

IS THERE ROOM FOR US ALL UNDER THE UMBRELLA?

by Judy Gillett

(Differences between Radical Feminists and Women Socialists)

It is not unnatural or coincidental that the main focus of attack in the literature, discussions and analyses of Women's Liberation have been anti-male. It is within a male-dominated society, economy, culture, religion, ethic, education and family that women's oppression is expressed.

It is natural that such male oppressive action produces a balancing female reaction. The reaction was long in coming - too long, maybe, for the oppression extends far back into the mists of societal origins and covers and crosses many national barriers, political structures and economic frameworks. The most blatant similarity throughout history, everywhere, is the direct oppression of women by men. Women's Liberation came after such a legacy and brought with it an exciting, new ethos of trust, mutual consolation, sisterhood, personal confidence, and a releasing of tensions, fears, secrets, inhibitions and roles. This was bound to arouse in many female breasts the pent-up, suppressed, often hitherto subconscious resentments, rage, bitterness, and aggression which such soul-searching was now laying bare.

The new and wonderful ability to immediately relate to one's sister was of tremendous importance and still is. To break through the hideous artificial barriers created BETWEEN woman was an achievement. It should have meant, and did often mean, an improved, deeper, more satisfying relationship with male acquaintances. However, it often also meant a widening of the already present social and emotional gap in understanding and rapport between the sexes. So, as women began to more fully appreciate and understand their female oppression, they also often began to analyse preconceived, established relationships with men. Areas where they were taken for granted, conditioned, structured, manipulated, black-mailed and/or merely misunderstood now came under serious, challenging review.

Man was exposed as a naked aggressor - which he is - and the struggle raged from there.

But is THAT the level from which the struggle should rage? POLITICALLY, what form should the struggle take?

Marxists - or whatever one calls them - believe that men are the AGGRESSORS, but that the REAL OPPRESSOR is the dominant class - in our society, CAPITALISM. That it is capitalist society which uses sexism as it does racism, etc. to divide society and manipulate it. Male chauvinism has a long cultural and historical heritage of serving and assisting the ruling class. Capitalism is no exception.

What it boils down to, then, is - that until we have a society where no class rules another (e.g. socialism) problems like male chauvinism, racism, etc. will persist. Thus, some sections of Women's Liberation, many communists, and members of other left groups, believe that Women's Liberation should be directly involved in class struggle, marxist analysis and revolutionary strategy..... certainly be involved also on important, immediate demands like child care, wage justice, abortion reform, etc., but keeping in mind real challenges to capitalist morality, the family and the class system.

Women marxists, I feel, must, if they believe that complete women's liberation can only be truly achieved by socialism, ally themselves with their brothers also, because, ultimately, their interests are common ones and no form of society is worth struggling for without unity of purpose and interests - without love, understanding, compassion and trust. Men suffer also, without these. Men also are oppressed under capitalism.

Radical feminism often recognises the mutual oppression of the sexes and rightly points out the more explicit, wider, deeper oppression of women, usually SPECIFICALLY ON THE BASIS OF SEX, and NOT, in the case of men, on the basis of their relationship to the means of production.

However, in attempting to alleviate and correct the injustices perpetuated on women, feminists can isolate their struggle from the class struggle. Their struggle is often personalised (i.e. a struggle between personalities) and the basic confrontation of the manipulative powers of capitalist society are overlooked. True - we do have to challenge men, as such, to make them see how they are conditioned just as we are, but we must be careful of our tactics. Not ALL men are against us, and many of those that are, mightn't be, given help and time. Those men who don't want to know, for whom we cannot wait - LEAVE them, sisters, they may catch up if we don't attack them.

Women's Liberation is giving women a value for themselves, as leaders, speakers, thinkers, writers, doers, workers, without being reliant on men. To ensure our integrity and humanness and capabilities, we need each other.

Those who say they don't need men (lesbians, etc.) should have our respect and affection, but this is not true of all of us, and the differences must be recognised and accepted.

Female chauvinism is as narrow and harmful as any other form of elitism. It is important for men marxists to recognise the difference between genuine, deserved criticisms of male chauvinism (and to make determined efforts to combat it within themselves as well as their fellows) and outright anti-male attack - as the former is often glibly and superficially taken to be.

Female chauvinism is the close associate of those women who fear men, who hate men, who mistrust or cannot confide in men, who think men are crude, rough, boorish stupid, who feel self conscious or embarrassed with men.

Radical feminism can over-react to this syndrome by almost reversing the roles, by aggressively asserting complete indifference to, and irrelevance of relationships with men and/or maintaining a struggle for women's liberation which alienates many would-be male converts and supporters.

The Women's Liberation umbrella is a wide one, and should be able to embrace all attitudes reflected in the movement.

The VERY revolutionary ideals of many radical feminists are important for the movement and they have much to offer in tactics of confrontation, analysis, challenge and conditioning.

Those who base themselves on marxism may also assist the movement by promoting an understanding of the need for unity in struggle of all oppressed, class alliance and socialist perspective.

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