

WOMEN IN BIG FLAME ? AND ELSEWHERE.

We outlined the sort of points we thought we should discuss much more fully if we are going to understand the relation of women to political work. That BF is an organisation open to women because of its approach to feminist issues - but that it hasn't been able to take the step beyond that to ensuring full participation, given the mass of factors working against that.

That our role in BF not totally connected with organisation and structures but with our total experience, which structures can only hope to moderate.

That all the points we made are very familiar and will read as particularly mundane and often said - but that we found in discussing them again we were still seeing new problems and potential.

WORK

That women more likely to be in work - parenting, hospitals, schools etc that demands involvement, commitment and emotional input - leaving fewer reserves for other work.

DOUBLE LOAD

That this an underestimate for most of us:

HOME: additional demands even if we are trying to change our living situation, personal relationships, child care. That the initiative and onus falls disproportionately on women.

WORK: double load stemming from raising fem. issues, fighting our own unions, womens groups in unions, cuts campaigns, as well as autonomous womens movt.

BF onus felt to raise fem issues, work out soc fem theory and practice.

SOCIALISATION

Means that merely sharing out womens load not enough. EG for equal time spent in childcare, women not only more likely to take on more responsibility for organising but also to let time spent with children take up more energy and to carry away more worries. Maybe true of other activities?

More likely to get and respond to demands for personal support from neighbours people at work etc.

POLITICAL WORK.

That women, because of socialisation, type of job, home commitments, more likely to be involved in and to prefer local/community work, stemming from living/working situation using personal contacts and getting personal feedback, where have a role other than as 'Political'. In contrast to more abstract, strictly political type of national work.

That can be a positive contribution and we need to find more ways to value, share, and find ways of getting more input from it into the organisation. Relations between local work and commissions vital but needs development.

AUTONOMOUS WOMENS MOVEMENT

That problematic, balancing contradictions between this and mixed organisation. That some women may look to work in BF specifically to move away from work around womens issues.

STRUCTURES.

That we still cant stress enough size of groups, length of speakers, skill-sharing, collective speaking and writing. But they do slow things up and make extra demands on time and energy and we have to allow for that.

Dont want to constantly criticise 'male' methods - lengthy discussion documents etc- and should learn some - but should develop and attach importance to other ways of developing debate and communicating ideas. (Like writing this down seems extremely pretentious but cant think of a better way).

Proportions of women in individual groups matters - for confidences, taking up sexism, taking off onus to have right-on feminist line. If cant be supported may be better for them not to be there.

Danger of star system of women developing - load of women representation being taken by women who can.

Judy elaborated in more detail one area we'd discussed to show how looking at our experience in an integrated way does throw up a lot of things we need to take account of:

WOMEN AS PARENTS.

At the womens weekend there would have been more ~~xxxxx~~ children than women if they had all come. Does BF have more women parents than non? Does it attract and keep more than other Rev Left organisations?

Is a positive gain for BF: brings in community as well as TU activity; brings in personal issues - childcare to political ideology. brings in experience of childrearing, shared with majority of women, and understanding of demands that makes.

1)WOMEN PARENTS

generally take on major responsibility for children, partly result of community network of childcarers - contacts through play groups, schools, friends' mums, baby sitting and mutual childcare amongst women. Presents problems for men trying to share childcare.

2)WOMEN AS SINGLE PARENTS

More are women - probably also true in BF. Means that without alternative living eg communal incl childcare, have less time and energy for political work than others. That local work more accessible than national (both because of experience and contacts and childcare) Commitments of a woman parent involve: meeting childrens social arrangements as well as their own; coping with activities outside school; looking after other people's children. As well as waged work, TU activity, local community activities, involvement in womens movt, leaves little for study or BF work.

3)SOCIALISATION

Leads more towards putting more into emotional, supportive relationships with people and children. Even when parenting shared women may put more into it as well as other relationships, and called on more for this support. needs to be seen as positive, but as men develop it more will take up time and energy.

4)ISOLATION of women at home with young children.

As an experience which undermines confidence.

5)NATIONAL WORK

requires both time and study. Women with young children find it difficult both to get time and the quality of time - often only for short spells. Short broken spells makes it difficult to get to grips with anything. Constant disruption and concentration dissipated over small practical details of living. Find not only study difficult but also concentration at meetings. Constant experience of interrupted conversations and lack of opportunities for sustained concentrated thinking in one area. ?Reinforces lack of confidence in theoretical work and choice of more practical political activities.

SO..... Commitment from different members will be different;
Need to recognise political input into childrearing and community activities;
To work on ways of increasing confidence and activities;
Use as positive means of building links with 'housewives' as a political group.

We dont see this outline negatively as a list of problems weighing us all down but as a way of establishing our general experience inside and outside BF, helping understand why our contribution may be different at the moment and how it can be increased, while not losing what's best about it and by altering the politics of BF so it will be more accessible not just to us but to women generally.