscription and the partial restoration of private enterprise, women were encouraged to return to the home. At the same time the government reduced its expenditure on childcare provision which was felt to be no longer economically viable. Thus the commitment to sexual equality was seen to have a hollow ring: women's labour was no longer needed and so women were effectively forced out of the labour

market by the withdrawal of the very facilities that enabled them to engage in work outside the home.

The next step was when, in 1925, a new 'family code' was drawn up which changed legislation relating to marriage to ensure that even where marriages were unregistered, the man would still be legally responsible for the maintenance of the woman and children. Thus the individual's responsibilities towards the traditional family were increased, undermining the notion of collective responsibility: the withering away of the family (like the state) was postponed indefinitely because, for economic reasons, capital needed the individual household to continue to fulfil the function of reproducing labour-power.

The Women's Section of the Central Committee was finally wound up in 1929 on the grounds that its work was finished. In fact it had become redundant, since the whole concept of sexual equality had long since been abandoned. Any subsequent alterations to the level of childcare provision or aid to mothers came about for predominantly economic reasons, despite official rhetoric about sexual equality.

Nowadays, women form 51 per cent of the workforce in Russia and 87 per cent of women are occupationally active (although this figure falls as low as 12 per cent in some Central Asian republics where the Moslem religion predominates), but gross inequalities persist between the sexes in areas similar to those in Western capitalism. Women are largely concentrated in the 'caring' and service professions (e.g. health care and education), in textiles and unskilled agricultural work. These are all low paid occupations and on average women's pay is only 69-70 per cent that of men's. Women are unrepresented at managerial level and are frequently over-qualified for the jobs they do - it is generally the case that women seek 'jobs', not careers, because jobs can be more easily reconciled with their domestic responsibilities. In addition the belief persists that domestic work and childcare are essentially women's work, so women's entry into paid employment, instead of freeing them from the drudgery of domestic labour and facilitating their liberation and independence, has only served to increase their work load.

The reproductive role

Women's reproductive role is of central concern to Russian planners and attempts are constantly being made to manipulate the birth rate by means of economic, legal and administrative measures. In many eastern bloc countries women are entitled to extensive paid maternity leave (in Poland it can last up to three years), child benefits, and maternity payments. However, the motivation behind these measures is not a commitment to sexual equality or the desire to bring about a reduction in women's sense of oppression. Rather it is the desire to encourage women to have more children. So, for example, contraception is generally unavailable or even prohibited, which means that women and men are not permitted any real choice over whether or not to have children. In Russia, abortion is the most common form of contraception: women may have up to eight abortions during their child-bearing years. It is difficult to avoid the

conclusion that this situation is allowed to persist because abortion is considerably more amenable to manipulation by the powers-that-be than are autonomously administered methods of contraception. This use of abortion as a means of controlling the birth rate is well illustrated with reference to changes in abortion legislation in Rumania. In 1965 abortion was available on demand with almost no conditions attached. As a result the birth rate was very low, with 4,000 abortions being performed for every 1,000 live births. Consequently, in 1967, because of alarm at this rapid fall in the birth rate and its implications for the labour force, the abortion law was changed to make abortions almost impossible to obtain except in very exceptional circumstances.

Similarly, divorce laws and the age at which people are permitted to marry are subject to the same kind of official manipulation. The law is reinforced in such cases by heavy-handed propaganda which seeks to promote the family, and in particular the official ideal of the three-child family.

The cost to women's health of this dual role of motherhood and wage slavery is considerable. Women's life expectancy is low; the creches and day nurseries tend to be overcrowded and unhygienic and so women are frequently reluctant to leave their children in them. They are forced to make the difficult choice of whether to go out to work or to stay at home. If they go out to work they risk their children's health and well-being in the state nurseries. If they stay at home with their children beyond the period for which they receive maternity pay, they suffer the consequences of a lower standard of living.

The persistence of sexual inequality

So, despite formal declarations of sexual equality and some early advances in this direction, women in the state capitalist countries of Eastern Europe can be seen to suffer the same kind of inequalities as women in the capitalist countries of the West. If anything, these are exacerbated by the fact that Russian women are under considerable pressure to engage in full-time wage labour (and there is almost no part-time employment) and to produce children. If there was ever any genuine commitment to women's equality, it was abandoned when the cost of the resources necessary for it to begin to be a reality was felt to be too high. The 'woman question' was officially held to have been more or less solved in Russia before the start of the second world war. According to Party ideology, private property had been abolished, women had been given equal legal status, and they were on their way towards achieving full economic independence through participation in paid employment outside the home; their children were being cared for by the state and their household tasks would eventually be performed on a collective basis when resources permitted.

In fact, the realisation of women's legal right to work on an equal footing with men coincided with an acute shortage of workers as a result of plans for rapid industrial expansion and the depletion of the male workforce because of war. The economic plans had promised, but had not actually provided for, a growth in supporting services at a rate commensurate with the increase in women's employment.

However, there was no change in the attitude that domestic work was essentially women's domain, and as a result of the failure of state provision, women were increasingly worn down by their double burden of paid work and housework. Their situation worsened again in the 1960s as a result of a further decline in the birth rate which led to a reassertion of women's role as mother and a new wave of propaganda to reinforce this.

The lessons

Many feminists point to the 'socialist' or, more correctly, state capitalist countries and claim that because women there have not achieved real liberation, then socialism has nothing to offer women. Of course they are right that the economic and social system that exists in the Russian Empire has nothing to recommend it, to either men or women. Workers in those countries are exploited in the same way as they are in the countries of Western Europe or the United States - they are forced to sell their labour power in return for a wage or salary. In fact their situation is in many ways worse since, lacking the limited democratic freedoms of the West, they are not even able to organise effectively to protect or improve their standards of living or conditions of work. Women in the so-called 'socialist' countries, like women in the other capitalist countries, are not able to make real choices about how to live their lives; they are forced into the economic roles laid down for them by the state.

But none of this is a consequence of the shortcomings of socialism. The so-called 'socialist' countries cannot in fact be considered socialist despite their claims to be so and despite the fact that their economic system does differ from the West in some respects. Such differences as a greater degree of state ownership and more centralised planning do not hide the fact that at root the economic system of the so-called 'socialist' countries is still one where production is for the profit and privilege of the few rather than to meet the needs of the many. This is self-evidently true when one considers, for example, the amount of resources that are expended in the production of armaments while many people's most basic needs for housing and food go unmet. Moreover, a socialist society would be both moneyless and classless. Again this is not the case in Eastern Europe. This is obvious as regards money, but that there is a ruling class may be less immediately apparent. Although the Russian ruling elite do not legally own the means of production and distribution, they control them and this gives them enormous benefits and privileges which are not available to the majority of workers. For example, they receive much higher 'salaries', they have access to a wider range of goods and services, many of which are only available in restricted access shops, and they are permitted to travel abroad. Furthermore, although they cannot legally pass on their wealth to their children, they can equip them with a superior education and the right 'connections' which will substantially improve their chances of being admitted into the 'nomenclature' from which the privileged class is drawn.

Because the Russian system does not resemble in every last detail the Western form of capitalism, this is no reason to accept Russian (or Western politicians') claims that the system is socialist. In all important

respects the Russian Empire functions according to the laws of capitalism and it is therefore not surprising that women there are no nearer to emancipation than they are in the West. So to reject socialism on this basis is to make the serious mistake of believing that socialism has been put to the test and found wanting. This is not the case.

CHAPTER 4:

WOMEN AND SOCIALISM

Theories relating to women's oppression and inequality have been developed largely within the liberal tradition of political philosophy. Demands have usually been formulated on the basis of moral arguments relating to natural justice and rights, and ignoring the economic conditions that render such claims to justice meaningless within the context of capitalism. 'Socialist' feminists, while recognising the importance of class, have shown they are theoretically confused by their failure to truly combine socialist and feminist theories.

We have seen the way in which women's role in society has changed over time and also the huge diversity of different behaviours, attributes and attitudes which have been assigned to both men and women in different cultures. Thus what is 'natural' is what a particular society at a particular point in time says is natural in order to justify a certain set of social arrangements. That set of social arrangements is determined to a large extent by the prevailing material conditions - the level of technology, the scarcity or abundance of food, jobs, etc., the way in which goods are produced, and the form of property ownership.

That women's role in society has changed over time is undeniable, but the equally undeniable fact that such changes have not resulted in real equality for women highlights the limits of what can be achieved while capitalism still exists. Not only are the economic conditions and the nature of class society an inhospitable ground for equality but also they create a set of attitudes which are appropriate to the particular social and economic conditions that prevail. It is possible then that sexist attitudes persist despite the efforts of feminists and others to change them because they fit rather well into the pattern of society created by the capitalist mode of production.

There are three essential components in the notion of women's liberation:

1. A redivision of domestic labour and childcare in such a way that these tasks are no longer seen to be the natural preserve of women, but instead are performed by people of either sex who undertake them willingly.
2. An end to the dependence of women on men.
3. A fundamental change in the ideas relating to gender, sexuality and the family.

It is easy to see that the chances of these kinds of changes being realised within capitalism are very small. It is difficult (although not

entirely impossible) to imagine the kind of far-reaching revolution in social and sexual relations entailed by the above taking place without a corresponding economic revolution if for no other reason than that it would require a vast reallocation of resources and reassessment of needs. Indeed, even the limited gains made by women over the last fifteen years are now under threat revealing the lack of genuine political commitment to the idea of sexual equality.

The extent to which feminist theories have highlighted the ways in which women's subject status is reinforced and maintained through social and cultural forms should not be underestimated. But to use these insights as the basis of arguments for all-women political organisations rests on a faulty premise and has politically damaging results. That premise is that in some way women's oppression in capitalism is fundamentally different from that experienced by working-class men. While it is undeniable that women experience certain forms of cultural and social oppression and discrimination as a result of their gender, the economic basis for exploitative social relations is not gender-specific. To argue that women's experience of capitalism is crucially different from that of men risks falling into the trap of sex-stereotyping. This would mean that women's role as wives and mothers defines them more completely than their role as workers. If socialism is to have any chance of success then we should seek to emphasise the essential similarities of experiences of members of the working class rather than the differences between them.

The lesson to be learnt from the experiences of women in Russia and its satellites is not that socialism has nothing to offer women, but that the particular social and economic system found there does not improve women's lot. The mere replacement of private ownership by state ownership is not socialism and cannot bring about women's emancipation. Socialism is a system of society based upon the common ownership and democratic control of the means and instruments for producing and distributing wealth by and in the interests of the whole community. Russia clearly does not have socialism.

Socialism will be a very different society from capitalism. Whereas in capitalism goods are produced for profit and sale on the market, which means that many people go without the things they need because they cannot afford to buy them, in socialism goods will be produced for people to use, without the need for buying and selling. And because there will be no buying and selling, there will be no need for money; instead people will take freely what they need from the common store

Work will no longer be the exploitation that it is in capitalism where the majority of us - the working class - sell our labour power to an employer, who owns the machines, factories, tools, land, etc., in return for a wage or salary. In socialism, because goods will no longer be produced solely for profit, there will no longer be the division of society into classes whose interests can never be reconciled. Work will take the form of co-operative effort, freely entered into by people who will be aware that ail of society is benefiting, and, as a result, they benefit.

In capitalism because of the need for the ruling class to protect its own interests against the opposing interests of the workers, the majority have very little say in the decision-making process - in central government, at local level, or at work. In socialism, however, each individual will be able to participate fully in the making of the decisions which affect their lives. Democracy in socialism will not be the sham that it is in capitalism but a meaningful process which recognises the worth of everyone and through which people will be able to contribute fully to society in accordance with their particular skills, knowledge or experience. And in this women and men will be recognised as equal.

In capitalism the world is divided into nation-states, reflecting the territorial interests of the capitalist class. This is the cause of patriotism, nationalism, and futile wars in which the working class are sent to be killed themselves, or kill other workers in order to protect the interests of their masters. Socialism will be a world-wide system without arbitrary and divisive distinctions between one area of the world and another.

Socialism will include the liberation of women as part of its project of human emancipation. This will not come about in an automatic or inevitable way. A political organisation whose object is socialism cannot permit sexism within its ranks on the grounds that nothing can be done now and that the problem will be resolved 'after the revolution'. For a political organisation to be credible, it must embody the attitudes, values and practices that it seeks to institute in society at large. Socialists believe that all people, men and women, are equally worthy of respect - and the Socialist Party of Great Britain includes in its Declaration of Principles, and has done since 1904, the following clause:

. . . as in the order of social evolution the working class is the last class to achieve its freedom the emancipation of the working class will involve the emancipation of all mankind without distinction of race or sex.