Chapter 2 - Women's oppression under capitalism

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The allocation to women of the task of caring for children and performing the bulk of household work leads to women being unable to play a full and equal role within socialised production. Women are either excluded from social life, locked away in the domestic household, or where they are involved in social labour, they are often directed into areas of work closely allied to the domestic economy and its skills.

Thus in the major imperialist countries, despite the presence of large numbers of women in industry, women's work is predominantly in the fields of retail distribution, clothing, catering, social and health services, cleaning etc. Where women work alongside men in factories and offices they tend to be restricted to the unskilled, semi-skilled and lowest paid sectors. The education and training of girls and women is designed to reinforce this "specialisation". Above all, the family is presented as the centre, the first responsibility of women, to which waged work is subordinated.

The picture in the semi-colonies is somewhat different. Imperialism is based on the super-exploitation of such countries and, in cooperation with rapacious indigenous capitalists, it is quite prepared to employ vast numbers of women, working long hours for very little pay, in manufacturing industry. This "subversion" of its own ideological views on the role of women is necessary for imperialist capital's super profits and is compensated for by its political and economic domination of the semi-colonial countries.

The jobs which women perform have remained highly segregated, despite their increasing numbers. Women rarely work in jobs alongside men of the same grade. Pay and conditions reflect this segregation, so that equal pay legislation has failed to substantially improve women's average wages in most countries, and in some the average full-time wage of women has gone down relative to male wages over the past decades.

In the public sector there are also large numbers of non-manual white collar female workers who are concentrated in the lowest clerical grades. In some countries most of the increase in women's employment has been through part-time working, which can fit in with domestic responsibilities, but also confines women to very low pay and poor conditions such as job security. In other countries, the expansion of part-time work is less significant (e.g. France), and there are much higher levels of state child care which enable women with young children to work.

6. The family of the working class is the dominant arena within which the commodity labour power is reproduced, both through the daily restoration of the labour power of each worker, the reproduction of the commodity labour power, and also through the raising of future generations of workers. The labour necessary to produce this labour power is centred on the home, outside of socialised production. This domestic labour is overwhelmingly done by women, for which they receive no direct payment. Rather, the working class as a whole receives a wage which provides for the reproduction of labour power.

Where a woman is not employed in wage labour herself, it is assumed that her husband's wage will be used to provide for the whole family. This leads to an extreme economic dependence of non-waged
women on their husbands. The division of labour between the domestic labour of the household and the rest of socialised labour for capital which occurs in the factories etc, is the root of women’s unequal position.

The nature of the work done in the home is generally repetitive, labour intensive and done by women in isolation from others in a similar position. This leads to their being separated off from the social nature of work under capitalism, which is essential to the development of the working class as a collective, conscious class capable of carrying out social change. This remains true for women, children and some men engaged in productive labour in the home. Such labour is normally exacting, done in addition to domestic labour and involves the super-exploitation of the home workers involved.

Capitalism has proved incapable of systematically socialising the labour done in the home. Although many elements of work which were previously done in the home such as making clothes and the preparation of food, have been turned into profitable industries under capitalism, the elements of domestic labour which relate to caring for children, sick and other dependent members of the family, have never been adequately provided in a socialised way. It is this area of household labour which capitalism cannot fully socialise. The potential to socialise these areas of domestic labour clearly exists.

During World War Two in Britain and the USA the capitalist class, through its state, were willing and able to pay for nurseries, communal canteens, laundries etc, so that women workers could be utilised to the full while the men were in the army. However, the capitalist class treats such periods as exceptions. If such measures became the norm the drain on the total surplus value in capitalist society would be too great for it to sustain. Those services which it is sometimes forced to provide, such as health care and welfare, are threatened as crises force the bourgeoisie to cut the “social wage” of the working class.

Another reason why capitalism will not and cannot fully socialise domestic labour is that irrespective of whether or not it can afford to do so it would undermine the family completely. The family is no mere decoration for capitalism. It is a social structure within which the oppression of women and youth is perpetuated and because of which the oppression of lesbians and gay men takes place. It is fundamental to the existence of capitalism itself.

Since World War Two the proportion of women who work outside the home has increased dramatically in the imperialist countries. The increasing proportion of women drawn into social production has a tendency to undermine some aspects of women’s oppression, giving women who work some economic support and social contact with the rest of their class. However, this tendency has not altered the fundamental features of women’s oppression, which rest upon the continued existence of the family as a sphere of private labour for the reproduction of labour power. Since women are still responsible for the rearing of children and still perform most household labour, this has remained their primary responsibility. There is no alternative.

The state has provided certain services such as schools, nurseries, hospitals etc, to relieve women from some of the tasks they previously had to carry out in the home, but none of these replace the need for a central person in the family who takes responsibility for the social well-being of the rest. The fact that women still have to perform this role means that their ability to participate equally in the labour force is undermined.

Women have to take time off, not only to give birth, but often to look after young children during school holidays, members of the family who are sick etc. The fact that so many women with dependents, work does not indicate a real reduction in the household responsibilities of women. Rather it shows the increasing dependence of the working class family on the wage of two adults where previously they could
manage, for periods of their lives at least, on the income of one.

Women with children need to work in order to support their families. The work they do is generally organised to fit in with home responsibilities—the shifts women work, such as evenings, nights, school hours—allow women to combine their two roles as well as possible, but at the expense of social time for themselves and their family. When a child is ill, or a relative becomes more dependent (such as the elderly and invalids), it is generally women who have to give up their jobs.

8. The family plays another important role for capitalism. It is an institution through which capitalism’s ideology is transmitted to the working class. It is the social structure in which discipline, obedience, uncritical attitudes, faith in authority and subordination to social domination, modelled on patriarchal authority and female oppression, are imparted to and bred into children from the earliest age and in which, in the everyday life of married partners, this relationship of subjection is maintained and renewed. The family represses resistance and ensures conformity with bourgeois morals. It is through the patriarchal family that the first identification of sex and gender roles occurs.

The maltreatment of women and children within the family and its toleration by bourgeois society is also a means of imposing reactionary morality, repressive sexuality and gender role identification within the family. The repression of sexuality is an integral part of early character development, and as such plays a key role in the acceptance of reactionary bourgeois ideology and passivity in the heads of the ruled. Sexual repression takes place in the practice of gender-specific social behaviour, the denial of child sexuality, discrimination against female sexuality and the oppression of homosexuality.

The ideal nuclear family, although not the predominant “family” unit in society, is held up by the church, state, the mass media and schools, as being the model which all must aspire to. The family’s role as a transmitter of ideology is made all the more effective because it is, or appears as, a haven for the working class in particular, a source of comfort, of spiritual and material aid, a defence against the ravages of capitalist society.

We reject the notion that women in the family objectively create their own oppression or consciously collude with it. Their isolated situation in the home atomises working class women and leaves them vulnerable to backward ideas, perpetuated daily in the press, television and radio. For these reasons housewives, their horizons limited by the immediate needs of maintaining the family, often express reactionary ideas and play a vital role in transmitting these backward and oppressive ideas to their children, especially their daughters who are brought up by mother’s according to the sexist rules laid down by capitalist society.

But this is a reflection of their position in society, not an expression of their conscious collusion, rather of a backwardness born of that oppression. But this should not obscure the true relations of authority within the family. It is paternal authority, supported by school, church and the dominant cultural norms, which determines the rearing of future generations, even if most of the practical work of child-rearing is done by the mother.

A further aspect which contributes to the political backwardness of women, and is found most strongly amongst those who are solely housewives, is that their husbands (even the politically active) obstruct their participation in political organisations and political struggle if they do not actually seek to prevent it. The political backwardness of housewives, just like male chauvinism is unavoidable for the majority without a mass movement for socialist revolution, or that revolution itself, whose influence would reach right into the family, siding with women and children struggling against patriarchal relations.
9. The imposition of monogamy for women, which came with the development of private property and class society, has meant that women are sexually, as well as socially, oppressed. The monogamy required of women in the working class is necessary for the maintenance of a stable family unit for the reproduction of labour power. The monogamous model of the bourgeois family, necessary for the ruling class in the transmission of wealth, is thus imposed on the working class but with a different social function.

The sexual oppression of women is primarily a consequence, not a cause, of their subordination within class society. The same applies for our understanding of the construction of gender roles. Although the processes by which gender roles are created have a profound psychological effect on people and are often carried through by a variety of subtle psychological means they cannot be overcome by purely psychological or therapeutic methods. It is utopian to believe that a social/psychological liberatory practice inside the party or other workers' organisations can resolve the profound contradictions that arise from gender role construction in capitalist society.

These gender roles, above all, serve a social purpose. They are a necessary means of maintaining the family under capitalism. Unless this is understood then we will lapse into a struggle to create the perfect personality, free of the constraints of a constructed gender role, on a purely individual basis. This is utopian and diversionary. While it is necessary to overcome some of the constraints of our gender roles, in order to make us better fighters against capitalism (an achievement that generally results from the collective solidarity of the party rather than from efforts of individual will or psychological treatment) our personalities will bear the scars of the society we live in.

We must transform that society before we can hope to fully transform our personalities and destroy the material basis for the gender roles that capitalism has imposed on us. Sexual oppression and character formation are, however, at the same time, means to maintain class society in general. They make an important contribution in creating preparedness for subordination and obedience to authority.

Sexual oppression also plays a regressive role in transforming class struggle aggression into frustration and even neuroses which find their expression in various forms of, from the standpoint of the class struggle, irrational behaviour, or passivity in the face of the reformist leaders. However, even if these psychological factors play such a role, the ?false consciousness? of the working class cannot be reduced to the level of psychology. The atomising effects of capitalism and the demoralising consequences of the reformist leaders are, for us, the decisive political factors.

For these reasons we reject the claim by many feminists that the major battlefield in the struggle for liberation is around issues of sexuality. This view leads to an emphasis on personal politics, to the belief in individual solutions to oppression and to utopian schemes for sexual liberation. Furthermore, it is a view which presents medical science, in particular psychoanalysis, as equal, if not superior to, collective class struggle as a means of ending oppression.

Marxists do not ignore the valuable contributions to human understanding that advances in the field of psychology have made. Personal problems can be alleviated by various forms of psychological treatment. However, we insist that psychological insights cannot resolve the fundamental social contradictions that actually lead to personal and sexual unhappiness. The key to understanding these contradictions and to resolving them lies in the study of the history of classes. Case studies of individuals have to be understood in their historical contexts and are of supplementary value in eradicating sexual oppression. The same is true of mass- and politico-psychological analyses.

The limits of a psychoanalytical approach were shown by the career of Wilhelm Reich. By identifying the importance of sexual politics as one element of capitalism's oppression of the masses Reich paved the
way to various insights into the way in which capitalism shapes, or rather distorts, the human personality.

However his failure to understand the relationship between social life, the class struggle and sexuality led him into fatal errors. He elevated sexual politics above the economic and political class struggle and began to define the key to liberation in purely sexual terms (hence his later obsession with the orgone as a source of energy). In reality just as sexual oppression is a consequence of class society and women’s oppression within that society, so complete sexual liberation will come as a consequence of the socialist revolution, not in advance of it.

Each class society has developed ideologies that justify exploitation and oppression. A reactionary ideology with regards to sexuality has always, to one degree or another, been a feature of societies in which women are oppressed. The dominant moral values of a particular society are, like its ideas as a whole, the moral values of (or rather that serve) the ruling class. As class society has developed so too have the means for perpetuating and enforcing a morality that is profoundly oppressive to women.

Within the family itself this morality is enforced on women by their husbands and on children by their parents. At a society-wide level the church and, increasingly, the mass media are powerful propaganda machines for reactionary morality. They lay down the pernicious moral laws on sexuality that determine what is ?normal? or ?abnormal? and they stigmatise, often with savage results, those who do not conform to these laws (in particular lesbians and gay men).

In capitalist society bourgeois morality is, despite its occasional liberal periods, a means of oppressing women. In bourgeois society the free and full gratification of the sexual appetite is thwarted or distorted. While all people suffer sexual misery as a result of bourgeois morality, women are particularly affected. The restrictions placed on women’s sexual activity are far more extensive than those placed on men. To sanctify the institution of the family capitalism denies women full control of their own fertility and attacks female ?adulterers? or single parents far more systematically than it does male equivalents. The ?slag? and ?stud? syndrome still exists amongst wide layers in capitalist society.

As a norm, therefore, women are discouraged from engaging in diverse sexual relationships. Their right to sexual pleasure (at times denied altogether) is defined as proper only with a single partner and within marriage. Stereotyped roles have been fashioned which clearly repress women’s potential for equal and enjoyable sex lives. Women are either virtuous or immoral, whereas men are allowed to be (and granted respect when they are) sexually adventurous yet still held to be ?good family men”. Women’s bodies are objectified and treated as things to be enjoyed by men, either freely so in marriage or at a price in prostitution. Women’s bodies are used to sell products that have nothing to do with their bodies at all, to men.

With such a callous attitude to the female body it is little wonder that abuse against women is so widespread. Women who reject the stereotyped image and attempt to express any independent sexuality, either through lesbianism, bisexuality or by having multiple male partners are abused, denied legal rights to their children and treated as social misfits. Women without male partners or without children are pitied and regarded as inadequate. And the overwhelming majority of women are forced to conform to the norms of family life, with all the resulting frustration and unhappiness that are attendant upon those norms. And women who earn their living as prostitutes are stigmatised by society, treated as outcasts and in many countries as criminals, while their male clients are excused all guilt. What clear testimony to capitalist morality’s stinking hypocrisy!

Despite vast differences of culture and tradition women all over the globe suffer sexual oppression. The epoch of world economy has torn down any protections that women in primitive societies might have
enjoyed. In Brazil, for example, women from primitive Indian tribes in the Amazon are literally stolen and used as prostitutes to satisfy the needs of the men from a civilisation that is expanding into every corner of the rain forest. In more developed semi-colonies the sexual subjugation of women may appear more subtle, but it is nevertheless brutal, wide-ranging and degrading.

As in the imperialist countries examples of institutionalised sexual oppression abound. In addition, however, in certain semi-colonial countries (Thailand and parts of East Africa for example) prostitution has been transformed into a mass industry in which thousands of women are super-exploited, forced to work in terrible conditions, and left highly vulnerable to (often fatal) sexually transmitted diseases.

By perpetuating the sexual misery of all and by objectifying women's bodies, class society has always rendered women vulnerable to extreme acts of aggression at the hands of men-namely systematic physical abuse, rape, and the threat of such abuse. Unlike the radical feminists, we do not regard male violence as the real essence of women's oppression or, in their terms, an expression of 'male power' over women. Acts of sexual abuse and physical violence are not a simple extension of the 'normal' oppressive relations between men and women. The high levels of sexual abuse of women reflect the particular influence of sexist ideology which degrades women.

The relative tolerance by the state, and bourgeois ideology (including the church), of such physical, sexual and mental abuse of women in the family, at work and in social life, reflects the institutionalised sexism of class society. In the working class such abuse reflects the demoralisation and divisions which set workers against each other, combined with the general brutality characteristic of class society. The existence of oppressive, sexist restrictions and their damaging effects on human beings, give rise to rape and systematic brutality. The existence of sexual violence and physical abuse is a real factor in intimidating women (resulting in women being afraid to go out at night etc).

Sexist ideology is rampant in capitalist society. Its purpose is to legitimise women's subordination in social and sexual matters. In media images of women the objectification of the body often leads to its degradation. A human being becomes a mere sex machine at the service of men and with no independent will of her own. The existence of such images and the extent of sexist ideology in the media has led some women to regard pornography as the quintessential expression of women's oppression. 'Porn is the theory, rape is the practice?' is a popular maxim amongst many feminists, radical and socialist alike. In fact targeting pornography as the number one enemy of women is wrong on several counts.

First it equates all sexual images of women with images which do degrade women. It equates all pornography with violent pornography. This is a totally subjective approach which theoretically precludes the possibility of non-oppressive erotic representations. It denies to women their potential enjoyment of the erotic representation of their sexual desires and fantasies. In a word it is a feminist form of prudery. Thus we are not in favour of calling for a legal ban on pornography regardless of whether it is defined as oppressive or non-oppressive.

The second problem with the anti-porn campaigners is that the only way of realising their goals is to call on the state to ban pornography. In practice this means strengthening the state's repressive power, its ability to interfere in people's private lives in an oppressive manner. The state, as one of the guardians of a reactionary moral code will invariably use its powers to ban porn against lesbian and gay publications. The state will be the arbiter of what is 'obscene'.

The third problem that making an attack on porn central to a strategy for fighting sexism, is that sexist imagery is a symptom of women's oppression, not the cause of that oppression. Campaigns against porn are therefore wrong in portraying it as 'the theory', i.e. the cause, behind rape and oppression in general. 


These errors concerning pornography have had disastrous political consequences. In particular they have led sections of the feminist movements in Britain and the USA into alliances with the Moral Majority and the Mary Whitehouse brigade.

However, as revolutionaries we are not neutral in battles over sexist imagery inside the labour movement and the media. We are resolute fighters against sexist imagery and support all campaigns to end the publication of pin-ups in the labour movement’s press, the efforts of women to get offensive posters or ads taken down in the workplace, campaigns against the sexual harassment of women at work and for concrete measures to protect women against the threat of rape, such as better lighting and transport facilities, free self-defence tuition etc.

In the media we support the fight for the right to reply to articles or pictures which degrade women. We call on print workers to help realise this demand by refusing to print such articles or pictures unless the right of reply for the union, its women’s section or a relevant campaign/organisation is guaranteed. These methods, the methods of direct action, actually lead to fruitful arguments with male workers on the nature of sexism and why it is divisive, as well as an actual curtailment of propaganda for the subordination or degradation of women.

Another important battleground against sexist ideology is in the field of religion. In all class societies religious ideas, perpetuated by organised churches which are often tied in with the state, play a key role in sanctioning and enforcing the ideology of women’s oppression. In the west Christianity and Judaism, both based on ideologies consolidated in pre-capitalist and intensely patriarchal societies, have, for centuries, preached the doctrine of women’s subordination. This doctrine has practical results for millions of women.

The Catholic Church’s rulings on contraception and abortion are a clear example. In the imperialist countries these rulings can produce the misery and hardship associated with unwanted pregnancies and children. In the semi-colonies these results are compounded by the greater degree of poverty that exists. In Latin America, a continent dominated by the ideology of catholicism, the church’s reactionary doctrines, liberation theology notwithstanding, lead literally to the mass murder of women. The denial of free abortion on demand does not eradicate abortion. It merely opens the door to the back street butcherers.

The purpose of such rulings is to ensure that women do not control their own fertility. Moreover, because sex is merely for the purposes of reproduction, women are taught by the church that sexual activity outside marriage and sexual activity for pleasure is forbidden.

The elaborate mythology of both Christianity and Judaism back up their reactionary teachings on women. The Eve myth, the tale of Lot’s disobedient wife in the Old Testament, the cult of the Virgin Mary, all portray women as the willing servants of men’s domestic needs, punished, like Lot’s wife, when they disobey orders from the patriarch. The bottom line of these religious ideologies is the sanctification of the family and its structure around a dominant male. The nature of the family has changed in different class societies and religion has reflected this in subtle changes of doctrine.

But the reactionary content of religion’s teachings on women and the family has not qualitatively altered over centuries. They are the clearest manifestations of the tendency of the dead past to weigh heavily on the living present. This is true even where religious ideology adopts liberatory trappings. Of late this has occurred inside the Catholic Church with the development of liberation theology, particularly in Latin America.

Yet, despite justifying violence against imperialist oppression, this theology remains tied to the church’s reactionary teaching on all of the key social questions affecting women. In the end all religion, regardless of nuance, is reactionary from the point of view of human progress in general and from the point of view of
women's liberation in particular, because they delegate self-activity and the responsibility for human action to a power lying outside the human being, they reinforce the powerlessness of humans and therewith limit the possibility of self-determination of humans.

Nor are the religions of the east an exception to this. They are not qualitatively different from those of the west. Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam may differ in many respects to Christianity and Judaism. But, like all religions, which are all invented by man in order to justify the existing order of things, their teachings consign women to a subordinate role within society and within the family. Today Islam is in the vanguard of the counter-revolution against women in North Africa and the Near East.

The treatment of women as chattels in Afghanistan, where the bride price is still in force amongst the Islamic rebel tribesmen, and the eradication of western influence on women in Iran's Islamic Republic through the enforced re-introduction of the veil and laws punishing adultery, both indicate clearly the dangers for women that Islam poses. No amount of anti-imperialist rhetoric, no amount of cant about Islam's respect for women, can alter the fact that its practical impact on women's lives is destructive.

Marxists have a clear duty to combat organised religion whilst respecting the right of individuals to freedom of religious belief and worship. We cannot regard religion as simply a private matter. We campaign to break the hold of religious ideology through militant materialist propaganda. We fight the attempt by the churches to control people's private lives by fighting for religion-free sex education, free abortion and contraception on demand for women etc. And we fight to realise the basic bourgeois democratic demand of the separation of all churches from all states.

The experience of women's oppression is different for women in the different classes. For ruling class and some professional women many aspects of life and work that were previously denied to them—such as management posts, access to the professions etc. are now more open to them. They are also able to buy certain freedoms through employing women workers to perform their domestic labour and raise their children. For the women of the top wealth owning families this leaves them free to be idle as were their aristocratic predecessors.

The situation of the women of the traditional petit bourgeoisie (handicraft workers, peasants, small family business) is entirely different. There is wide variation even within these strata, but for many social exploitation and sex oppression coincides in the personal relations between man and woman. These women are thus directly exploited as employees in the family firm, are doing the reproduction work for husband and children in which the traditional authoritarian nuclear family structure has maintained itself without encroachment until today; a situation of multiple exploitation and oppression which is a bit mitigated by a higher living standard compared with that of the average working class.

This does not mean they are equal to the men of their class however. They are still denied many rights in law regarding inheritance and ownership, and their role remains essentially one of subservient wives or daughters, beholden to the male heads of their families. In that sense ruling class women are not excluded from the oppression of their sex. However, they remain part of a non-productive ruling class, and often play a key role in perpetuating the ideology of women's subordination through their work in churches, charities or as members of ruling or royal families upon whom the working classes are supposed to model themselves.

For women of the professional middle classes improved access to education, careers and property has allowed a considerable improvement in their lives. The availability of better contraception and safer abortion allows a degree of control over fertility which enables a career to be combined with a sexual and personal life, which in previous generations were considered mutually exclusive. In addition, those women
whose incomes allows them to buy the services of other women to perform their domestic and child care tasks can now combine work with a family life.

Thus the conditions for the better paid and qualified approach those of the middle class and petit bourgeoisie as far as family structure, ideology, role models and living standards are concerned while, on the other hand, within the lumpenproletariat, within the long term unemployed and the most exploited and most wretched layers of the working class, prostitution, the break up of the family, violence and criminalisation are daily features of women’s oppression.

But their apparent equality has not emancipated them completely from their oppression. Women are still very under-represented in the higher levels of the professions, promotion prospects are made difficult by the prejudice of male bosses, and careers are not usually flexible enough to allow women to have even short periods of time off to have children and yet maintain their pay and position.

Within the household these ?middle class? women are still subjected to domination by their husbands, and may be subject to sexual and physical abuse. Like their truly bourgeois sisters however, their experience of oppression can be offset to a much greater extent than that of most working class women, since they can buy themselves out of much drudgery and even violent situations.

For working class women, and this includes many non-professional women who may refer to themselves as middle class because their jobs are not manual (e.g. white collar workers, teachers, nurses etc.), their oppression is experienced in a different way. The majority have to combine work in a factory or office with primary responsibility for the housework and childcare in the home. This double shift can be extremely hard work especially for those women who work a night shift, then come home to work most of the day doing housework and preparing meals. They end up getting inadequate sleep and no relaxation time. Working class women rarely have adequate child care arrangements to meet their needs as workers (unlike the nannies or private nurseries of the bourgeois and professional women), and their low pay and poor job security means they continue to be economically dependent on their husbands.

Obviously the increasing number of women who receive an independent wage allows some financial independence, but rarely enough to allow a woman to choose to leave her husband if she wishes and continue to keep her children without major finance and housing problems. This is even more the case for women who depend on state benefits, which in all the major imperialist countries are based on a belief that the family unit is one with a male head of household plus dependent wife and children. Hence benefits are often only claimable by the husband. Single women parents often have great difficulty with benefits and housing.

Peasant women, who number millions in the imperialised world, suffer extreme oppression. The idea that a Latin American peasant woman has a fundamental common cause with the women of the world’s ruling classes is laughable. The oppression suffered by peasant women, especially poor peasant women, is manifold. In the course of work a peasant woman will be obliged to attend to the crops, to the animals, to the maintenance of the household and the management of its budget and to take the produce of the land she works to the market, sell it and purchase the goods she and her family need to live on. Add to this endless round of chores the functions of child bearing and rearing she performs and we can see clearly the extent of the oppression suffered by the peasant woman. The peasant woman, even more so than the peasantry in general, is indeed the pack-horse of history.

Working class women are also vulnerable to the brutality of violence and sexual abuse against them both in the home and through sexual harassment at work. Whilst sexual and physical abuse is by no means confined to working class women, they are less able to ‘buy’ themselves out of the situation by moving
out of the house, leaving their job, using cars etc, which give some security against street attacks etc.

Of course we do not confuse (though nor do we excuse) the occasional violence that flares up in families because of the tensions of daily life in capitalist society, with the systematic brutality of some men against some women. But, domestic brutality, however terrible for the individuals concerned, must be kept in perspective. It is not an expression of or means of perpetuating "male power". It is a product of the frustrations that make daily life under capitalism miserable and unrewarding. It cannot be compared with the systematic use of violence, in particular by many dictatorships in the semi-colonial world, directed against women and men and designed to maintain the power of the semi-colonial bourgeoisie and their imperialist paymasters. In these countries the dictators, not the husbands, are the real perpetrators of systematic violence against women.

So, we do not overstate the question of violence against women in the imperialist countries, in the way feminists do, in order to propound the idea that male power exists and is enforced by systematic male violence. There is nothing inherently male about violence anyway. To suggest there is is to concede to the thoroughly reactionary ideology that portrays women as inevitably weak, unresisting passive objects. Women class fighters the world over, from Nicaragua during the revolution against Somoza to Britain during the miners' strike of 1984-85, have shown themselves capable of fighting physically against the real enforcers of their oppression, the capitalists and their states.

The relationship between men and women is also different for the working class. The family often remains the last haven for the working class where capitalism is unable to provide the communal support necessary for individuals and particularly dependents in any other way. It is also an arena where most socialising, support and love is found for working class women and men. It is therefore something which is defended by workers, male and female. Unlike professional and bourgeois women, it is not husbands or working class men in general who are the fundamental origin of their problems. For ruling class women it is their own class which produces their inequality and subordination. It is the obstruction of men which denies them true equality.

But for working class women it is not working class men who are their "enemy". It is the capitalist system, and therefore the ruling class men and women who create both the exploitation and oppression of working class women. This is demonstrated in the joint struggles of men and women, such as where women in a community are active in building support for a struggle of their husbands (the tin miners in Bolivia and the coal miners in Britain are excellent examples of this unity). For both men and women it is the bosses who are their true enemy.

However, it is true that male workers generally have better pay and work conditions than women. They also benefit from the fact that women do most of the tedious domestic chores, often in addition to waged work. The structure of the family, the male dominance within it and the overwhelmingly sexist ideology which helps perpetuate this situation, lead to men acting in ways which directly oppress women. They deny women control over their combined family lives, they determine how much of their wages are to be used for "housekeeping". In some cases they brutally physically and sexually abuse their wives and other women.

This division within the class weakens its collective strength. It has led to instances of male workers organising to prevent women having access to certain jobs, particularly crafts and other skilled work, and men scabbing on women's strikes over equal pay. These male workers believe that women workers are a threat to their own wages and conditions and therefore they can act as a reactionary obstacle to women. There is no doubt therefore that men do enjoy real material benefits as a result of the oppression of women. However, these benefits are either ephemeral (status as the man of the house), transient (access
to certain jobs during certain periods) or, on a historic scale, minor (not having to do as much domestic labour).

Certainly the ideology of male dominance—the ?macho identity? that often exists inside the working class and bolstered by the material privileges that male workers do enjoy and do, on some occasions defend—needs to be constantly combatted by the revolutionary party and the mass proletarian women?s movement.

However, the material advantages of men do not mean that they exploit women economically. They do not appropriate and control the fruits of women?s domestic labour. And as against the relative privileges male workers do enjoy in the home or at work the disadvantages that they face as a result of the social oppression of women are immense. The divisions within the working class that are opened up as a result of the oppression of women weaken the class as a whole and leave it vulnerable to economic, social and political attack from the bosses. The possibility of overthrowing the system that both exploits all workers and socially oppresses women is retarded by these divisions.

In this sense, then, male benefits are not decisive. They do not mean that men have a historic stake in the oppression of women, any more than the benefits enjoyed by some workers as against others give them a historic stake in capitalism. On the contrary, male workers have a historic interest in overthrowing capitalism, and in so doing destroying the basis for the social oppression of women. They are then, the real strategic allies of working class women in the fight against oppression and exploitation. In fact the working class is weakened by this division, and the ability to collectively struggle to overthrow the system which produces both their exploitation and oppression is weakened.

The gains that working class men will receive from the final liberation of women from the family—the collective responsibility for welfare, freedom in relationships, sexual liberation and the economic gains of socialism—all this means that working class men ultimately draw no decisive benefit from, but suffer as a result of the oppression of women. Unfortunately their perceived advantages over women leads to individual men, and men collectively in the trades unions, believing that their situation will be best served by continuing to participate in the oppression of women.

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