

These are some very schematic ideas on the question of women in BF. I haven't thought them through enough for them to be totally worked out or to lead to any wonderful instant solution for any of the problems we face as women in BF, or that BF faces because of the position of women in the organisation. Perhaps there isn't a wonderful instant solution.....

It seems to me that the problem of women in BF stems, at least in part, from a critical ambiguity in BF's politics, which, at present, directly affects women almost exclusively. This is an ambiguity over the function of autonomous organisation of oppressed groups both within and outside the revolutionary organisation. An important, and for many comrades, crucial part of BF's politics is the recognition of the right of different oppressed sections of the population to organise autonomously, and of the political value of doing so. But however much we acknowledge the importance of autonomous movements, whether they are the movements of black people, gay people, women, old people, the disabled, for liberating themselves, we are also committed to working for an overall socialist revolution whose aim is to eliminate all oppression and exploitation. We see the revolutionary organisation as a necessary means to achieve this goal. The ambiguity in our politics arises because the existence of the revolutionary organisation does not eliminate the oppressions of particular oppressed groups of people within it.

As women we are in BF, not because BF is of itself a vehicle for liberating women, nor because BF is a haven from the overall patriarchal relations which we experience daily in society, but because we believe that socialism will be advanced by the association of revolutionaries to work out priorities for struggle, to maintain active links between different struggles, and to argue for what we see as socialist goals in the many campaigns and struggles in which we are involved. Part of our conception of those goals is what has come to be called "prefigurative" i.e. the development of alternative structures and relationships which enable people to participate more actively in controlling their lives now rather than postponing those changes until some post-revolutionary utopia.

In BF this means that we try to share responsibility for many activities normally undertaken by specific groups e.g. we collectivise childcare from those with children to everyone, whether they have children or not; we pool fares to meetings to share the cost between richer and poorer people. It is necessary to note that these kinds of prefigurative efforts largely, but by no means wholly, affect women, and that they are also very partial. We only collectivise childcare and pool fares during meetings etc.; in life as a whole, comrades look after their "own" children, and we do not share our incomes. The limitations of prefigurative forms of organisation, and the contradictions that these can involve (we could collectivise childcare totally and share our non-existent incomes if we all went off to an idyllic rural utopia - but we would also thereby abandon our attempts to struggle for feminism and socialism in the real world), mean that within BF, hopefully to a significantly lesser extent than outside, the oppressions of patriarchy, of racism, of class, and of poverty, still necessarily (unfortunately) persist. To combat this, particular oppressed groups also need to organise autonomously within BF; this is not just applicable to women - it could be applicable to any collection of people within the organisation, which felt that its members shared an oppression not shared by others, and which could

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not be eliminated by however judicious a combination of goodwill, support by others, and prefigurative structures.

But this means that when we do organise autonomously as women in BF, we need to see ourselves not as an extension of the autonomous women's movement inside BF, but as playing a specific role as women in BF as a revolutionary organisation, because of our overall politics which involves participating in both the Women's Liberation Movement as an autonomous movement, and in BF. We need to be clear about our justification for doing this, and also about what that role is in BF. I think that some of the structures in BF at the present time confuse both us and the men in the organisation about what we are doing / should do/ can do, and actually have the counterproductive effect of weakening us as women rather than strengthening us.

I see the justification for women being in both BF and active in the WLM as follows:

- 1) The WLM - The liberation of women and the elimination of patriarchal relations in society can only be achieved by women struggling for themselves.
- 2) BF - However, whatever distinctive oppressions we suffer as a result of patriarchy, women also suffer oppressions of capitalism, imperialism, etc. in common with men (even if women's oppression under these systems is somewhat different from that of men). So, as socialist women, we want to join with men to overcome these as well as wanting to separate from men in order to organise over the specifically gender related oppressions.
- 3) As socialist feminists we have to consider the problem of how to struggle about both kinds of oppression in ways that are compatible with an overall goal of ending all oppressions and exploitative relationships on a world scale. This means, for instance, not substituting a goal of the oppression of men by women for the existing oppression of women by men. It means recognizing and confronting the contradictions between the struggles of different groups of women, or between women and other oppressed groups, and trying to resolve them.
- 4) Our membership of a revolutionary organisation as well as involvement in the WLM enables us to bring feminist influences to bear on socialist struggle and ideas, whilst also influencing our actions in the WLM as a reciprocal process.

Our Role as women in BF

There is no reason why women in BF should have political agreement on all questions but nor is there any reason why women as an organised grouping within BF should confine their attention to questions which are supposed to be of special interest to women. Instead, I think there are ways in which women can make a crucial and distinctive contribution to the character of BF, in its internal life, in its conception of socialism and feminism, and in strengthening ourselves as women. We can do this by:

- 1) emphasising prefigurative structures within BF that help us challenge sexism within the organisation. These include the autonomous organisation of women within BF to discuss whatever we want to, free from the pressures of male presence, as well as support from men for childcare in and outside BF meetings etc.
- 2) emphasising a socialist and feminist politics that incorporates the distinctive needs of women i.e the development of a "feminist perspective" on all political issues.
- 3) raising important problems of the women's movement within BF, e.g. of violence and pornography, or of abortion and childcare, not so that men in the organisation can tell us what we ought to do, but because discussion about whether to fight pornography by

burning sex shops raises questions beyond the WLM which involve men as well as women. Structures of childcare which involve both men and women (even if men are "involved" by virtue of their absence), influence women's decisions whether or not to have children, and thus affect individual women's choices, though not A Woman's Right to Choose. Such questions not only ought to be raised with socialist anti-sexist men, but such men ought to involve themselves with them, regardless of whether/^{or not} they arise from autonomous women's campaigns.

A Proposal to restructure women's organisations in BF

I think that the Women's Commission in its present form tends to have the effect of confining discussion of problems of the women's movement to women only, thus de-emphasising questions of sexism and male behaviour both in our politics and in the internal life of the organisation. Outside the WC there is no permanent forum for women, and if the WC is seen as one commission competing with others, there are women who decide to attend another and so have no forum except the odd women's weekend, to meet with other women in BF. We then have the worst of all worlds, the ghettoisation of feminist politics, and the absence of a forum for all women in the organisation.

The ghettoisation of feminism seems to me to be a negation of most of what I understand by socialist feminism. If our view of socialist feminism is that a feminist perspective can be developed on all political questions, and that such a perspective is a necessary and central part of a socialist perspective, then we need to involve our male comrades in discussions of these issues and in challenging their own sexism. Our politics should have no time for a "men mustn't/can't talk about feminism" approach. Women often feel inadequate and ignorant about their knowledge of (male-dominated) politics, and we want help in "catching up". Let us so insist on the centrality of feminism to socialist politics that we can take the lead in helping men overcome their ignorance on these questions.

To this end I propose:

- 1) A Women's section of BF for women to organise and meet separately from men - to discuss, meet, socialise, organise, and raise questions of importance to women in the organisation.
- 2) A mixed anti-sexism/personal politics commission to generalise feminist questions, and publicise and mobilise for anti-sexist struggles.

I don't have any comments here about the NC, though I support the continuation of some form of positive discrimination for women. I think that the NC problem is symptomatic of women's feelings that feminism is token in BF, and that we are therefore marginal to BF. I hope this document suggests some ways of reducing that marginality both as a feeling and in practice. (Sorry it's so long!)