



International Women's Day - The fight for women's liberation

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Women in India are saying enough is enough. Hundreds of thousands have demonstrated against the brutal rapes of a young student in Delhi and more recently a seven-year old girl. Women workers at rice mills in West Bengal have launched a movement for dignity in the workplace and demanding the right to toilets ? a privilege that only men enjoyed while women were made to go into the fields.

But the spark that has lit the tinderbox in India ? the degrading and often brutal treatment of women ? is not limited to national borders. Egyptian women, who were key in the movement to topple Mubarak's hated regime, are taking to the streets to protest against sexual harassment and against the Islamist dominated Shura Council blaming women for the attacks against themselves. More than 1,200 female and around 100 male migrant workers from Burma have walked out at a garment factory in Jordan after factory supervisors beat four workers for refusing to work overtime.

This is the fighting spirit that launched International Women's Day on 8 March, 1908, when garment workers marched in New York to demand the vote and an end to sweatshops and child labour. At that time, women were also fighting for their right to be a part of trade unions and political parties, things that many women across the world are still denied.

Over 100 years later, the statistics that illustrate women's position in society are shocking. Women comprise 70 per cent of the 2.5 billion people worldwide living on less than \$2 a day. Fewer than half of women have jobs, compared to almost four-fifths of men. Currently, more than 80 per cent of domestic workers are women, which accounts for 7.5 per cent of women's employment worldwide.

In over 100 countries, women still do not have equal status with men under the law. Such differences can prevent a woman from opening a bank account, going to school or university, getting a job without permission from her husband, or being able to own and manage property. And although the same number of countries now classify rape as a crime, half of those still do not criminalise it within marriage and enforcement remains weak or in many cases non-existent.

Sexism is prevalent worldwide ? even in ?developed? countries women face on average a 16 per cent pay gap and gang rape is not uncommon, as the people of Steubenville, Ohio can testify.

Why does sexism persist in the 21st Century? To answer this question, we must uncover the root of women's oppression. This in turn leads to how we can develop a programme to fight for women's liberation ? as part of the struggle for socialism.

The root of women's oppression

Although men's dominance over women existed before capitalism, this was not always the case across all human societies. Anthropology has shown that there have been both matriarchal and patriarchal family structures. Frederick Engels was the first to establish that women's oppression was linked to the development of class society in his seminal work ?*The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*? (1884). He argued that when human society moved from hunter gathering to settled agriculture it allowed the production of a surplus that could be accumulated, exchanged and eventually sold ? this was the birth of private property.

The struggle for control over that surplus necessitated control of women's bodies – only by restricting his partner's sexual activity could a man ensure that those who would inherit his property really were his children. Therefore, a man's control over a woman's fertility developed and with it the family, within which women were considered, along with the animals and the land, a form of property.

In addition, the formerly social labour of women – gathering, agriculture and household management – was transformed into privatised labour within the male dominated household unit, the early monogamous family, which was severely oppressive to women.

The development of industrial capitalism revolutionised the nature of human production, taking it forever out of the family home. This, however, did not mean an end to women's subservient role within the family. Although the household stopped being the basic unit of production, as goods were now produced externally in a factory, the family structure persisted and with it the oppression of women. The family became the means by which the new class of proletarians reproduced themselves and their labour power for free – which is of great value to the capitalists.

Although the capitalist mode of production draws an ever increasing number of women into the labour force, giving them thereby greater economic independence, the family unit keeps them in domestic bondage, limiting that freedom. As Alexandra Kollontai, a Russian revolutionary, said: "Capitalism has placed a crushing burden on woman's shoulders: it has made her a wage-worker without having reduced her cares as housekeeper or mother. Woman staggers beneath the weight of this triple load." Even in the "liberated" West, where women make up close to 50% of the workforce, they still do the vast majority of the housework and childcare.

The status quo, and sexism, persists because men gain material benefits from women's oppression; they have, on average, higher wages than women, their skills have greater value, they don't have to do much housework, and don't face problems of sexual harassment and assault.

While it is true that working class men don't "conspire" with capitalists to keep women down, their advantages from the status quo are a real motivating force for many working class men, particularly for those who do not see things clearly from the standpoint of their interest as a class. This is the material root of the strength of sexism within the class. But, at the same time, this sexism weakens the struggle against the employers and their state. Just like racism or national chauvinism, it divides and weakens us. In all major working class struggles, therefore, those with a broader, class viewpoint, men as well as women, try to overcome this division by combating the relegation of women to an inferior position.

This was seen in the Great Miners' Strike of 1984-5 with the inspiring organisation of the women of the mining communities. Class unity can be forged in struggle but, even then, it is not automatic, it requires a resolute struggle against sexism by women – and also by men who have been broken from sexism. Because the role of the family constantly reproduces the oppression of women, the struggle against it, and against sexism, is constant and oft-repeated. And if you deny the problem exists, you won't even get to first base.

Revolutionary Communists struggle for women's liberation

The Marxist position on women's liberation owes its origins and development not only to the work of Engels but to a remarkable group of women in the pre-1914 Second International, particularly in the German and Russian Social Democratic parties (the SPD and RSDLP).

First amongst these, and the real pioneer of the socialist women's movement, was Clara Zetkin. She launched the socialist women's paper *Die Gleichheit* (Equality) in 1891 and founded the women's bureau of the SPD in 1907. She also pioneered the calling of the first International Socialist Women's congress in Stuttgart in 1907 and thereafter the adoption of 8 March as International Women's Day in 1910.

In Tsarist Russia, Alexandra Kollontai, at first a member of the Menshevik faction of the RSDLP, and Inessa Armand and Nadezhda Krupskaya, both members of the Bolshevik faction, took up the task of organising working women.

Kollontai wrote a series of articles on the nature of women's oppression and the sort of movement that was needed to combat it. In *The Social Basis of the Women Question* she argued:

The struggle for political rights, for the right to receive doctorates and other academic degrees, and for equal pay for equal work, is not the full sum of the fight for equality. To become really free, woman has to throw off the heavy chains of the current forms of the family, which are outmoded and oppressive. For women, the solution of the family question is no less important than the achievement of political equality and economic independence.

She went on;

Where the official and legal servitude of women ends, the force we call 'public opinion' begins. This public opinion is created and supported by the bourgeoisie with the aim of preserving 'the sacred institution of property'. The hypocrisy of 'double morality' is another weapon. Bourgeois society crushes woman with its savage economic vice, paying for her labour at a very low rate. The woman is deprived of the citizen's right to raise her voice in defence of her interests: instead, she is given only the gracious alternative of the bondage of marriage or the embraces of prostitution - a trade despised and persecuted in public but encouraged and supported in secret. Is it necessary to emphasise the dark sides of contemporary married life and the sufferings women experience in connection with their position in the present family structure?

Kollontai also criticised the more radical feminists of her day who posed the question of liberation from the family as a matter that daring individuals could achieve if they banded together under slogans such as 'free love'. She points out that only a limited number from the more privileged classes could break free of the family and organise new free forms of family life. For women of the lower classes this was materially impossible.

Only a whole number of fundamental reforms in the sphere of social relations - reforms transposing obligations from the family to society and the state - could create a situation where the principle of 'free love' might to some extent be fulfilled. But can we seriously expect the modern class state, however democratic it may be, to take upon itself the duties towards mothers and children which at present are undertaken by that individualistic unit, the modern family? Only the fundamental transformation of all productive relations could create the social prerequisites to protect women from the negative aspects of the 'free love' formula. The task of caring, alone and unaided, for her children.

The feminists and the social reformers from the camp of the bourgeoisie, naively believing in the possibility of creating new forms of family and new types of marital relations against the dismal background of the contemporary class society, tie themselves in knots in their search for these new forms. If life itself has not yet produced these forms, it is necessary, they seem to imagine, to think them up whatever the cost.

In short, she used the arguments Marx and Engels used against the utopian socialists against the feminists; that is, dreaming up 'recipes for the cookshops of the future' rather than basing oneself on the socialising trends of capitalist society and transforming them into the basis for a socialised production which would support a socialised domestic life. Like the utopians, she accused the feminists of covering up class differences and making women of all classes the subjects of their liberation; socialists accused the feminists of seeking to divide the working class and instead unite women workers with their 'enemy sisters', bourgeois women.

Even today, Kollontai's critiques go to the very heart of Marxism's differences with feminism.

In the years just before the First World War, women in the Bolshevik party, with Lenin's encouragement, launched a women's paper, *Rabotnitsa* (the Woman Worker). It first appeared in 1913 but had to cease publication when the war broke out. During the war, the Bolshevik women were active in the antiwar movement and linked up with German socialist women like Clara Zetkin and Alexandra Kollontai who had broken with Menshevism and came closer and closer to the Bolsheviks. In early 1917, she joined them and was one of the first to side with Lenin's April Theses, which set the goal of working class power and socialist revolution as the immediate objective of the party.

Following the October revolution in 1917, Kollontai was appointed as People's Commissar for Welfare. In November

1918, she, along with Inessa Armand, Nadezhda Krupskaya, Konkordia Samoilo and others organised the First National Congress of Women Workers and Peasants.

Kollontai fought for a women workers' bureau to be established to look into women's issues and the particular concerns of women workers, but faced opposition from inside the party. She was accused of capitulating to bourgeois feminism. But she had a strong supporter in Lenin, who said:

'The Party must have organs, working groups, commissions, committees, sections or whatever else they may be called, with the specific purpose of rousing the broad masses of women, bringing them into contact with the Party and keeping them under its influence. This naturally requires that we carry on systematic work among women...We must have our own groups to work among them, special methods of agitation, and special forms of organisation. This is not bourgeois 'feminism', it is a practical revolutionary expediency.'

In 1920, various special sections were set up, including the Women's Section or Zhenotdel. The opening conference of the Zhenotdel surprised the Bolshevik leadership in gaining over 1000 delegates, many of whom were peasants who travelled for days on foot to attend. Even in the first year they began to make some inroads into dealing with female specific unemployment, abortion rights and awareness of services and work on prostitution.

In the years 1920 to 1923, Zhenotdel did major work to organise women both to create a whole series of institutions that liberated them from the oppressive limitation of the family unit; maternity units, nurseries and communal kitchens, and to educate and involve women in political life. It did this via a series of special papers (Rabotnitsa was re-launched) and women's pages in the regular mass papers.

But Zhenotdel could not escape the general problems of the Russian Revolution; the growth of bureaucracy and the purging of the party of many of the main activists of the revolution. Kollontai, a supporter of the Workers' Opposition, was an early victim and found herself removed from the leadership of Zhenotdel and then effectively exiled to a Soviet trade mission in Norway. Zhenotdel suffered a series of reorganisations and purges throughout the 1920s and was eventually dissolved in 1930.

To sum up; the revolutionary communist position on women's liberation takes as its starting point that working class women are the central agency in the struggle against their own oppression, aided at every step by class conscious working class men. They will not 'be liberated' they will liberate themselves. It sees in working class women, amongst the most oppressed and exploited of their sex, those with the most potential for mass struggle.

This was what Lenin and the Bolsheviks argued.

'We say that the emancipation of the workers must be effected by the workers themselves, and in exactly the same way the emancipation of working women is a matter for the working women themselves.'

If all women are oppressed, they are not all equally oppressed and not all women have the same degree of power to end their oppression. Women, like men, are divided into classes. The women of the ruling class offload most of their oppression onto their working class 'sisters' and their privileges vis-à-vis working class men, as well as women, will always tie them to defending their class before their sex.

Women of the lower middle class and the professions suffer more oppression and have a long history of struggle, the history of feminism. Many of the issues feminists raise are very important; violence against women; sexist ideology in culture and education; the hypocrisies of male chauvinism and religious morality. But their solution, an all-class women's movement and the tendency to seek solutions that leave capitalism intact, mean that they cannot get to the roots of the problem: the bourgeois family and capitalist production, on which this family rests and for which it reproduces the workers' capacity to work and brings up a new generation of workers.

Working class women, especially those drawn into social production and socialised services, partly escape from the atomisation and isolation of the individual family home. They are impelled by the workplace to seek collective, self-

defence via the trade unions, a gateway to social and political life in general. Of course, the burden of the family or domestic labour still weighs heavily on them, holds them back. Of course, too, in the unions they encounter sexism and discrimination.

It is for this reason that Marxists set as their goal the socialisation of domestic labour and childcare both as reforms in the here and now and as demands transitional to a socialist society. But, to fully and completely socialise child care and domestic labour, will require a whole different method of organising production itself. An economy planned democratically by everyone can radically adjust the one to the other, fitting labour time to the needs of childcare, deploying resources for childcare at work, ensuring men play an equal role in both spheres and involving the young themselves as a part of their education. Only thus can a real social equality be planned for and achieved.

To fight for this perspective, is why we need not only a revolutionary party and trade unions but, vitally today, a socialist working class women's movement. It would take up the whole spectrum of women's oppression; domestic violence and rape, discrimination at work, inequalities in pay, lack of, or cuts in, childcare and healthcare. It would also combat the sexist culture of capitalist society. Another vital weapon in the struggle against sexism is the right of women to organise amongst themselves in the workplaces, the unions and the parties, to raise all issues of sexist culture. This right to caucus should be guaranteed by all bodies. It is not, as some argue, an instrument of division but of unity at a higher level, unity against sexism, unity in the struggle against capitalism.

A socialist women's movement must set out to draw in women in the unions, on the housing estates, in the schools and the colleges, uniting them into a common struggle. They must have democracy and autonomy, with the right to elect their own leaders, not subject to dictation by any party. However, a genuine revolutionary party would openly and frankly organise its own members within such a mass organisation, as it would in the unions, and would have to win the right to lead by persuading the majority its course of action was right and its members the best fighters. By this means, more and more women could be won to the revolutionary party.

This common goal of socialism and women's liberation indicates why the latter is a struggle for men as well as women, why all those who share this goal must unite their efforts in common trade unions and political parties. But, as long as women remain oppressed, they have the right and the duty to organise themselves. Socialists cannot say to women that their liberation must 'wait for socialism' or will be only a by-product of the economic and political class struggle. It is a vital and integral part of it.

In the words of the slogan of the 1970s

'There can be no socialism without women's liberation and no women's liberation without socialism'.

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