

Chapter 1 - The origin and nature of women's oppression

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There is nothing "natural" or "eternal" about the subordination of women. Human societies have existed during the stage of development that Engels terms "primitive communism", when women's contribution to, and role within, these societies were regarded as equal to (in some cases superior to) those of men. The proven existence of such societies by anthropologists and archaeologists confounds those who defend the subordination of women on the grounds that it "has always been so" and must, therefore, always be so. It also exposes the errors of those feminists who regard the existence of women's oppression in different class societies as proof that this oppression is not based on the division of societies into classes.

Class society and its corresponding forms of property resulted from the disbanding of the gentile society. Kinship groups owned possessions collectively or on a communal basis and it was households rather than families which formed the fundamental units of social organisation. The kinship groups were often structured in a matrilineal way, but some were patrilineal. The basis of production for the communities was primarily agriculture and in part cattle breeding and herding. The oldest forms of human societies, however, were represented by foraging hordes who did not yet use the soil as a means of labour but only as an object of labour. The land was not property even in a communal sense. Such groups were initially based on hunting and gathering. Later horticulture and the domestication of animals became the basis for subsistence.

Within such societies there were various divisions of labour on the basis of sex and age. These were neither rigid nor formalised through ritual or custom. Such divisions were not identical in every group, but several common features emerged with regard to the roles adopted by males and females within this period of human society. In general females were more likely to be involved in gathering than hunting. This stemmed from their role as the reproducers of the species. Pregnancy and the subsequent suckling of infants (which was often very prolonged) explain why women tended towards gathering as the main element of their work. Although arduous, gathering was more compatible with carrying infants who were suckling. Males were involved in hunting and activities which involved wider mobility from the home base.

Exceptions exist (and there are many cases of younger women, prior to their involvement in reproduction, being involved in the hunt) but the same general features are found in most hunter-gatherer societies which have been studied. However, this emerging division of labour was not either then, or inherently, oppressive. Women's contribution through gathering was no less valued than that of men engaged in hunting. A rough equality between the sexes existed.

In some situations in small clans where the reproduction of the clan was endangered by a shortage of women, women were, because of their ability to bear children, the intended victims of raiding parties, whilst male prisoners of war were mostly immediately killed. In order to protect themselves against such seizure, women were reliant upon the protection of men of their own clan because they themselves were less

practised in the arts of war. These facts are held by feminist writers to prove the oppression of women in primitive communist society. This is not true. Rather, this reliance formed one element of the interdependency of males and females in primitive society.

However, the decisiveness of reproduction in determining the nature of the division of labour does not mean that oppression was biologically determined. Reproductive roles played their part in shaping an initially non-oppressive division of labour. The development of the forces of production and the changing relationship of reproduction to them, not the fact of women's reproductive role in and of itself, was central to the transformation of the division of labour into an oppressive one.

As the forces of production expanded with the development of horticulture and later agriculture, the domestication and breeding of animals, and the development of metalworking leading to the production of better tools (and weapons) for carrying out such tasks, the conditions were created for the production of a surplus, i.e. more food and means of subsistence than were required for immediate consumption by the group. The existence of a surplus stimulated a struggle within the kinship groups. A stratum of individuals (emerging out of the complex ranking systems that prevailed in kinship groups) began to assert their direct control over the surplus in contradiction to the norms of communal possession that had previously held sway. Individuals acquiring and controlling an embryonic form of private property were thrown into conflict with the kinship group as a whole.

This struggle was not yet a class struggle, but rather the birth pangs of class society. The death knell of 'primitive communism' had been sounded. It was during this period that the kinship group was replaced by the individual family and monogamy was imposed on women. It was as a result of this process that women became systematically socially oppressed.

Of course all sorts of 'oppression' existed even during these early stages of human development? captives, male and female, for example, were often oppressed. And it was also here that the oppression of sexuality, above all of women, had its origin. All the same, the oppression of women in societies on the threshold of class division was very far from being a coherent system of gender-specific oppression and discrimination. The dissolution of the original primitive communist equality of the sexes took place in the course of thousands of years and in many tribal societies it was accompanied by counter-tendencies to maintain the old order.

In societies struggling to maintain their existence within the framework of a subsistence economy, particular factors such as demographic problems resulted in the establishment of rituals and taboos that often had brutal consequences for women because of their role in reproduction, e.g. the Australian Aborigines. However, such examples remain exceptions explained by contingent material causes and are not proof of the generalised social oppression of women. The systematic social oppression of women as a sex was a consequence of the struggle between communal possession and private property (or in the case of the Asiatic mode, property held by the state) and the triumph of the latter over the former.

This social oppression means that women were systematically excluded from an equitable claim on the communal social product and denied control over the product of their own labour. This form of oppression, social oppression, can only develop where there has been prolonged production of a social surplus, where struggle for control over that surplus necessitates control of women's productive and reproductive functions. The social oppression of women was a result of the emergence of class society. As such it can only be consigned to the dustbin of history with the destruction of class society.

As the surplus was produced the process of exchange between groups, rather than the simple distribution for consumption which had occurred within the kinship groups, became more and more important. Trade

developed and the value of the surplus became clear in terms of the ability to acquire produce from other groups. The groups that came to control this surplus and thereby developed into the ruling class of the new societies, were in general male due to their existing role in production.

That is, the pre-existing division of labour although initially non-oppressive, was to be central in the creation of a ruling class. The legacy of men's role in hunting was decisive in three ways. Firstly it meant men were in control of domesticated animals, a dynamic sphere of production in terms of the expansion of the surplus. Secondly, the increased importance of the land as a valuable resource led to struggles for land. Men had, by virtue of their hunting role, control over the weaponry (and related to this, tools) and had developed the skills in making and using it.

Their role in warfare was not only to defeat rival kinship groups but also to destroy female control of the land. Women still worked the land but men both seized new lands and controlled the produce from it. The third advantage for men was that they tended to be the members of the group who travelled. With the expansion of the forces of production travel involved not only war but trade. From early on men generally controlled trade (although there are exceptions such as certain tribes in West Africa).

Thus men enjoyed advantages in both production and exchange. Therefore a section of men who were best placed to take control of the distribution of the surplus product of the collective group became an embryonic ruling class. In the earliest class societies the transformation of the communal surplus into private property was often given a religious guise, with the owners being a priestly caste. The idea that private property was in fact merely communal possessions controlled by representatives of the 'gods' was a legacy of the kinship group traditions that had only recently been overthrown and an ideological justification for the new regime that had replaced them.

This process shaped the economic order of the private household. The division of labour between men and women became profoundly oppressive to women. The formerly social labour of women's gathering, agriculture and household management was transformed into privatised labour in the service of the household unit, the early monogamous family.

It was women's role in production which consigned them to a subordinate position in society. But within this process the conflict between communal possessions and private property had a transforming effect on the social organisation which resulted in the systematic social oppression of women. The accumulation of private property by a small caste required an end to the egalitarian distribution system which had existed in the kinship groups. The wide network of claimants to produce within the kinship group (all of a wide range of fairly distant relatives having equal claim) had to be ended if the surplus was to be concentrated. A smaller social unit, within which direct descendants were the only legitimate heirs, was created as a result of the contradiction between communal possessions and private property.

This group, the family as we now recognise it, developed through the transformation of what had been a temporary, easily dissolved, 'pairing marriage' between a man and a woman of different kin groups, into the permanent basis for the new household. The pairing marriage became permanent, and for women this was exclusive sexually. This meant that all her children were necessarily those of her husband and therefore legitimate heirs to his wealth. As this became the predominant form of social organisation so codes and laws were introduced which enforced the subordination of women and resulted in the loss of any equal rights either to possessions/property or within political and social life. The collective household of the kinship group was transformed into the prison house of the monogamous family. Patrilineality became the norm and matrilineality was overthrown.

The clash between the kinship groups (gentile society) and the family, reflecting the clash between

primitive communism and private property, created the objective need for a public power to adjudicate in the struggle. The material basis for the state was created. Within the kinship groups no external power was required since the groups themselves operated co-operatively with all members having equal rights and responsibilities. The external state reinforced the patriarchal nature of the family and inheritance. These developments occurring over many thousands of years and in a profoundly combined and uneven way created the earliest class societies (the ancient city kingdoms of Mesopotamia, Egypt etc). These class societies were patriarchal. Women had suffered an historic defeat.

Engels' analysis of the origins of women's oppression was correct in its fundamentals. New anthropological evidence has called into question certain details of his analysis which we are therefore obliged to modify or supplement. These are as follows:

Engels' acceptance of mother-right as a universal stage of society and his implication that this stage involved a period of female domination in society is not borne out by modern archaeological and anthropological evidence. While there is extensive evidence of matrilineal kinship groups there is little evidence to suggest that they were socially dominated by women. Rough equality existed.

Moreover this equality prevailed in the patrilineal kinship groups that also existed in the earliest phase of human society. However, insofar as the obliteration of matrilineality is always a feature of the development of class societies, Engels is right to refer to a historic defeat for women. The point is that this defeat occurred as a result of a process rather than as a conscious and cataclysmic act against women, by men.

Engels' emphasis on cattle production as the primary area for the accumulation of a surplus should not blind us to the importance of the struggle over control of the land as a component of the process whereby women became oppressed as a sex. The development of horticulture into agriculture made the land a vital source of surplus produce. While in many hoe-farming societies, women more or less maintained their equality, the later-developed nomadic herding societies represented the opposite extreme. In them, tattle,-herding, controlled by men, contributed more to the social product than did the labour of women. In this context, essential features of patriarchy and the oppression of women were established, and in the course of wars and invasions, were imposed on defeated hoe-farming cultures. Male domination of warfare ensured that men were the chief beneficiaries of the struggles that took place over land.

Engels identifies slave society as the first fully fledged class society in which the subordination of women is legally enshrined. In fact the urban civilisations of Mesopotamia were class societies dominated by large landowners and a priestly caste who extracted tribute from the mass of servile farmers in which the patriarchal family was established and recognised in the laws of the state. Their difference with the slave societies of the classical world was that they exhibited more and clearer traces of the communal kinship groups from which they had sprung (e.g. the idea that property belonged to the gods, rather than individuals and the priests were merely its administrators, the ability of women to escape aspects of their legal oppression through buying themselves into temple service etc).

We must add to Engels' analysis an explanation of why it was women who were subordinated as a sex. This stems from the transformation of the original hunter-gathering division of labour (which in turn was shaped by women's role in reproduction which made them less well suited to hunting) from a predominantly co-operative one into a systematically oppressive one. The conflict between the developing family unit and the kinship group was the reason for this transformation.

One main idea of Engels' derivation of the origin of women's oppression was based on Darwin's principle of natural selection which he saw realized in a universally generalized incest-taboo. Consequently, Engels understood the development of mankind as one of progressive stages: starting with the

promiscuous ancient horde, via Punalua-family and gentes to the coupling marriage which was welcomed by the patriarchy as a fertile ground to establish the monogamic marriage by force. However progressive it was for Engels to place the monogamic marriage as a later stage of human history, his given sequence of family forms was far from universal.

On this point Engels did not fully transcend the biological determinism because he could not link the development of reproduction and production according to the level of development of the social formation. The development of family forms has to be studied with the historical-materialist method in the same way as the sphere of immediate production, but not in a Darwinist way; incest-taboo and marriage rules have to be derived socially; i.e. from the level of the forces and relations of production.

With these modifications and additions the origins of women's oppression can still be explained by the method of dialectical materialism utilised by Engels, and the woman question can be understood as, fundamentally, a class question.

The monogamous family

The emergence of class society brought with it the monogamous (for the woman) family. The nature of marriage in primitive societies varied. Pairing marriages and group marriages were common. In the former case it was generally relatively easy to dissolve the marriage at the request of one partner. While the degree of sexual freedom in these marital arrangements varied enormously in primitive society, monogamy could not be said to be the prevailing norm.

Its appearance as a prevailing norm in the earliest class societies marked a new historic period for both the family and for women. It also added a new dimension to the sexual division of labour which intensified women's oppression and became a common feature of that oppression in every subsequent class society.

That dimension was the privatisation, within the individual family unit, of domestic labour. As the anthropologist, Eleanor Leacock put it, "The subordination of the female sex was based in the transformation of their socially necessary labour into a private service through the separation of the family from the clan. It was in this context that women's domestic and other work came to be performed under conditions of virtual slavery."

Despite the massive expansion in the productive forces since the time of the ancient cultures, women are still domestic slaves.

In slave society the family was not simply (or even primarily) parents and their children. In fifth century Athens the family of the newly emerging ruling class (the large slaveholders and land owners of Attica) was organised around the household, the oikos. Within this framework women managed the household and engaged in weaving (for consumption and trade) while men conducted public affairs, trade, matters of state etc. Women were legally restricted from engaging in substantial trading themselves. While they could, formally, own property, they could not control it.

Control was recognised as belonging to their husbands or, in the case of daughters who had, because of a lack of sons, inherited the family wealth, male guardians (kyrios). The woman's father or guardian arranged marriages in order to attract wealth into the family. Needless to say, slave women were oppressed at the hands of this fiercely patriarchal society by being used for the economic benefit and sexual pleasure of ruling class men. They were denied all rights to having any family of their own, since the children of slaves were simply the possession of the master.

This economic subordination was matched by a ruthless regime in social matters. Women in Athens

(Sparta was less rigid in its attitudes, though the warrior culture was oppressive to women in a number of other ways) were segregated into their own areas within the household and regarded by their husbands as breeding machines. Individual sex-love played no role in the matter. A cynical fourth century Greek orator summed up the attitude of the most highly developed slave society (Athens) before the Roman Empire:

?We resort to courtesans for our pleasure, keep concubines to look after our daily needs, and marry wives to give us legitimate children and be the faithful guardians of our hearth.?

In ancient Rome women (of the ruling strata) did enjoy more personal freedom than their Athenian forebears. However, relative personal freedom in some matters did not mean that social oppression ceased to exist. In all essentials the Roman family, the familia, was, like the oikos, a household, within which women were responsible for all domestic concerns while having no independent control over the produce of the household.

The collapse of the Roman Empire and the slow and painful transition to feudalism altered the family structure considerably. The triumph of the barbarians meant:

- a) the end of slavery as the dominant mode of production
- b) the fusion of the barbarian family, still by and large harmonious with the clan, with the individual family unit of the conquered empire.

Over a period of several centuries this process gave rise to a new mode of production and a new type of family. Feudalism, a mode of production that emerged out of the period of transition transformed the clan property of the Germanic tribes into the property of feudal lords and princes. The serf household, working a plot of land on a feudal estate, worked co-operatively as a unit of production, constantly striving to improve the margin of produce they were able to enjoy after fulfilling their obligations to the feudal lord. Of course life was miserable for the serf and feudal lords sought to deny them anything other than the barest means of subsistence, but by eliminating slavery as the dominant mode of production and by transforming the serf family into a productive household, feudalism, a dynamic agrarian economy as compared with the late Roman Empire and with the primitive farming methods of the Germanic clans, played an important role in taking society forward after the collapse of the ancient world.

In this situation the form of women's oppression changed. For ruling class women household management became management of servants and was less decisive to the economy than the oikos or familia. In addition daughters of the ruling class were valuable assets in the construction of alliances, estate enlargement etc, through arranged marriages. For the serfs, on the other hand, the family was the basic unit of production. The husband, wife and the children worked the land co-operatively to produce the means of subsistence for themselves and a surplus for their lord. However, the pre-existing displacement of women from equal control of either the surplus or the means of subsistence could not be reversed by the serfs. The ideology of the feudal lords, refined and expressed by the church, consigned all women to an inferior status.

In medieval Europe sexual repression applied differentially to women of different classes. Amongst the ruling class ?courtly love? between a woman and a (noble/knightly) man other than her husband, was widely tolerated. For the great mass of serf women, on the other hand, the strictures of christian morality meant that sexual activity other than within marriage, was stigmatised. In particular adultery was punishable by torture or even death. The implementation of rules by the church, such as the obligation to attend confession at least annually (a measure introduced in the middle ages), ensured that local priests could interfere directly in the private lives of the serfs. Of course, reality was more complex than christian morality and ?deviant? sexual activity, including that of the priests with various married women of the

village, often went unpunished.

Serf women were still regarded as the property of the lord (a clear carry over from slavery) and in many places in feudal Europe male serfs were obliged to present their would-be wives to the lord so that he could exercise his 'right of the first night'. The maintenance of privatised domestic slavery alongside co-operative social production in one and the same serf family was a decisive material factor in the perpetuation of oppression for the great mass of women during the feudal mode of production.

The serf household could only survive as long as feudalism itself did. Taking Britain as an example (since it was the first modern industrial nation) the dissolution of feudalism led to the eventual destruction of the country's peasantry. Landowners drove the small tenant farmers from the land and laid the basis for the creation of a class of free labourers, proletarians.

Dislocated from the land they worked co-operatively. Peasant families ceased to be households engaged in social production (although cottage industries did retain aspects of the household during the earliest phases of manufacture). In the cities and towns during the industrial revolution the peasant family was undermined as all members of it were drawn into the factories or mines as individual proletarians working for an employer rather than for the maintenance of the household. Although the transition from feudalism to capitalism has not always followed this British model in every country, its essential features and their impact on the nature of the family have been generally the same.

For example, in the German lands and central Europe, a greater part of the serfs, who worked as servants on the manor, often had no families. The feudal lord had the right to allow marriage, deny it or require it. Capitalism first dissolved these fetters of personal dependence. This led to loose forms of cohabitation which engendered a massive population explosion. Only later did the capitalist state grant them the legal right of sexual activity but then only in the form of enforcing bourgeois monogamous marriage.

The pattern of development and transition described here is a predominantly European one. Clearly the forms and extent of women's subordination outside of Europe were shaped by the differing sets of social relations that existed (for example in the Asiatic mode of production). Nevertheless, the oppression of women, located in their position within the family, is common to all class societies.³

Industrial capitalism revolutionised the nature of human production and with it the specific form of women's oppression. The household ceased to be the basic unit of production and was replaced by the capitalist factory and farm. The working class family no longer produced the means of subsistence for themselves, they no longer owned any means of production. Capitalism thus created the proletariat, a class owning nothing but its capacity to labour. The sale of labour power became the only way for proletarians to survive. The introduction of machinery in industrial production allowed for all members of the working class 'regardless of sex or age' to be useful in the processes of production.

In the early period of industrial capitalism, first developed most clearly in Britain, the new productive relations broke up the old form of the family and household by drawing all members in to the factories, mines and mills. The capacity of the workers to survive and reproduce was damaged by this development, since the time for the household labour necessary to reproduce labour power had been taken into capitalist production. This led to working class struggles over the length of the working day and the setting of limits on the labour done by children and women.

Although the household as the basic unit of social production had been destroyed by capitalism the family had not. It remained the means by which the new class of proletarians reproduced themselves and their labour power. Capitalism was undermining the proletariat's capacity to do this. It was, by forcing every

member of every proletarian family to work under appalling conditions for long hours, undermining the family itself. In the face of a determined struggle by the proletariat sections of the capitalist class recognised the need to act.

Objectively the maintenance of the proletarian family as a means of reproducing labour power and the proletariat itself was in the interests of the bosses. However, the profit motive blinds capitalists to their own long term objective interests. Only when the action of the working class forces splits within their own ranks are sections of the ruling class compelled to override the objections of 'reactionary' bosses and grant reforms that are designed to preserve the rule of capital itself. Thus in nineteenth century Britain, the prototype of modern industrial capitalism, the liberal bourgeoisie succumbed to the pressure of the proletariat and granted a reform that they themselves had come to recognise the need for.

There was nothing automatic about capitalism's sudden outburst of 'enlightenment' when it conceded legislation restricting the working day. It was split and granted a reform to avoid something worse—the revolutionary action of the working class. Hence Marx rightly recognised these legislative reforms as a decisive victory for the political economy of the working class.

The introduction of legislation which limited the length of the working day for all workers, and specifically restricted the labour of women and children, allowed the working class the time needed for the reproduction of labour power. This was one factor reducing women's participation in production and taking responsibility for domestic labour. The result was that the family unit, which had been shattered by the brutality of early industrialisation, was reformed, with the altered and limited function of ensuring the reproduction of labour power. This did not result in the total exclusion of women from socialised, capitalist production, but did result in this having a secondary role, co-incidentally providing a flexible reserve army of labour.

In the period of the mid to late nineteenth century in Britain the implementation of the protective legislation and the re-creation of the family was used by sections of the labour aristocracy in the craft unions to exclude women from production in a way that went beyond that which was necessary to preserve the reproduction of the class. In this way the factory legislation was both progressive and necessary for the working class, but was implemented at the expense of women playing a fuller role in the employed workforce.

The family became the only means of physical and social survival for the working class within the brutal capitalist system and was therefore defended by the class. However, this haven was also a prison for women. It had become institutionalised as the means of reproducing labour power. This meant that the already existing division between domestic labour and social production was accentuated, and women's oppression was, thereby, reinforced. The proletarian family unit was in this period, therefore, profoundly contradictory (and remains so to this day). On the one hand, it was the only place that workers—men and women—could retreat into for physical regeneration, relaxation and emotional sustenance. On the other hand its inherently oppressive structure very often negated its ability to truly satisfy these needs. It was therefore only a limited protection against capitalist devastation.

In countries such as Britain the prosperity of the labour aristocracy enabled them to have full-time housewives at home, replicating the 'ideal' of the bourgeois family. Through the labour aristocracy this ideal was transmitted into the whole working class. Defence of this ideal became inscribed on the banner of political reformism. Defence of the family as a means of survival was thus transformed by the reformist leaders based on the labour aristocracy into a defence of the reactionary bourgeois ideal of the family.

This partly explains why, contrary to Marx and Engels' expectations, the family of the proletariat did not

disappear. Another reason, however, was that capitalism itself could not conceive of any other social structure capable of fulfilling its needs in relation to labour power and the labour force.

With the development of capitalism on a world scale, and in particular with the development of imperialism, the destruction of the family inherited from pre-capitalist periods has been repeated. In the course of its development capitalism has continually contradicted its 'ideal' of the family. In circumstances such as the African slave trade to the Americas the destruction of the family and of the ideology of family life took place. In the imperialised countries where in times of rapid industrialisation men women and children are drawn into wage labour with little protection and scant regard for their ability to maintain any home or family life. Similarly in times of economic crisis in industrialised societies, unemployment, poverty and the physical division of families caused by migration, undermines the bourgeois family 'norm'. However, the bourgeois state recognises the general social interest of the bourgeoisie in the maintenance of the family, and 'modernising' states promote the ideal of the family whilst often actually undermining its capacity to function as a unit for reproducing labour power.

In imperialist South Africa families are physically divided in order to facilitate the exploitation of black workers. With virtually no welfare provision to protect the working class family it is being torn apart in the shanty towns and ghettos that surround the urban industrial centres in the semi-colonies. From the bands of homeless, foraging youth in São Paulo and Mexico City through to the ruthlessly exploited children who labour as semi-slaves in the sweatshops of Thailand, proof of capitalism's preparedness to sacrifice the working class family for the sake of profit abounds.

Only the struggle of the working class can stop this brutal process. Marx recognised the victory of the European workers in securing a legal limit to the working day, a measure of protection that facilitated the re-creation of the family, as a victory for the political economy of the working class over the capitalists. Such a victory is necessary in the semi-colonies, but its achievement there will be inextricably linked with the destruction of imperialist domination through the achievement of working class power. This in turn can ensure that the working class does not seek recourse from misery in the bourgeois family, within which the woman is enslaved.

The functions of the bourgeois family

The family of the bourgeoisie emerged in capitalism with a different role. Its primary functions are the reproduction of the next generation of the ruling class and the transmission of wealth in a patrilineal fashion. These functions required the continued control over women's sexuality and monogamy remained essential for the wife if the paternity of the husband was to be guaranteed.

The bourgeois marriage was often used to secure the aggregation of capital by the most wealthy families. Bourgeois marriage was different from marriage in preceding epochs. Up to the triumph of capitalism marriage had always been arranged by people other than the partners involved. Even to this day arranged marriages are predominant in a number of semi-colonial countries, a mark of the backwardness such countries remain trapped in during this, the epoch of imperialism.

For the emerging bourgeoisie of the eighteenth century arranged marriages were supplanted by the marriage contract, a contract signed by two free individuals who have made up their own minds as to who should be their partner. To justify this new arrangement in their struggle against the feudal aristocracy the bourgeoisie seized upon and romanticised the notion of individual sex-love as the motive for marriage. However this notion was a hypocritical disguise for the real motives of the rising bourgeoisie. It provided them with moral cover against the 'dissolute' aristocracy and, at the same time, enabled them to place their own particularly vicious stamp on the monogamous marriage.

The 'contract' entered into freely by both parties, enshrined the dominance of the man within the family and ensured that individual sex-love was the means for guaranteeing a wife's fidelity within marriage. The contract still left the man free to practice individual sex-love with other women, particularly, as capitalism developed, with prostitutes. However, the early development of capitalism also included the bourgeois democratic revolutions which broke the economic and political fetters which hampered capitalist production. These revolutions proclaimed the 'rights of man' yet signally failed to grant, in practice, the 'equality of woman', even though bourgeois revolutionaries were occasionally prepared to inscribe it on their banners for the purposes of enlisting the support of the whole people.

The continuing legal restrictions on women denied them many things, such as their right to hold and control property, their right to vote, hold public office, divorce, gain admission to education and the professions and to have access to available methods to control their own fertility. This was in clear contradiction to the proclaimed ideals of bourgeois democracy.

The struggle for these rights was the basis for the bourgeois women's movement of the late nineteenth century. Despite exceptions the general resistance from the ruling class to grant these limited rights even to women of their own class reflects their need to defend the family form which produced heirs to inherit their property, and their reluctance to extend democratic rights which might be taken up by the subordinate classes and then used in their struggle against the bourgeoisie.

In most imperialist countries, during the twentieth century, women were granted many, if not all, of these formal, legal, democratic rights. However, these remain limited and open to frequent attack as capitalist crises require the bourgeoisie to reinforce the ideology of the family and women's unequal position. Whilst this is primarily required to ensure that the working class family takes on increasing responsibility for care of its members, the bourgeois women may be needed as an example of the 'natural' family role. The rights gained by bourgeois women fall short of true equality, even for themselves, since they fail to attack the heart of their own, and working class women's oppression which remains the existence of the family.

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