



Breaking the chains of Stalinism: women in the Eastern Bloc

Sat, 30/03/1991 - 11:59

?In the last decades only the surface signs of tradition were destroyed. Traditional structures, like the slave-life of women in the family, remain.?1

These words from a Soviet woman worker show the reality of women?s ?liberation? under Stalinism. For decades women in the USSR and Eastern Europe were told that they were equal and free, and that the ?woman question? had been solved. These lies, together with the claim that socialism had actually been established, are being cruelly exposed as the regimes crumble one by one. The danger now facing women is that they may exchange one illusion for another. Instead of the bureaucratic chimera of ?socialism in one country? and women?s liberation, they are now being offered an equally fantastical picture of what the market economy and mass consumerism can do to lighten the crushing burden of domestic toil. Neither of these alternatives can advance the condition of women workers.

The collapse of the bureaucratic regimes in most of Eastern Europe in 1989 and 1990 had a special impact on the lives of women. It opened up great possibilities for self-expression and gave working-class women the opportunity to take collective action to change their lives. In Romania women played a major role in the revolution which brought down the brutal Ceausescu dictatorship. Women were active in the factory committees and the workers? militia, meting out workers? justice to Securitate agents and throwing out the tyrannical and corrupt enterprise bosses. Elsewhere in Eastern Europe working women played a leading role in the demonstrations, the strikes and the political organisations that toppled the Stalinist rulers.

Working class women were clearly jubilant at the downfall of these police dictatorships, which they had no reason whatsoever to defend. The pompous male bureaucrats and their pampered wives had happily left them in misery whilst claiming to preside over socialism and to have solved the woman question. But the reality of this ?socialism? and this ?emancipation? was the denial of basic political rights, and the creation of economic conditions that meant most women spent their lives queuing for food, living in appalling conditions and working long hours for little reward.

After the overthrow of the Stalinists in most of Eastern Europe, and whilst the once almighty Soviet bureaucracy remains torn between a headlong rush to the market and a brutal but doomed return to dictatorship, the issue is now sharply posed: what type of society will best serve the interests of working class women and lead them towards genuine liberation and the final resolution of the woman question?

The Bolsheviks and the woman question

The situation of women in the USSR and Eastern Europe today is shaped by the origins of these states. After the Bolsheviks achieved state power in Russia in 1917 they began to enact progressive social legislation. Women were given the right to vote before they had gained it in the ?advanced? bourgeois democracies of the west. Full and equal civil rights were enshrined in the Family Code of 1918: divorce became easily available, women were granted the right to own property, laws requiring wives to move residence with their husbands were removed and civil registration of marriage was established.

Children were given the same status regardless of whether or not their parents were married. Couples could adopt the name of either partner or both. These legal advances went beyond those achieved by the suffrage movements anywhere

else in the world; indeed, some of the advances have yet to be achieved in many western countries.

The Bolshevik programme went beyond simple legal equality for women, recognising that formal equal rights did not tackle the underlying causes of women's oppression. Based on the traditional positions developed by Marx, Engels, Bebel and Zetkin, the Bolsheviks also sought to draw women into socialised production outside of the home, to protect women from harmful labour processes and to improve maternal care, to make social provision for child-care and household work. They sought in every way possible to organize and mobilise women for the construction of the new society. As Trotsky wrote:

'The revolution made a heroic effort to destroy the so-called family hearth—that archaic, stuffy, and stagnant institution in which the woman of the toiling classes performs galley labour from childhood to death?'

The implementation of this programme was uneven due to the adverse material conditions facing the Bolshevik government. Civil war, added to the carnage of four years of imperialist war, led to famine and near total social collapse. It was difficult enough to restore production to pre-war levels, let alone to create the surplus needed to facilitate large scale social advance.

The Bolshevik Party set up a special Commission, later a section, called Zhenotdel which was given the task of mobilising women in support of the Soviet government and also pushing for the rights of women at every level of the party and state apparatus. Groups of Bolshevik women agitators were sent to all areas, including Soviet Central Asia and the Far East, in an attempt to draw women into action against their own oppression. Child-care programmes and maternity homes were established wherever resources permitted, and intensive debates were fostered on the role of the family, sexuality and women's position in society. The Bolsheviks also legalised abortion and prostitution in 1920.

Although regarding both as evils for the women concerned, arising out of women's oppression, they recognised that criminalising women was no solution. There was a fierce debate on the proposed legalisation of abortion, with leading Bolshevik women arguing that it should be made available alongside improved access to birth control for women.

These positive developments were initiated and led by women Bolsheviks including Alexandra Kollontai, Inessa Armand and Nadezhda Krupskaya. Kollontai fought within the Russian Social Democratic movement for many years before the revolution to ensure that special attention was paid to the question of women so that the bourgeois feminists did not win the support of working class women.

In the early 1920s she promoted discussions on sexuality and the family which acted as a fundamental challenge to the petit bourgeois morality and ideology which even most revolutionaries still held on to these questions. Kollontai argued that the building of a socialist society required the transformation of every aspect of social life, including that of sexuality and personal relationships.

At an All-Union Congress of Working and Peasant Women in November 1918 Inessa Armand, the first director of Zhenotdel, said:

'The bourgeois system is being done away with. We have entered the period of socialist construction. Private, separate domestic economies have become harmful anachronisms which only hold up and make more difficult the carrying out of new forms of distribution. They must be abolished. The tasks carried out earlier by the housewife for her family within her tiny domestic economy must become independent branches of social labour. We must replace the thousands and millions of tiny, individual economies with their primitive, unhealthy and badly equipped kitchens and primitive washtubs by clean and shining communal kitchens, communal canteens, communal laundries, run not by working women/housewives but by people paid specially to do the job.'

The Bolsheviks in retreat

Faced with a growing economic crisis in 1922, the Bolsheviks were forced to temporarily adopt a policy of concessions to capitalism, the New Economic Policy (NEP). This retreat on the economic front represented a serious and sustained

threat to the liberatory goals of the Bolshevik women's movement. In the first period of the NEP there were extensive job losses, 70% of which affected women. The number of state homes for children and mothers fell sharply and women were pushed back into increasing economic dependence on men and there was a flourishing of prostitution

In 1926 a new Family Code was introduced. It imposed greater responsibilities on parents for looking after their children after separation and divorce. It granted the same legal status to de facto marriages as to legally registered ones and made divorce even simpler.

The purpose of this legislation was to ensure that the families of un-registered marriages were supported by fathers. This was opposed by Kollontai but supported by many women who believed that the growth of less formal relationships had enabled men to avoid their paternal responsibilities.

This re-emphasis on individual responsibility for child-care was a retreat from the goal of socialisation. It was a cruel proof that right can never be higher than the material circumstances of society allow for. As Trotsky wrote:

‘To institute the political equality of men and women in the Soviet state was one problem and the simplest. A much more difficult one was the next—that of instituting the industrial equality of men and women workers in the factories, the mills and the trade unions, and of doing it in such a way that the men should not put the women to disadvantage. But to achieve the actual equality of man and woman within the family is an infinitely more difficult problem . . . As long as woman is chained to her housework, the care of the family, the cooking and sewing, all her chances of participation in social and political life are cut down in the extreme.’⁴

The rise of Stalinism

Isolated, and faced with a growing parasitic bureaucracy, the Russian Revolution slowly succumbed to a bureaucratic counter-revolution. As the working class lost political power, Stalinism organised a forced march to the right. Real reverses occurred in the position of women. These were not justified as a forced short-term retreat but were sanctified as the natural order of things. Trotsky designated this period ‘Thermidor in the family’. The advanced revolutionary cutting edge of the Bolsheviks’ programme—the socialisation of domestic work, the responsibility of society for the care of children, the mobilisation of women into political and social life, the challenging of the old sexist and patriarchal structures in family and sexuality—all these were abandoned and indeed denigrated by the bureaucratic usurpers of the revolution.

With the introduction of the industrialisation and collectivisation programme of the late 1920s women became viewed, not as a force to be mobilised for their own liberation, but as a workforce to be organised to meet the targets of the Five Year Plan. They were subordinated to production through work in the factories and fields, and to reproduction through giving birth to large families. The needs of the Stalinist planners were placed before the interests of women and the working class.

Women’s participation in social production was massively increased—between 1928 and 1949 the number of women workers in the Soviet Union increased from 3 million (24% of the workforce) to over 13 million (over 50%). Meanwhile, the responsibility of women for domestic labour in the family was massively reinforced. This was a ‘double shift’ with a vengeance! The Stalinist interpretation of women’s liberation through work is a caricature of the revolutionary position. The Bolsheviks never regarded women’s emancipation as an automatic process which would arise out of women being given jobs. They saw it as something which required a conscious struggle to transform work, home life and the political organisation of society. The Stalinists would have none of this.

In 1930 Stalin abolished Zhenotdel on the grounds that it was no longer necessary. The individual family unit was actively promoted and glorified. It became a way of reasserting control and discipline over the working class. The ideology of the socialist family, the base unit of society from which everyone worked as one to construct the Soviet motherland, was a central part of the atomisation and political dictatorship over the working class by the new ruling bureaucratic caste. Divorce was made more difficult in 1936. Abortion was re-criminalised for first pregnancies in 1935

and made completely illegal in 1936. The Stalinists claimed that because 'socialism' existed in the USSR and the woman question had been solved, women did not need to avoid having children!

With this came an assault on all that was progressive about the early Bolshevik debates on sexuality. Pravda led a campaign against these ideas, now such a threat to Stalin's authoritarian state:

'So-called 'free love' and all disorderly sex life are bourgeois through and through, and have nothing to do with either socialist principles or the ethics and standards of conduct of the Soviet citizen . . . The elite of our country . . . are as a rule also excellent family men who dearly love their children. And vice versa: the man who does not take marriage seriously . . . is usually also a bad worker and a poor member of society . . . A woman without children merits our pity, for she does not know the full joy of life. Our Soviet women, full-blooded citizens of the freest country in the world, have been given the bliss of motherhood.'⁵

Stalinism fostered a strong sexist culture to support the continued centrality of women's role as mothers and wives in addition to their work outside the home. Although the regime applauded the women tractor drivers and exhorted women to be good workers and 'heroine' mothers, the role separation of male and female workers was continually stressed. Sexism in education and stark job segregation was the norm. Girls and women were encouraged to be mothers and workers in the unskilled or caring professions. Opportunities for women to enter male dominated professions were provided for a few women who could show to the world what 'equality' for women looked like.

The Stalin period continued to repeat some of the words of Bolshevism on the emancipated woman, but this was now measured by her contribution to the 'socialist' industrialisation project—how much grain and how many children she could produce. The family was reinforced in order to increase discipline within the working class. Thus the one aspect of the Marxist programme that was retained—increased participation in production—came to represent not a first or second step along the road to liberation but, when tied to continued domestic slavery, an inordinate burden on women.

This slavery was made more acute by the waste and chaos of bureaucratic planning, the shortages and poor quality of consumer goods. Separated from the other integral elements of that programme—the socialisation of domestic labour, the commitment to breaking down sexism and old ideas about the woman's role, the mobilisation of women to take decisions and control over their own lives individually and collectively as part of the democratically controlled workers' state—entry into production ceased to have a revolutionary function. In short, women were reduced to production machines for the state and breeding machines with little control over their own fertility.

Trotsky described the results in terms that would ring painfully true even today:

'The forty million Soviet families remain in their overwhelming majority, nests of medievalism, female slavery and hysteria, daily humiliation of children, feminine and childish superstition.'⁶

The position of women in Eastern Europe

In the period after the Second World War, Stalinism expanded its influence into Eastern Europe. Degenerate workers' states were created in East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania and Yugoslavia. These counter-revolutionary overturns of capitalism resulted in states which mirrored many of the features of the USSR including formal political and legal equality for women.⁷ The other features of the Stalinist position on women, the drawing of women into social production and the rhetoric about women's equality, varied widely from country to country.

The position of women in each state was determined by a combination of the influence of the USSR with its Stalinist constitution, and specific features based on the historical position of women in each country. For example, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) had a long tradition of women's organisation, with strong women's anti-fascist committees. The Stalinist bureaucrats first incorporated these and later abolished them, but were never able to completely destroy the tradition of women's political organisation—indeed over 30% of the seats in parliament were reserved for women.

Significant advances for women were made in the GDR following the occupation of the region by the Soviet Armed Forces. In 1947?before the overthrow of capitalism?women were declared equal and granted equal pay for equal work. The 1950 Act for the Protection of Mother and Child and the Rights of Women included provisions for state child-care, maternity grant and paid maternity leave, a revision of family law, and positive measures to increase women?s qualifications and promote their access to male dominated areas of work.

Despite such reforms, the Stalinist GDR was far from being a paradise for working women. The relative advantages enjoyed by women were always double-edged. All legislation referred to women as ?workers and mothers? and the assumption that family and child-care was the primary responsibility of the woman remained unchallenged. Although by the 1980s 80% of women of working age worked outside the home (compared with only 32% in West Germany) women were still responsible for 80% of all domestic labour! Although the state provided considerable child-care to enable to women to work?by 1986 81% of children under three years old were cared for in day-care centres and after-school supervision was available for 84% of six to ten year olds?the quality of care was poor, so much so that many women did not want to entrust their children to the run-down nurseries.

In the other East European states the participation of women in social production and the level of social provision was generally less than in the GDR but still in advance of the situation in the west. By the 1970s women constituted about a half of the labour force, whereas they averaged only one third in the OECD countries. There were variations in this development. In Hungary the proportion of women in the workforce increased from 29% to 44% between 1949 and 1974, but in some areas of Yugoslavia less than 6% of the workforce were women in 1986!

Throughout the degenerate workers? states Stalinist bureaucratic misrule has meant that the participation of women in work outside the home has not broken down the traditional divisions of labour at work and the segregation of women into low paid and unskilled jobs. In Poland women?s wages are only 65% of those of men; in Yugoslavia the figure is 75%. In Eastern Europe as a whole the wage gap between men and women ranges from 30-35%. This figure has remained virtually unchanged since the Second World War.

In other words, despite the destruction of capitalism, despite the numerical expansion of women workers and the formal provision of equal pay, Stalinism has proved unable and unwilling to transform the nature of ?women?s work?. Formal equal rights cannot overcome women?s inequality where the roots of that inequality in the family remain unchallenged, or, as in the Stalinist states and under capitalism, are reinforced.

The bureaucrat?s plan comes first!

Throughout Eastern Europe, the needs of the bureaucratic plan were fulfilled whatever the cost to the working class in general or women in particular. The pollution and poor living conditions in the sprawling grey workers? districts of Eastern Europe?s industrial regions meant that poor health and infant mortality placed an even greater burden on women in their role as mothers and housewives. The concentration of many of these countries on the manufacture of heavy industrial products for the USSR meant that consumer goods were neglected. The lack of labour-saving devices for use in the home has been one of the major complaints of women in Eastern Europe, as has the failure of the regime to invest in good quality housing and social provision.

These factors have meant that women have not experienced the increase in work outside the home as a step towards liberation but as an additional burden. Child-care and basic household tasks?cooking and preparing meals, washing and cleaning?generally take much longer in Eastern Europe than in the west due to the failure of the plan to even match the provision of labour saving appliances common in Western Europe. Poor distribution and bureaucratic theft mean that women spend hours queuing for food and basic consumer goods.

In virtually every case, this massive burden falls entirely upon working-class women: in Poland women are exclusively responsible for cooking in 94% of households, and for washing and ironing in 90%. In Yugoslavia women do an average of 26 hours of housework each week! The bureaucrats in the GDR dealt with women?s ?double shift? in a classic fashion: women were granted a ?household day??one day off every month, and if they had two or more children

were allowed a shorter working week. Whilst obviously perceived as a boon by the women concerned, this measure reinforced the division of labour in the home: men were explicitly excluded unless they were single parents or their wife was certified as ill.

The bureaucracy encourages motherhood

As in the USSR, the bureaucracies of Eastern Europe were determined to ensure a growing workforce for the future by promoting larger families through 'pro-natalist' policies of various types, almost all of which ultimately failed. The most extreme and savage form was found in Romania. Ceausescu's drive towards economic autarky led him to outlaw abortion and contraception and couples were regularly screened at work to make sure they were not using contraception! Childless couples were hounded by the state and penalised through higher taxation.

The GDR also had a pro-natalist policy, but encouraged population growth through positive encouragement of women to 'choose' to have more children, combined with widespread, if poor quality, child-care provision and generous maternity leave. The 1972 legislation on abortion in the GDR was explicit:

'The equality of women in education and vocation, in marriage and family makes it necessary to leave it to the discretion of women themselves to decide whether and when to have a child . . . Women have the right to decide on their own responsibility and on the number and timing of children they bear, and shall be able to decide upon this through a termination of pregnancy.'

This relatively progressive position, far better than that prevailing in West Germany, was not the product of enlightened Stalinist bureaucrats in the GDR. Rather it reflected the relative weight of the traditional organisation of working class women in the region, and the importance for the Stalinists of maintaining at least the passive acceptance of bureaucratic rule among these layers. When the Wall came down in 1989 the whole Stalinist project in the GDR came tumbling down with it. The abortion legislation has proved a sticking point in imperialism's destruction of the degenerate workers' state: for the next period the ex-GDR will maintain its pre-1990 abortion legislation, although the imperialists have made clear their intention to wipe out this gain.

The revolutionary upheavals of 1989-90

Ever since the creation of the degenerate workers' states, working women have played an important role in the revolutionary struggles which have periodically shaken the Stalinists' bureaucratic rule. In Czechoslovakia in the 1960s, faced with growing discontent amongst women, the Stalinists were forced to launch a new women's movement, the Czechoslovak Union of Women (CUW). During the 'Prague Spring' of 1968 the CUW, which was 300,000 strong at its peak, ousted the old leadership and was an important focus for sections of the opposition. In Poland the revolutionary struggles of 1980-81 saw the massive involvement of women: 50% of the Solidarnosc activists in the early days were women, although they were later marginalised by the increasingly reactionary and Catholic leadership.

The struggles of 1989 and 1990 mobilised many women, opening up new opportunities but also new dangers. Freed from the Stalinists' dictatorship over political life, women have looked for new alternatives. The abuses which were inflicted on the working class in the years of Stalinist rule have discredited 'socialism' in the eyes of millions.

Whilst fighting against bureaucratic dictatorship the leaders of the various opposition movements have inexorably turned their gaze towards the mirage of the market economy. This has appealed to many workers and to women who yearn for the apparently comfortable lifestyle of women in Western Europe. This seductive but poisonous alternative is accepted by virtually everyone: from leading oppositionists to many of the Stalinists themselves as they desperately try to cling onto power.

What does the market and capitalism promise for women? Many working class women are understandably tempted by the democratic and individual freedoms they see on offer. They are tempted by the wealth, the availability of consumer goods, even the clothes and the reported sexual freedoms that they believe exist for women in the west.

But the reality of restored capitalism would not be that of the idealised media vision of the 'Swedish' model. Whilst a minority of women—mainly the petit bourgeois and bourgeois—would undoubtedly be wealthier, have more opportunities and be able to exercise some of their freedoms, for the vast majority of workers it would mean continued and worsening drudgery at work and in daily life. Restoration of capitalism would make life more difficult and insecure for millions of working class women in Eastern Europe. Lack of jobs, market prices for housing food and fuel would all be felt hardest by women as they sought to keep the family fed and clothed.

The destruction of the degenerate workers' state in the GDR and the moves towards the rule of the market in Poland and Hungary have revealed the true values of capitalism. Unemployment has escalated as 'unprofitable' enterprises are closed. For those without jobs, the promise of possibly better wages under capitalism is of little comfort.

Child-care and other services are being axed as enterprises close. Where nurseries remain parents will be charged 'market prices' for the care their children receive. Many women will be forced through lack of jobs and kindergarten places to stay at home to care for their children. In Poland women have faced repeated attempts to outlaw abortion, and suffered as prices rise and subsidies are removed, whilst in Czechoslovakia abortion has already been restricted.

The experience of the majority of women in capitalist countries throughout the world is one of poverty and deprivation. The crises of capitalism, the exploitation of the imperialists who seize the land of peasants and proceed to destroy the fertility of that land through over-intensive single crop techniques, the forcing of millions of women and children to the urban slums and shanty towns to beg or live by prostitution—that is the reality of the capitalists' market world-wide. And this is the grim prospect facing the working women of Eastern Europe, not the media image of the glamorous liberated housewife.

Women in the USSR today

In the USSR the political crisis has yet to be resolved. For the moment the Stalinists still retain power. A massive potential threat to their rule is the seething discontent of working class women.

The crisis of bureaucratic planning has exacerbated a situation which was already verging on the unbearable for millions of Soviet women. The specific oppression of women in the USSR is massive. For example, on average Soviet women with young children do twenty hours more domestic work per week than men.

Domestic appliances are virtually non-existent, and as in the other Stalinist states, those social services which do exist are utterly inadequate in quality and quantity. This is particularly true in the rural areas and in the eastern republics—social service provision in Tadzhikistan is only 6% of that in the urban areas. And those services that do exist are under threat. As the enterprises become competitive and 'extras' like providing a service for the local community are axed parents now have to pay five times as much to put their children in some local workplace nurseries if they do not work in the factory.

One result of glasnost has been a debate about the role of women in society. Gorbachev contributed to this debate and his sentiments have found resonance amongst many parts of the bureaucracy and in the working class itself:

'Over the years of our difficult and heroic history, we failed to pay attention to women's specific rights and needs arising from their role as mother and home-maker, and their indispensable educational function as regards children . . . We have discovered that many of our problems—in children's and young people's behaviour, in our morals, culture and in production—are partially caused by the weakening of family ties and slack attitude to family responsibilities.

This is a paradoxical result of our sincere and politically justified desire to make women equal with men in everything. Now, in the course of perestroika, we have begun to overcome this shortcoming. That is why we are now holding heated debates in the press, in public organisations, at work and at home, about the question of what we should do to make it possible for women to return to their purely womanly mission.'⁸

The free market 'experts' advised Gorbachev that millions of workers would have to be sacked in order to shore up the

ailing bureaucratic system of planning and production. His response was to focus on women as being the easiest to get rid of. Given the monotonous drudgery of most jobs in the degenerate workers' states and the crushing weight of domestic work, he could present a return to the home as liberation from toil and the restoration of the wife and the mother to her 'natural' sphere.

The bureaucracy has long been searching for an answer to the 'problem' of women's participation in the world of work. From 1980 onwards part-time work has been promoted for women, as has home-work, but few can afford to lose earnings. Changes in maternity leave and benefits in 1981 encouraged more women to stay at home, with women being entitled to twelve months leave on partial pay. But these changes did not substantially shift women out of production?they have remained at around 50% of the workforce since the end of the war.

Gorbachev sought to reverse this process and make women more responsible for the family, something also made necessary by the cuts in social provision which have accompanied the moves towards the market from the outset. The twelfth Five Year Plan (1986-90) included the growth of part-time work, further development of home-work and a shortening of the working week for women. Maternity leave was extended to eighteen months.

Elements of Gorbachev's programme for women found favour within the working class. The miners' strike in the Kuzbass in 1989 included as one of its demands the provision of three years maternity leave for women. This might sound tempting to many women, but it would make them ever more dependent upon their husbands, and exclude them from the social life of collective work.

A shorter period of guaranteed maternity and paternity leave, on full pay and with job security, combined with a shorter working week, flexible hours and child-care leave for all parents plus the provision of high quality child-care, would ensure relief from domestic burdens whilst allowing their continued participation in the workforce.

Many women have openly opposed this reversion to the old sexual division of labour. Even within the party organisations women have raised objections. At the All-Union Conference of Women in 1987 delegates argued for equality in domestic work against Gorbachev's 'womanly mission'. The Conference also argued for better prospects for women in promotion and training and a breaking down of the sharp contrast of male and female labour rather than adopting a 'back to the family hearth' position.

The hardship experienced by the mass of women leads many workers to look for more time to carry out domestic work. But for this to be channelled towards demanding more time for women in the home, rather than towards a reduction in the working week for all workers, represents a step back in the position of women. The back-to-the-home solution of the marketising reformers is supported by the growth of other reactionary ideologies. Following decades of suppression the church has enjoyed a growth in influence under the greater democratic freedoms of glasnost. The Orthodox Church in Russia, Catholicism in the Baltic republics and Islam in the eastern republics are all gaining influence. All these religions, often strongest in their hold over women, support moves restricting women's role to that of family domestic slave and child rearer.

The response of women workers

In the face of this pressure from the bureaucracy, the church and pro-market forces to return to a 'purely womanly mission', the response of women has varied. Whilst there are those who mistakenly embrace this retreat, others have resisted. In Poland women in the independent workers' movement have organised to defend abortion rights and women's jobs. In Germany women in the former GDR have led action to protect child-care facilities and progressive abortion laws.

But as the forces of reaction grow more confident, women find it more and more difficult to mobilise. Working class women's own specific needs will be increasingly ignored. In the change from revolution to counter-revolution in the GDR, the role of women and their organisations changed. Women's groups participated in the Round Table discussion of autumn 1989: their reward has been to see their interests signally ignored by all major parties since the time of

restoration.

Seeking to fight reactionary proposals to return to hearth and home, and disillusioned with both pro-bourgeois and working class organisations, many progressive women will be drawn towards the ideas of feminism. They will be attracted by the idea that women must organise 'autonomously' to win equality with men in all spheres of society. But feminist ideology and the feminist programme does not provide a real solution to the problems facing the majority of women in the USSR and Eastern Europe. Instead of seeking to make the fight against women's oppression part of the struggle of the working class as a whole, the feminists see women's struggles as distinct and separate.

Radical feminists argue that that working class women must not unite with working class men against the common enemy of boss or bureaucrat, but that all women should unite against their common enemy, men. They further claim that the inability of Stalinism to liberate women shows that socialism is no guarantee of women's liberation. They ignore the fact that these societies are not socialist. They are dominated by a bureaucratic caste which is incapable of taking society forward.

The radical feminists' recipe of a cross-class alliance of women would be poison for working class women: the only power which can successfully sweep away the bureaucracy, beat back the impending restorationist onslaught and open the way to real women's liberation is that of the proletariat. All separatist movements which try and split working women away from the labour movement will inevitably weaken the only real force for progress.

Socialist feminism shares with radical feminism the idea that the structures of women's oppression have a separate existence from other forms of oppression and exploitation. They refer to this system of domination as 'patriarchy'. This idea leads socialist feminists to argue that women must organise autonomously and to expect that their struggles will be distinct from those of the working class as a whole.

Pushed on by the inexorable logic of their anti-working class theory of patriarchy, socialist feminists in Western Europe have ended up being more concerned about the interests and ambitions of a narrow layer of petit bourgeois women than about the fate of the majority of women—the workers. The socialist feminists have generally gravitated around the reformist parties, taking part in both local and national government. They have thereby lent credence to the reformists' fraudulent formal commitment to equality for women and have frequently played a full role in the reformists' anti-working class actions.

Feminism cannot offer a way forward for working women in Eastern Europe. Nor can the capitalist market, be it run by Stalinists, Social Democrats, populists or nationalists. The only alternative for working women in the degenerate workers' states is a return to the revolutionary tradition of the Bolshevik programme for women, now embodied in the programme of Trotskyism.

The need for a revolutionary programme

The revolutionary upheavals of recent years and those ahead offer the opportunity for the working class, and women workers in particular, to organise to fight for their own interests. These cannot be separated from the general struggle to destroy the bureaucracy, resist the restoration of capitalism, and totally transform the degenerate workers' states into revolutionary vehicles for the liberation of the working class.

The choice is a stark one and the stakes for women could not be higher. A return to the market would face working class women with a dramatic worsening of their conditions as well as with the loss of a historically vital instrument for their emancipation—the nationalised and planned economies.

As each country adopts more and more market reforms, leading ultimately to the restoration of capitalism as in the GDR, women will experience mounting attacks on their daily lives: increasing unemployment, loss of job security, reduced child-care provision, loss of abortion rights, decreased rights to parental leave. At the moment women in Eastern Europe and the USSR are generally equal before the law and in political life. Whilst such formal equal rights can never mean true equality if the lives of women remain dominated by family responsibilities and low paid work in

the factories, they should be defended against repeal.

Both the hardline Stalinists and the restorationists want to reduce women's participation in work. But it is through involvement in social production that women can fully become part of society, can break from isolation and dependence within the family and can organise collectively to determine their own future and the shape of society. Women, alongside male workers, must control the way they work, the goods they produce and their equitable distribution throughout society. The division between domestic work in the household and collective work in the enterprises must be broken down. The collective provision of services to carry out domestic work, raise children and care for dependents is a central part of the liberation of women.

Child-care and social provision in the Stalinist states are generally high by capitalist standards, but provision is extremely uneven, and the quality of services is often appalling. Nurseries and kindergartens are staffed by women on low wages and with little training. Without any collective and state child-care women would be forced into an even more dependent position with regard to their husbands and families, so it is important to defend state and enterprise provision of such facilities. But the present quality of such provision should never be idealised and can only be improved fundamentally through the direct control of workers and parents.

For women to achieve real freedom and equality there must be a society which plans the social provision of basic necessities such as good quality housing, food and care for the aged, the young, the sick and the disabled. These tasks cannot be the responsibility of the individual family unit and in particular to the women within it. Nor can they be left to the gross inequalities of the capitalist market.

To decide on such priorities and to meet them requires a conscious direction of society's resources. This will only be possible in a state where all the large scale means of production are the property of the working population as a whole. Workers must control the planning, the quality and the distribution of all goods and services. This is only possible in a revolutionary workers' state based on workers' councils which assures the active participation of the majority of workers, including women.

Women who were jubilant at the downfall of the Stalinists in Eastern Europe and who are active oppositionists in the USSR can play a decisive role in shaping their future if they understand the impact of the Stalinist workers' states on their lives, foresee the assaults of capitalism and fight for a revolutionary alternative to both.

Notes

1. See interview on page 23
2. L Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, Pathfinder (New York 1976) p44
3. Inessa Armand, quoted in Elizabeth Waters, *'In the shadow of the Comintern?', Promissory Notes, women in the transition to socialism*, edited by Sonia Kruks, Rayna Rapp and Marilyn B Young, *New Feminist Library* (1989 London) pp33-34
4. L D Trotsky, *Problems of everyday life*, Pathfinder (New York 1973) p38
5. Quoted in Rudolph Schlesinger, *Changing Attitudes in Soviet Russian: the family in the USSR* (London 1949) p252
6. L D Trotsky, *Revolution Betrayed*, op cit, p145
7. For an analysis of these bureaucratic overturns see *The Degenerated Revolution, Workers Power and the Irish Workers Group* (London 1982)
8. M Gorbachev, *Perestroika* (London 1987) p117

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/breaking-chains-stalinism-women-eastern-bloc>