



To mark International Women's Day, 1988, 'Class Struggle' is printing this article, the first in a series. Although the League has for many years paid lip service to the importance of developing and putting into practice a policy on the question of women, it has made little progress so far. This series of articles is intended to help the debate and we welcome comments and criticisms from our readers.

*GLIMPSES INTO HERSTORY*  
**WOMEN'S OPPRESSION**

**CLASS STRUGGLE** 

REVOLUTIONARY COMMUNIST LEAGUE

# GLIMPSES INTO HERSTORY.....



Women's oppression affects half the world's population. Women all over the globe are victims of sexism, violence and male domination. And yet their oppression remains largely invisible.

Women have resisted exploitation in all its various guises through the centuries. And yet this history is largely forgotten, hidden or ridiculed.

Women do two thirds of all labour in the world and also the labour of reproduction. And yet women's work is given little value and everywhere marginalised.

The "new" women's movement which has grown up since the 1960's, both in the West and in Third World countries, has produced a wealth of feminist literature and has been active on many practical issues which affect women in their daily lives. Sections of this movement have explored both the origins of women's subordination and the links between women's oppression and the international division of labour as well as the wider issues of its relation to present day imperialism, the exploitation of the Third world and the working class.

In many liberation movements and in socialist countries, women have come to the fore. But the relationship between socialism and the oppression of women remains theoretically unexplored, with only a few exceptions.

For women in this country - whether they suffer from exploitation in the form of violence and rape, poor pay and prospects, lack of reproductive rights or simply from their undervalued position in a sick society - these questions are of fundamental importance. Yet 'Class Struggle' has, over the years, managed to report on them only occasionally and analyse them even less.

We hope that this series will open the debate on women's oppression, and especially its relation to class and national oppression.

## ORIGINS OF WOMEN'S OPPRESSION

The beginnings of women's subordination by man is partially lost in time. But it seems likely that it came about at different stages in different social organisations, and was always an oppression based on violence. We have to try and take a non-Eurocentric view of this and study the position of women in different societies, at different times in history.

The traditional Marxist line holds that the start of women's oppression coincides with the development of class society and private property. Women's role as the bearers and rearers of children, with the essential tasks of food gathering or growing, clothing and nursing that these entail, earned them equality and respect in pre-class society, where survival was the name of the game. But when the production of surplus led to its appropriation by one class at the expense of another, things changed.

Women's role, which had previously ensured their equality, now ensured their inequality, by excluding them from social production. On this basis, a complex and pervasive ideology of male superiority and female inferiority has developed.

However, this view has been challenged by Third World Marxists such as Samir Amin and Cheikh Anta Diop, as well as by many feminists. Diop's researches suggest that although in pastoral and nomadic societies patriarchy was established very early, it was not so in the agricultural societies which were established in most parts of Africa. In these societies, which were based on subsistence agriculture, with hunting as a luxury extra, a matriarchal system was established which survives to the present day in some areas.

In the great ancient civilisations of Egypt and Ethiopia, women held high positions of state power and there were several influential queens, such as Queen Hatshepsut. In addition, there were matriarchal kin structures and great importance and respect were given to women. These matriarchal systems were overthrown by outside influences: by invasion, influence of religions such as Islam and later by the colonial invasions of European powers and their Christian religion.

It will be argued later in this series that women's oppression today is an intrinsic part of

the society that we live in and that women's liberation is an essential component of the struggle to overthrow imperialism. It is also clear that the forms of women's oppression change with the different societies that they are part of. However, what the above examples show is that the exact origins of women's oppression are an important area of debate which recent research has shown to be more complex than has often been held by Marxists.

## GLIMPSES INTO HERSTORY

In later history, there are well-documented examples from around the world, of the imposition of women's oppression by force. In Europe, in the so-called Dark Ages, there is evidence that women had built up great skills in healing, as midwives, in controlling reproduction and performing abortions. But these large numbers of strong and independent women were a threat to the emerging bourgeois order. Between the 14th and 18th centuries, the male guilds and rising bourgeoisie managed to push craftswomen out of the sphere of production and millions of women, mostly poor and rural women, were for centuries persecuted and burnt as witches. They were also used as scapegoats to divert the unrest of poor people away from the church and state. The scale of this persecution is undoubtedly much higher than history would have us believe. For example, one prosecutor, Benedikt Carpzov, of Leipzig signed 20,000 death sentences against witches.

In some parts of the world there was relative equality between the sexes before they were colonised. In others, imperialism intensified existing oppression of women. There are, for example, descriptions of Burma when the British first arrived, which tell of a society of freedom and equality for women, and a peaceful society based on Buddhism. It seems the same was true in Senegal, at a similar time, where women traders were in high positions of power.

There is no doubt that the Western colonial powers, Britain especially, systematically destroyed such societies and raped both the countries, and the women. As well as the physical and economic carnage, women were also exploited as potential breeders, and at different stages either prevented or coerced into childbirth. Women slaves in the Caribbean were

at first not allowed to marry or have children as it was cheaper to import more slaves as replacements. But towards the end of the 18th century, when the slave "trade" stopped the Caribbean women were suddenly under pressure to "breed" to replace the workforce. A similar pattern can be seen in plantations in Sumatra.

#### WOMEN'S FIGHTBACK

Women have fought back long and hard against all these forms of oppression. The women in the Caribbean and Sumatra, for example, went on a birth strike. This tactic was also used by women in South West Africa in rebelling against German invaders. The Herero women reduced their population from 80,000 to 19,962 between 1892-1909.

Population control is still a favourite strategy of oppression in the world today with millions of dollars of "development-aid" imposing it on Third countries. Recent campaigns against forced sterilisations and the contraceptive Depo-provera, which the women's movement has taken up on an international scale, are modern examples of resistance to this imperialist strategy.

Women in Africa have also fought back in more violent ways. In Eastern Nigeria, in 1926 10,000 women marched and looted in protest at taxation and ill-treatment by the colonial power.

The 19th century women's movement in Europe and the USA was sparked off by the contradiction between the universal principles of the bourgeois revolution: freedom, equality and fraternity and the systematic exclusion of women from these basic rights.

In Britain, the second half of the 19th century and early part of the 20th, saw women active in many different fields. The history of the women's movement of this time, which involved women of different

class backgrounds fighting for their freedom in many different areas of their lives, has only recently been researched and written up. Later articles in this series will cover this period in more detail. At the same time, a working class women's movement developed, in other countries, notably in Germany, on the Marxist theory that only women's full economic participation in social production would lead to emancipation.

#### WOMEN'S LIBERATION IN THE SIXTIES

The "new" women's movement in the West developed in close relation to the other big movements: the movement against the war in Vietnam, the struggle for civil rights, particularly in the USA, leading to the Black

Power movement. The women's movement evolved through women in small groups sharing their personal experiences and discovering that they had common experiences which required political action: "the personal is political". Such groups tended to concentrate on issues such as violence against women and sexuality. However, the movement broadened. A particularly important signpost was the strike of women sewing machinists at Fords in Dagenham who came out for equal pay.

The First National Liberation Conference in 1970 took Oxford by storm and demanded a total transformation of society whilst at the same time, challenging the orthodoxy and sexism of the left-wing groups. A year later, women marched for four basic demands: equal pay, equal education and job opportunities, free contraception and abortion on demand and free 24 hour nurseries.

The question of housework was raised, particularly by those who later became known as the "Wages For Housework" group, who challenged the theory that housework is non-productive labour and sparked off an on-going debate.

Later, in 1971, the book "The Dialectics of Sex" by Shulamith Firestone was published in the UK and the "radical feminist" current was born. Shulamith Firestone maintained that the primary cause of conflict between man and woman was in the relations of reproduction, and that woman's biological make-up had made it possible for men to wield power over women even before the development of class society. Women's main enemy is, in this analysis, men and the main aim for women's liberation has to be to seize control over reproduction.

In response to the challenge of radical feminism, there developed "socialist feminism" which started from a basic Marxist view that men oppress women by virtue of their social and economic relations with them. Socialist feminism today encompasses a wide range of views on the exact relationship between sex and class and has made progress particularly when it has drawn on the experience of feminists in Third World and socialist countries.

While there were distinct trends and theories within the women's movement and debates between and within them (which we should come back to in more detail later), there was often unity in action round numerous issues. A fifth demand for liberation for lesbian women was also added to the earlier four. In the 60's and 70's, big campaigns were organised round reproductive rights; rape and pornography, violence against women in the home; equal pay and

opportunities; and childcare. An important development was the growth of black women's groups who took up the fight against the immigration laws and other aspects of racism and sexism. They also challenged, in practice and theory, racism among white women. Women were active in the peace movement and the Greenham camp has become famous around the world. In many cases, women's groups have not confined themselves to domestic issues but linked up with women around the world, active in the anti-imperialist struggle. Women have organised pickets in support of women Republican prisoners, both in Armagh and in this country as in Durham.

#### STRUGGLES IN THE THIRD WORLD

In the 20th century, the struggle against imperialist powers has taken the form of national liberation struggles in many countries. Revolutions such as the Chinese revolution could not have succeeded without the full participation of women. In other countries, we can see today a total transformation in the position of women through national liberation struggles such as that in Eritrea or Tigray.

In other parts of the world, small groups of women were meeting and developing their own feminist perspectives. By the Mid-Decade International Women's Conference in Copenhagen in 1980, there was a growing militancy and network amongst Third World women and better links with other women around the world. That conference showed how the situation for women around the world was deteriorating. It also marked an escalation in feminist groups world-wide fighting back against such attacks on them such as dowry-killing and rape in India; sex-tourism in Thailand; clitoridectomy in Africa and various forms of machismo in Latin America.

The 1980's have seen the women's movement in the West fragmented while in many Third World countries, it is a growing movement. However, there is a growing realisation of the inter-relationships between the exploitation of women in different parts of the imperialist system, of the international division of labour and women's need to fight for reproductive rights world-wide.

#### GLOBAL SISTERHOOD

Women's oppression is a systematic feature of the world political economy and ideology.

Feminism and the different forms of women's fightback is found everywhere, too. Western feminism is derived from our own unique historical experience and cannot therefore be applied universally. Thus the analysis and strategy developed by the movement here is not to be denigrated but must be placed

firmly in a comparative and historical perspective. There are inequalities and conflicting interests between women, based on class and nation and it is vital that we, as western women, understand that racism and imperialism may prevent us from understanding Third World women's situations. It is not likely that a single women's movement can address all the culturally specific forms of oppression. But any such movement must be aware and non-antagonistic to others.

#### SEX AND CLASS

It is not enough to say that all women are oppressed by all men. The feminist movement cannot ignore class, or the exploitative international division of labour and imperialism.

On the other hand, most 'left' groups have a record of subordinating the question of women to nothingness. The question of women is seen as subordinate to the class question, or simply as an ideological question to be overcome in time.

The question that is unresolved is the relationship of patriarchy and imperialism. Put crudely, we have to understand the aspects of women's oppression that are common to women of different classes and nations and how the almost universal domination of women by men has developed and can be overcome (patriarchy) and how this interrelates with the structure of class and national exploitation that makes up imperialism.

This is the question that we will have to return to, again and again, in the series of articles. Until we are clear on the basis of women's oppression, we will not be able to destroy it and build a future society where women are free.

An organisation that really shows itself able to understand and value the labour of women in an imperialist society; to be able to fight the violence against women, to uphold the importance of reproduction as work, to give back to women power over their own bodies and minds and to treat their work in production as of equal value to men .... an organisation that does that, that shows the way forward, will rally half of the population to their side. And, what is just as important, will stand a chance of building a socialist society where women and men are truly equal.



the labour of women is devalued both at home and in the workplace. In different countries and societies around the world, women have in common that their oppression and exploitation is related to their child-bearing role. In most societies, women have the main responsibility for bringing up children (at least very young children) and providing food etc. However, in most societies in the world today, women's labour, which plays an essential role in reproducing and maintaining the workforce, and in social production as well, is not rewarded in economic, political or social terms (money, power or status).

On this dual exploitation of women's labour, the whole complex political, ideological and social structure of oppression is built. Although this article will concentrate on women's work outside the home, we will constantly find that this aspect of their oppression is closely bound up with others, in particular their work inside the home, and wider aspects such as violence against women, the education of women etc.

#### WOMEN WORLD-WIDE

A single article can only touch on this huge subject. (Whoever sat down and wrote one article on man's work?) This article will concentrate on the differences between women and men's work, and the historical and material basis for this.

Women of all classes and nations are oppressed as women and their labour devalued, but working class women also suffer from class oppression and Third World women from national oppression. This produces a complex relation between women world-wide. Imperialism has exploited women differently, at different times and in different places, in order to maximise profits and this has produced both a sexual division of labour and an international division of labour. In concentrating mainly on this country, we do not mean that international aspects are not important: both women internationally, and national minority women in this country are of extreme importance. But lack of space and resources must make us concentrate here on the history of women's work in this country, whilst learning from, and supporting, women's struggles elsewhere.

#### WOMEN IN PRE-INDUSTRIAL BRITAIN

Historically, there has always been a sexual division of labour. Under capitalism and imperialism, there have been complex and contradictory trends. On the one hand, women have at different stages worked outside the home in large social units of production of service work, and today they make up a significant section of the workforce. On the other hand, in many ways women's role in social production has been restricted progressively.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, Britain was still an agricultural society, with the vast majority living on the land and producing enough for bare survival. Amongst the peasantry, women were essential in the family economy. The peasant's wife bore children, which meant more hands to toil and she also

laboured herself. The rise of trade started a more complex and specialised society and richer yeomen's wives withdrew from agricultural labour. In the towns, workshops became larger with the main division being between masters and workers, and a lessening role for masters' wives and widows. The trades which women kept control of longest were those relating to women's household tasks: drink and clothing production such as brewing or spinning.

Gradually, women were forced out of the more profitable trades, and women's work became associated with low pay. There were wide variations from place to place and from trade to trade. In Wales and Scotland, feudalism lasted much longer. Young printers, for example, were protesting against women in the unskilled printing processes in the 1630's and had virtually excluded them

by the mid-17th century. In the woollen trade, women retained quite a strong position although by the 17th century, they were being restricted to carding and spinning at home, while men did the sorting and dyeing. In 1639, Mary Arnold went to jail because she continued to brew, contrary to an order of the Brewers of Westminster. Women healers were increasingly persecuted as witches and the expensive education required for medicine as a science excluded women. Midwifery survived for the poor only.

#### COLONIAL WIVES

By the 18th century, the idea that men should be able to support women from their wage gained credence, although only amongst a very small minority at first, of course. The Victorian middle class male required wives who were decorative, accomplished in music etc. to entertain him, but most importantly, in charge of all domestic concerns and able to bear children, so that he could



put all his energies into his capitalist and colonial ventures.

By the early 19th century, the middle class had a distinct identity and there was a close connection, in England, between business and landed property which changed the feudal relations in the countryside and produced rich farmers with "non-working" wives and farm labourers.

Whilst the rich women were being excluded from production, the lives of poor women were ceaseless labour. Women agricultural workers had the bearing and succour of large families, work in the fields, especially at harvest, and also would work as domestics in the big houses. Poor women played an active, and if necessary violent and organised, part in the struggles for a cheap loaf of bread.

#### WOMEN IN THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

The industrial revolution gradually separated women's work in the family for work for wages. Women and children forced off the land by capitalist farming methods, as well as Irish immigrants starved out by English colonialism, competed for jobs, thus strengthening the hands of the industrialists.

Marx saw women being drawn into factory production in this era as the beginning of their emancipation. Indeed, it was a very complex process. Despite the brutality of conditions in early factories, the complete control of male overseers, the double burden of caring for children, as well as twelve-hour factory shifts; despite all this, women for the first time were earning money and gaining some glimpses of economic independence.

#### FAMILY WAGE

Many working class men resisted the entry of women into

factories, both because they wished to remain master in their own home, and because of competition for jobs. In reality, then as now, families depended on wives' earnings. But the idea of a man's right to a family wage gained credence. Protective legislation for women workers was a two edged-sword: men and women desperately needed shorter hours and better conditions. But women were excluded without alternative employment. The reasoning behind such legislation was often more to do with maintaining patriarchy within the family and imposing middle-class values than bringing working women any relief.

Despite the growth of factory production, there were large areas of work where it was still cheaper to use low-paid female labour as outworkers, for example, finishing off, lace-working. In addition, domestic service absorbed many women, seasonal agricultural work, and shop work.

#### DOUBLE OPPRESSION

Thus women continued to labour for capitalism in two ways. Although capitalism broke the complete control of the working class man over his woman and children, in that they ceased to be directly a means of production for him, the women's low wage was still complementary to the commodity system. Women could not enter commodity production on the same terms as men. Like the man, they sold their labour power now as a commodity. But they still worked to maintain the labour force at home.

In the early years of the industrial revolution, the work of women in reproducing the men and children's capacity to labour was drastically reduced. With protective legislation and fewer hours in the factory, women workers spent more time doing housework in the family. The need for women's labour in the family, in reproducing and maintaining labour power thus exercised a certain restraint on the direct exploitation of women's labour power in industry. But women's social usefulness was never recognised or recompensed.

Capitalism and imperialism have used women's labour in different ways at different times. But this basic contradiction remains unchanged and is reflected today in women's place in the wage labour market, their role in trade unions and attitudes to women within the unions.

#### WOMEN IN TRADE UNIONS

The growth of workers' organisations in the early 19th century, which culminated in the legalising of trade unions in 1824 and later the Chartist movement in the 1840's, included some women. For example, a spinners' strike in 1818 saw men and women drawing equal strike pay. In 1832, there was a strike of 1500 women card setters. But most of the early unions of strength were in male-dominated industry. The Chartist movement included some women united on a class basis but it did not take up women's problems as such and campaigned for a family wage and a place for women in the home.

The expansion of trade unionism in the 1870's included some women-only unions which were united under the Women's Protective and Provident League by Emma Paterson and in 1876 such unions were welcomed into the TUC. However, conflict soon broke out. Not surprising with prominent trade union leaders such as Broadhurst, who said it was "...very natural for ladies to be impatient of restraint at any time .... wives should be in their proper place at home."

Despite this, women workers took increasingly militant action at work. The matchgirls' strike is the best known. But in the same year of 1888, there was action by blanket weavers in Heckmondwike, female cigar-

makers in Nottingham, girls in a tin box manufacturing in London (who pelted men who continued to work with red-ochre and flour), and jute workers in Dundee.

Women workers were helped by some male trade unionists, radicals and socialists, and in 1891, a big demonstration of laundresses in Hyde Park was supported by the railway workers amongst others. There is, however, very little written about the ideas and aspirations of working women at this time. In the early 1900's, women trade unionists, especially in the textile unions, became actively involved in the long and bitter struggle for the vote.

#### THE GIRLS BACK HOME

The period of the two world wars, of course, saw dramatic but temporary changes in women's work and unions' attitudes. Suddenly, women were encouraged to be engineers, drivers, and do heavy work of all kinds. Millions of women today can describe their experiences of this period. Basically, unions made agreements that women would leave their jobs at the end of the war, and equivocated about equal pay because they did not want to admit that women were as capable of the work as men.

Towards the end of the Second World War, the beginnings of the welfare state were set up. The Beveridge Report which formed the basis for many of the plans, stated: "In the next thirty years, housewives as mothers, have vital work to do in ensuring the adequate continuance of the British race and of British ideals in the world."

Consequently, women were sent back to their homes and the labour shortage solved by importing workers, firstly from Europe, as in the case of Italian workers recruited to work in the cotton mills, and later from the Third World.

Immigration to Britain in the post-war years was carefully planned. Initially, Caribbean immigration to Britain in the post-war years was carefully planned. Caribbean people, many of them women, came in search of jobs and money that they could send back home to their families. Later, people were also recruited from the Indian sub-continent. Most did not plan a long stay and their children were often left behind at first until the grim reality of extreme exploitation and state racism hit home. Many black women were employed in the new National Health Service, and continue to be employed there today, and suffer oppression as the lowest paid workers, as national minority people and thirdly as women.

National minority women brought with them their long history of hundreds of years of struggle and resistance and this tradition has continued in new forms in this country. Some

strikes have involved black women, for example, Grunwicks. Many black women in this country are employed in jobs which make union organisation extremely difficult (without taking into account the racism of the unions), like homeworking and small workshops. In 1981, homeworkers in Leicester were earning an average wage of 80p an hour with no expenses paid, no benefits or legal rights.

#### MODERN UNIONS

Women in trade unions these days face many of the same problems they always have. The TUC passes progressive resolutions but these signify a token commitment only. The same applies to the separate unions. For example, the Transport and General Workers Union has recently set up regional Women's Advisory Committees and been more active on women's issues. But it remains to be seen how much priority this will be given: with a 15% female membership, only 1 out of the 40 strong Executive Committee is a woman and only 14 of the union's full-time officials are female.

On the shop floor, women's involvement in union affairs is held back by both practical and ideological difficulties. Half of women workers are part-time, often with two or more jobs, and then have all their work with children and the home to fit in and organise. Attending bureaucratic union meetings, out of working hours, is just not possible for most women.

Several recent local studies by women have emphasised again the degree of segregation and discrimination for women at work:

#### WOMEN'S WORK

Nicola Charles interviewed and studied 160 women and union representatives in different industries in Sheffield in 1980. Most of the women did "women's work" which was separate and lower-paid than the men's. This was not seen as a problem by the unions. Union reps upheld the idea of a family wage and considered women's pay as a secondary wage. They had strong views on women's shifts so that their work at home was not interfered with; and some saw women as a cause of male unemployment. All these views were echoed by women themselves and equal pay was not supported by the majority. They were keen on the union as such, but very critical of local unions, and many said they would be union reps if they were asked to.

Ruth Cavendish worked and studied on a car assembly line in London, in 1977. She also found strict divisions between men and women, and black and white workers, in the way they were employed. The women saw themselves primarily as house-

the reality of life at home and the low wages and boring, alienating work they were offered in the factory.

Anna Pollett, studying in a tobacco factory in Bristol, in 1972, found the same occupational segregation and low

pay. Young women there could only treat their unskilled manual labour as an affirmation of their own worthlessness and often sought refuge in romance.

The gradual "de-skilling" of women's paid jobs is partly due to a restriction in the sort of work women are allowed to do, and partly due to the category "skilled work" being applied to men's jobs. The many demanding, fiddly and exhausting jobs that women do like machining or electronic assembly, are classified as unskilled. This process historically has not only involved capitalism maximising profits but also the connivance of the male-dominated labour movement. The Equal Pay Act has made little impression—mainly due to this de-skilling of women's work and struggles to regrade work have proved difficult to win in the present system.

#### FACTS AND FIGURES

Official facts and figures on women's employment are extremely misleading because of the huge sector of women working part-time below the National Insurance threshold, working as casual labour, homeworking, or working in small workshops or family concerns. None of these women form part of the official statistics. Many women do two or more "little jobs" such as cleaning. Many do not register as unemployed but would like to work if it was available and possible. Statistics also take no account of women working to care for elderly relatives, handicapped family members etc. all of which is hidden labour.

However, for what they are worth, statistics show that in the UK, the percentage of women in paid employment has increased from 46% in 1960 to 57% in 1980 (a period when male employment was falling). Part-time work has increased: in 1971 only one job in seven was part-time, and by 1984 the proportion had become one in five. The majority of part-timers are women. Between 1984 and 1986, 60% of women were officially "working" and about half of these were full-time and half part-time. The service industries employ 81% of all working women.

#### LOW PAY

The gap between men and women's pay on official statistics has narrowed over the last 15 years but is still great. Average gross hourly earnings in 1970 were 67p for men and 42p for women, and in 1977 were 1.77p for men and 1.33p for women. However, men do more overtime which widens the gap.

trend of imperialism in the 1980's which is to increase exploitation of part-time and casual, usually female, labour in the rich industrial nations. This, to a certain extent, reverses the trend of the 1970's when production was exported to the cheap Free Trade Zones.

in the Third World. But it is only the same process of imperialism doing anything to maximise profits.

The early 1980's saw increasing fightback by workers in the Third World for better wages and conditions, at the same time as the recession was causing severe unemployment back home. With the unions and working people on the defensive, employers have been able to widen the division in the workforce between the traditional, male-dominated and unionised, full-time workers and the part-time, or casual, female workers who are being cruelly exploited. National minority women in this country suffer especially from such exploitation.

#### DOMESTIC SLAVERY

While women labour for low pay out of the home, they labour for no pay at all within the home. The vital task of reproducing and maintaining the workforce is carried out for the capitalist system completely free of charge. But this is not only a class question: there are very few men who do not gain tremendously by women's labour in the home. This question will be discussed more in the next article which will deal with the family. But no writing on women's work should end without a clear statement that for most women, their paid work is only one part of their daily labour, the rest of which is domestic slavery.



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## WOMEN AND THE FAMILY

In trying to understand the relationship between the family and women's oppression, we need to study the family in a historical and non-Eurocentric way. This is very difficult. Our experience of the nuclear family in imperialist Britain is particular in time and place and should not be generalised. On the other hand, it is significant to us because it is the concrete reality of the position that we are in.

### BOURGEOIS FAMILY

Our present concept of the family - the monogamous nuclear family - is a bourgeois one. Even the concept of 'family' became popular only towards the end of the eighteenth century in Europe, and to begin with, was only promoted among the propertied classes. It was only these classes who were supposed to have a family: that is, a family as a combination of co-residence and blood relationship based on the patriarchal principle, with the man as the 'head' of the household and 'breadwinner' for wife and children.

Until the middle of the 19th century, there were a number of marriage restrictions for people without property. Agricultural labourers, workers etc. were expected to work ceaselessly, both men and women. Indeed, many of these women worked as domestic servants and were allowed no family life of their own.

In the second half of the 19th century, these restrictions were abolished in most European countries and the family was promoted and put under the protection of the state.

The reasons why the bourgeoisie encouraged the establishment of the modern family within Europe are many and complex. At the same time, they were systematically destroying kinships and societies in the colonies: the other side of the same coin.

### PUSHED INTO THE FAMILY HOME

Women and children constituted a large part of the early industrial proletariat. But their extreme exploitation quickly led to such high infant mortality and disease that the

next generation of workers was under serious threat. This was undoubtedly one reason for the reforms and for the strong promotion of marriage and patriarchal family. Unlike the peasants, the propertyless proletariat had no material interest in the production of children. Many were unmarried or deserted and lived a mobile existence with their children.

A combination of legislation, police measures and church ideology forced this class towards the bourgeois family. Legislation was passed criminalising infanticide, sexual intercourse outside marriage and abortion. What the state called a crime, the church called a sin. Thus women were forced into the home to take on the role of housewife; labour costs were reduced for the bourgeoisie and a new consumer market eventually created.

### THE LABOUR MOVEMENT AND THE FAMILY WAGE

This process, whereby women's place was to be in the home was pushed forward by the bourgeoisie and the state. However, the working class movement in the 19th and 20th century also made its contribution. The organised working class (mainly made up of skilled men) used the argument that a man's wage should be sufficient to maintain a family so that his wife could stay at home and look after the household. The principle of equal pay for women was consistently rejected by most unions until quite late in the 20th century, for this reason.

The question of women's work in factories was discussed at the 1866 Congress of the First International in Geneva where Karl Marx stated that the tendency of modern industry to draw women into production had to be seen as a progressive tendency. The French section and also some of the Germans, however, were strongly opposed to women's work outside the house. The German memorandum contained such sentiments as:

"To wives and mothers belongs the work in the family and the household. While the man is the representative of the serious public and family duties, the wife and mother should represent the comfort and the poetry of domestic life, she should bring grace and beauty to social manners and raise human enjoyment to a nobler and higher plane." (Thonnessen, 1969, trans. Maria Miers).

Other revolutionaries such as Bebel and Clara Zetkin had similar views on women as primarily wives and mothers and upheld the creation of the bourgeois nuclear family within the proletariat. This has led to a basic contradiction for socialists, that on the one hand, the entry of women into social production is seen as

a pre-condition for women's emancipation, but on the other hand, man is upheld as breadwinner and head of the family and woman as dependent housewife and mother, and the nuclear family as "progressive".

The material basis for this contradiction lies in the advantage which working class men gain from women's role in the family: both his ability to dominate paid work, his control over all money income to the family and the benefit of unpaid labour for him at home. Coming home to food bought and cooked, clothes washed, children cared for,loo paper on the roll etc. etc. is, let's face it, one hell of an advantage.

Thus women's role within the modern Western family means to the capitalist that all the labour required to serve and reproduce his workforce is provided free, and to the working man, the everyday burden of existence is invisibly lightened.

### DOMESTIC LABOUR

The way in which women's domestic labour fits into the wage labour system must be dealt with at length another time. As domestic labour produces use values, not commodities, it is not directly paid for by the capitalist. But it does affect the profit made by them. The contribution which domestic labour makes to surplus value (profit) is one of keeping down "necessary labour" to a level that is lower than the actual subsistence level of the working class.

For example, it could be argued that it is cheaper for capital to pay a male worker a wage sufficient to, at least partially, maintain his wife



so that she prepares his meals for him, rather than pay him a wage on which he could afford to eat regularly at restaurants. If housework is socialised, and those workers paid a proper wage, the value of labour power (and therefore wages) would rise dramatically. However, as we saw in World War 2, if capital is desperate enough for women to enter the labour market, then housework will, to a certain extent, be socialised.

As stated earlier, the state promotion of the bourgeois family in Europe was bound up with the destruction of kinship systems in the colonies. Without the vicious exploitation of the Third World, the capitalist states would not have been able to promote the ideal of white women being wives and mothers. This is bound together not only in purely economic terms but also openly in eugenic terms - that white women should breed pure and healthy white children to continue the colonial system.

#### FAMILIES WORLD-WIDE

In order to have a more all-round view of the family, we need to do more investigation into family structures in non-European countries. National minority women in this country bring with them experiences of quite different family life from, for example, the Caribbean, from India and from Pakistan. Many of these families will have suffered from interference from colonial rule and have also been disrupted by emigration to an alien and racist culture.

#### THE NUCLEAR FAMILY

The evolution of today's small nuclear family from the more extended family continued until well after the industrial revolution and the state promotion of the family has continued in varying intensity up to today's strident calls of Mrs Thatcher.

In the more extended form of family, women toiled physically with no mechanisation. Descriptions of the never-ending drudgery of their lives also illustrate, however, the support women gave each other in child-rearing and coping with extreme poverty.

The transition to the small nuclear family began with the industrial revolution and the move from land to towns, the mobility of labour, poor provision of housing, and the individualism, competitiveness and consumerism of capitalist society.

Within this family, women are virtually owned by their husbands. On marriage, many of their legal rights disappear; economically, they require his signature for HP, rent, mortgage, tax: and once tied by

children are completely dependent on him for money. Physically, there is little legal protection from assault. Rape by a husband is still not illegal. Morally, women are responsible for family harmony and burden the guilt if it fails. Old people and children are excluded from useful social work and varied communal living. The small nuclear family makes roles and sexist stereotypes very difficult to change: it provides an intense social situation, isolation from friends and alternative models, isolation especially of women from other women, and an ideal opportunity for media influence.

The present attack and rundown of the welfare state is happening alongside a voluble Tory promotion of the family. Like Mr Jenkin (1980):

"If the good Lord had intended us all having equal rights to go out to work and to behave equally, you know, he really wouldn't have created man and woman."

But the Labour Party do no better, like Prime Minister, Callaghan, (1978):

"We have to pay much more attention than we have done in the past as to how industry organises women's role at work, so that her influence at the centre of the family ... is not weakened."

Despite this, there is growing evidence that the family is breaking up, especially under the strains put on it by the economic recession. Over one in four marriages now ends in divorce. And, in Haringey, for example, half the households are now single parent families headed by women.

#### CHILDCARE

Many of the basic demands taken up by the women's movement of the 1970's, relate to their oppression within the family: especially the demand for free 24-hour nurseries. For many women, it is the first baby and thereafter, which suddenly loads onto them their oppression as women. They are immediately unable to compete in the labour market; unable to have any time to themselves; tied to a demanding and exhausting routine round the clock; and often because they are now 'at home' all day their husband expects his meals all cooked, his shirts ironed, his shopping done, etc. etc.

Society at one and the same time puts women on a pedestal of ultimate achievement and offers them no help whatsoever. In the 1970's, many women's groups campaigned for nurseries or set them up themselves. But they were too expensive to run privately and employers were not interested. By the end of the decade, the importance of comprehensive childcare for all under-fives was recognised on paper, by the TUC,

the Labour Party and Equal Opportunities Commission. But nurseries were being closed down. Under pressure from public services cuts since then, things have worsened and such provision is a pipe dream to most women. Experience has shown us that this demand is not realisable in the capitalist system. But it is one which is top priority under socialism.

#### VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Underlying much of the inequality and exploitation which women experience within the family, is violence against women. In contrast to the defeat on childcare, however, women have organised, exposed and made some practical advances in their struggle against violence.

In 1972, Erin Pizzey set up the first refuge for battered women in Chiswick and since then, the Women's Aid movement has grown, to a total of 99 groups and 200 refuges in 1980.

The extent and brutality of domestic violence that was uncovered has been mirrored in many other countries once women got together to talk about it. In India, for example, dowry killings had been covered up for decades. Women's Aid offers battered women a place where they can talk and discover they are not alone, and also some degree of safety amongst other women.

In 1976, the Domestic Violence Act was passed which simplified and strengthened court orders to stop a violent husband. This was a step forward although the police remain very unwilling to act in "domestic disputes" and the immense practical difficulties of housing, income, etc. for women on the run with children, remain.

During the 1980's, there has been an upsurge in violence against women and pornographic violence in the video industry and rape, both inside and outside of marriage, is still dealt with as minor offences.

#### THE FAMILY IN REVOLUTION

In revolutionary situations, traditional patriarchal family systems need to be overthrown so that women can take a full part in the revolution.

The tremendous changes that have taken place for women in liberated areas in Eritrea, for example, are described in 'War On Want's publication 'Eritrean Journey'.

In health programmes and education, women's needs have been given more than equal attention to those of men. There have been special campaigns against traditional customs which particularly affect women: the practices of infibulation, for instance, arranged marriages and the dowry system. Not long ago,

it would have been unheard of to see a nomad woman talking to a man in public. Now, there are even nomad women fighters sharing the frontline of battle with men. Women are now active in village assemblies. (In the past, if women had dared to stand up and speak, they were publicly humiliated and beaten by their husbands.) Land distribution has given many women land for the first time.

Within a socialist system which follows such a struggle, there will be, for a long time, conflicts between old family structures and the new social organisations which will grow to replace them. In China, for example, a leap was made from a feudal society to a socialist one only one generation in many cases and many contradictions still remain between women's traditional family roles and those required and demanded by today's women. This is complicated by other changes, for example, the population policy of one-child families. Despite these difficulties, most women in new China lead a totally different and liberated life compared to only 50 years ago. It is certain that women will have to continue and refine their struggle for a fair and equal family relationship. A successful outcome will, in many respects, liberate men as well as women.

#### NO HAVEN IN THE FAMILY

The specific form taken by the family at any time or place is linked to the mode of production. It is a creation of that social system and will reflect its culture. In most of the world today, and certainly in Britain, the family is essentially oppressive to women. Although women seek shelter and warmth within the family from the uncaring, racist and sexist society outside, the bourgeois nuclear family cannot provide this. The bourgeois family is part of the capitalist system and is built on exploitation, isolation, suppression and violence towards women.



# THIRD WORLD WOMEN: SWEATSHOPS IN THE SUN

## WOMEN IN THE THIRD WORLD

The impact of capitalism and imperialism on women in Third World countries was necessarily very different and very varied. It depended on the social organisation which had developed in that society before imperialism, on the nationality and stage of the colonial power and on many other factors. It is also a continually changing pattern depending on maximising profits for imperialism, at any one time. This article can only touch on one or two examples. But knowledge and understanding in this area is vital to our better understanding of women's oppression and the struggle against it.

Broadly speaking, the colonial period involved the extraction of raw materials from the colonies, manufacture "back home" and then forcing these products onto the markets in the colonies. This involved women as slaves; women working directly on plantations; women being left behind with family and poor subsistence land while men were forced to work the rich cash crops; and women losing both land rights and their own handicraft industries as was the case with the Indian textile industry, destroyed by English factory-made cloth. Women were raped, used as prostitutes and the whole social and family structure destroyed.

Thus at the same time as capitalists were withdrawing their own women from the labour force and instituting the family at home, they were destroying it in the Third World. (This is something we will explore in greater detail in future articles.)

## SWEATSHOPS IN THE SUN

In the 1970's, Third World women were to a certain extent re-

discovered by international capital in their search for higher profits and many labour-intensive industries were re-located in the Free Trade Zones. For example, between 1971 and 1983, 1.5 million workers, mostly women, lost jobs in the clothing and textile industries in Europe and the USA, and over 2-million new jobs were created in the Third World.

The computer "revolution" was made possible by the super-exploitation of Asian women in Free Trade Zones, who make up 80% of the workforce. The factory conditions these women work in are appalling and also continue the ideology that women are women and housewives before workers.

Besides this exploitation of women by low wage labour, there has also been a growth of the sex and sex-tourism industries. Sex tours provide the second or third most important source of foreign exchange in Thailand and the Philippines. Women continue to do the majority of agricultural work: a recent study in Southern India found that women were doing all the housework and 80% of the agricultural work, and that modernisation and 'aid' programmes made this worse.

## RESOURCES

The following books have been used to compile much of the information in this article:

Hidden From History, Sheila Rowbotham.

Waged Work, A Reader, edited by Feminist Review.

Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale, Maria Mies.

Common Fate, Common Bond, Swasti Mitter.



# SOCIAL PRODUCTION & THE EXCLUSION OF WOMEN

GLIMPSES INTO HERSTORY

A Contribution

Thinking about the very useful articles on Herstory in March and April 'Class Struggles', there are one or two points worth raising even though this contribution is not well worked out.

Starting from the premise that class society excluded women from social production, the question in my mind is: why did only men become the social producers, and not women and men?

There seem to be two main reasons. One: women had, and still have, the essential responsibility for child-bearing and rearing. And two: the greater physical strength of men which was essential for the heavy labouring work necessary for the development of settled agriculture.

However, with the development of classes, ruling class women ceased to be oppressed as a class but still became oppressed as women. Why? In those far off days, were men already aware that they were onto a good thing by being the only earners and women the home-makers and a stable element in the society? Or were women who could afford the so-called luxury of being the home-makers only too pleased to be free of the enormous toil of working on the land?

Even in Diop's analysis (see March 'Class Struggle') although matriarchy still held sway in many African countries as far as inheritance was concerned, women generally speaking, in fact passed on hereditary rights to sons or brothers not to daughters: that is, hereditary rights were transmitted 'through the women', not to her. Also, from my very limited reading of early societies, Diop's theories for Africa do not hold up for some early South American

societies such as the Maya, the Aztec and the Inca. Women here did have some political and social rights but they were oppressed as sexual objects and never, as far as I could tell, were equal with men.

## OPPRESSION BEFORE COLONIALISM

As for the Aboriginal people in Australia, whom I read about in Robert Hughes' excellent book 'The Fatal Shore', they lived, at the time of the imperialist invasion 200 years ago, in a state of near primitive communism. With no private property, land rights and no surplus beyond their needs, the women were cruelly oppressed by their menfolk just the same.

Their marriage was usually arranged at birth and they then became the property of their husbands. They had absolutely no rights within the clan and were physically assaulted by their menfolk if they tried to stand up for themselves in any way.

The ideology of men's superiority over women gained credence and acceptability over the generations because nearly always the men were physically the strongest. Strongest for hard physical labour, for going out to war and always with the dominance of physical force over women. She, on the other hand, was always responsible for the essential child-bearing and rearing which took place during the most productive years of her life.

## PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

Exceptional women have historically stood out against this oppression. But for the mass of women, the laws made over the ages discriminating against them have always pushed women's efforts at freedom back into the home and at the service of men. And, of course, phys-

ical violence against women in the home has played a large part in the action.

But now the superior physical strength of men is not a necessity in our daily lives, with machines, science and technology taking the place of strength in nearly all fields of work. Women are not handicapped from that point of view any more, and can be equally capable in an all-round way.

The only exception is still in the home, where violent men can still overcome women physically, again generally speaking.

## COPING IN A MAN'S WORLD

So now women have to undo all the discrimination and violence perpetrated against them over the centuries and win their equal partnership with men in the world. Most importantly, they have to realise deeply their equal ability and stand up to this task ideologically as well as practically.

I think we underestimate the enormous burden of generation after generation of women being made to feel inferior to men and how they can overcome this inbuilt subjugation.

But they still have the double task of fighting for equality and being the necessary bearers of children, and at present the rearers, too. How to cope with that dilemma in this man's world, is a problem that even socialist countries such as China, are finding very hard to solve.



'Class Struggle' would welcome readers' responses and contributions to this series and other items in the paper. Please send them to: Class Struggle, c/o 203 Seven Sisters Road, London N4 3NG



Of all the aspects of being a woman in society, sex and reproduction must be the most ignored by "politics", whilst being at the core of womanhood. The unique contribution of women to the world economy is the reproduction of the people themselves, although the possibility of giving birth does not alone define womanhood.

#### WOMEN'S WORK WITH BREAST AND WOMB

The whole process of pregnancy, childbirth, child-rearing - a process that determines twenty years of their life for many women - is placed in a separate category of "nature" or "biology". It is not viewed as productive work, not included in political economy and not mentioned in political manifestos.



In rejecting this view that such labour is purely a function of "nature", we need to recognise that men and women have different bodies which interact with nature in different ways. They use their bodies to interact with nature and to change it (sometimes called the appropriation of nature). It is a conscious human and social activity.

Marx defined work in its broadest sense as acting on the external world and changing it. In this way, the labourers' hands are his "means of production". But we do not hear of women's breasts, or womb, being her means of production. Indeed, the actual process of childbirth is called labour, but not really thought of as "work", although any mother can testify to the fact that it is!

#### WOMEN'S TRADITIONS

Throughout history as we know it, women have acquired knowledge which helps them to choose and control their reproductive activity. Breeding is not just a natural activity but is a form of human work which reproduces the human race in a socialised way.

There is evidence that the ancient civilisations of Africa and Asia had much knowledge about conception and childbirth, such as herbal remedies, an understanding of body rhythms and diet, which enabled them to control to an extent their productive forces. We certainly know that many societies under threat can increase or decrease their population and women have wielded this as a power in fighting colonial battles.

Much of this knowledge was systematically destroyed or hidden from women in the last few centuries in capitalist and imperialist societies.

Independent free-thinking women were seen as a threat to the rising bourgeoisie in Europe and, more recently, fat profits have been made by making knowledge into commodities, for example through drugs, contraception or food.

All this has weakened women and marginalised their labour. Their bodies have been turned into commodities. Women have lost sight of their identity: the fact that female productivity is a pre-condition for male productivity. It is no accident that the history of early societies is hidden: societies where women were the producers of children, the gatherers of food and the early agriculturalists, whilst men went hunting for the luxury of meat and slaves. That is the history of women using their bodies as means of production in a different way to men, but a way which must be publicly reinstated as productive labour.

#### DEBATE IN THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Although much of this has been ignored by political movements, it has been at the very centre of much of the women's movement both here and world-wide. The resurgence of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, in this country and America, was fired by demands for abortion on demand, control over their bodies and sexual freedom, among other demands.

#### FREE CONTRACEPTION AND ABORTION ON DEMAND

'Free contraception and abortion on demand' was one of the original demands of the women's movement in the West in the 1970s. At an early stage, the Women's Abortion and Contraception Campaign included 'an end to forced sterilisation' in its campaign.

In 1975, however, the National Abortion Campaign was launched with the sole purpose of defending the 1967 Abortion Act. This campaign was successful in defeating a series of Private Members' Bills and also in spurring the trade unions and TUC into taking action.

When some 80,000 women and men marched in October 1979, it was the largest trade union demonstration for many years for a cause which lay beyond the traditional scope of collective bargaining and was also the biggest ever pro-abortion march. For the feminists who had done the years of work, however, it was a bitter pill - the TUC insisted on heading the march with Len Murray and General Council members - almost all men.

## Reproductive Rights

Effective though the National Abortion Campaign (NAC) had been in defending the 1967 Act, it had completely missed out on the wider implications of "a right to choose". Its white, middle-class background had blinkered it from seeing the importance, for black and working class women, of the issues of forced sterilisation, the use of injectable long-acting contraceptives such as Depo-provera, and the whole 'other side' to reproductive rights.

In 1983, NAC split into two separate campaign groups: one, continuing on the single issue of abortion rights and the other, a reproductive rights group.

The reproductive rights group has publicised the history of the birth control movement and its involvement with eugenics and the ideology of the need for birth control in order to carry on and strengthen the white race. This racist basis has been carried on to the present with working class and black women being forced into sterilisation and experimented on, with new and long-acting contraceptives.

Campaigns such as those around Depo-provera have united women from many third world countries. Organisations such as Gabriela in the Philippines have played a leading role. Population control and "aid" to third world countries from the West are of enormous repressive significance to third world women. Any campaigns for reproductive rights in this country must clearly acknowledge this, and further links between women world-wide on this issue.

#### REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGY

The 1980s have also seen the rapid growth of "reproductive technology". Science, unfortunately in the hands of imperialism and patriarchy, is completely changing

reproduction. Like other scientific and technological knowledge, it is not right or wrong in itself, but dependent on to whose advantage it is used.

The new reproductive technology has the potential to bring immense pleasure to infertile couples, and to prevent the birth of babies with severe congenital handicaps and diseases such as muscular dystrophy and cystic fibrosis. However, the potential is also there, and at present being used, to determine the sex of the embryo and hence to bring about the abortion of female babies. In India alone, it is estimated that between 1978 and 1983, around 78,000 female foetuses were aborted after a sex determination test.

The benefits of the new technology can be closely controlled by the state and offered to the "perfect" couple in order to have the "perfect" baby. In these hands, in many ways it increases the powerlessness of women and brings alienation even to conception and child-birth.

#### SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Women's sexual needs and pleasures are not only ignored and suppressed by the whole state and religious machinery, but women world-wide are exploited and violated sexually. Within marriage in this, and most countries, rape is not an offence. Pornography and sexual violence against women are promoted in advertising, films and videos, so that women's bodies become commodities themselves.

The total degradation of third world women by western men on sex tours is growing big business. Sex tours provide the second or third most important source of foreign exchange in Thailand and the Philippines, where Americans, British and Australians go. Women are "bought" in advance from brochures. Every Sunday, a planeload of men leave Amsterdam for a sex tour in Bangkok. The women used in this way get a tiny fraction of the fee and are in great danger from violence and drugs. This is an example of how sexist and racist oppression often double up.



## Sex, Race and Class

Also complicating the issue of sexual violence against women, is the racist ideology that it is black men who are violent to white women. This lie has been used historically and in the present, to attack black men, often through lynching.

Historically, there are many examples of how white women's vulnerability to physical violence from men has been used to bring in oppressive legislation. For instance, in 1926 a White Woman's Protection Ordinance was passed in Papua (New Guinea), then under British rule, which introduced the death penalty for the crime of rape of any European female.

In a similar way, class has interacted with sexual exploitation, in that working class and peasant women have been considered "fair game" for seduction or rape by upper class men. Such men can use their social and monetary power to force women to comply and suffer no reproach from society afterwards. Similarly many, many women suffer sexual harassment at work, from bosses and supervisors: ranging from verbal remarks, through touching and mauling, to outright blackmail or intimidation.

Female sexuality does not belong to a private sphere which floats free from economic and political affairs. Nor is it simply an expression of economic relations - it does hold a fundamental challenge to patriarchy.

Feminists have challenged powerful myths in our society: such as that sex is purely a natural phenomenon and therefore apolitical; that the natural expression of sexuality is what we know as heterosexuality; and that a woman's sense of her own sexuality is natural rather than constructed by social and economic factors.

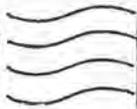
In 1975, came the women's movement's sixth demand: 'An end to discrimination against lesbians, and for a woman's right to determine her own sexuality'. This was the beginnings of a positive commitment

to female eroticism, as something powerful and autonomous, which is shared by heterosexuals, lesbians and bisexuals, and breaks down barriers between them. Femininity could then be celebrated rather than shunned. It could be positive and strong as well as sensual, desiring as well as desirable. It would not necessarily deny men, and it certainly would not rely on them. It would be what women wanted to be, not what men decreed.



Margaret Thatcher

Oppressor and a  
oppressed sister ?



Dear Editor,

I've been following with interest the 'Glimpses into Herstory' articles and had intended to give a more considered reply to many of the points it gives rise to. For instance, the idea of childbirth as part of the Marxist category of labour, seems far removed from traditional orthodoxy, and worthy of investigation.

However, it was the article in the June issue, 'Sex and Reproduction' that I felt needed some points to be made. It was, to my mind, the least satisfying of the series so far. Especially with a concept like 'femininity', it seemed more philosophical than based on scientific understanding.

Whilst absolutely correct to emphasise that aspect of women's oppression that treats women as commodities, where the article was lacking was in its treatment of the movement which has risen to challenge violence against women in its many forms.

There are divisions, some quite intense, within the women's movements: from those who seek to recreate a separatist environment, where it is not enough to be women together but one must be a Lesbian woman; to those who have benefited in their professional status from equal rights reforms (paltry as they are) but do not consider themselves 'feminists'. Neither of these ends of the spectrum make much difference to the lives of the majority of women, those working class women within a monogamous family structure or those who wish to be within that structure. That there are class interests at stake seems to take a back place in the article as if the women's movement operated in a general framework agreed by all.

It is highly inappropriate to write of a "positive commitment to female eroticism" when the articulate sections of the women's movement in Britain are racked by a debate on the nature and expression of female eroticism. To many women, schooled in activity against pornography and the debasement of women, the advocacy of women-orientated eroticism/pornography and sado-masochist practices, which reproduce a mirror image of the power relations condemned when committed by men on women, is far from given recognition as an acceptable expression of femininity. Is it femininity expressed through decorative fashion? Do not female soldiers react as their equally trained male counterparts? Is macho behaviour restricted only to sections of the male population? Are there no men who are gentle, considerate and caring? Is it only women who are peace activists? These are some of the characteristics or qualities banded about in definition of femininity, and the subjectiveness of what is erotic and what is pornography makes for a chasm in arguments.

What could have been developed, and hopefully will be in future articles, is that femininity "would be what women wanted to be, and not what men

decreed". The obvious challenge to heterosexuality means that there should be a clarification on opposition to the anti-gay legislation.

It has been a universal feature of the human species that a sizeable minority of people are attracted sexually towards their own sex. And for this they have been subject to various social sanctions. That there should be defence of consenting adults against attacks from the state and popular prejudices should be part of a political platform.

There is an unfortunate tendency within the gay movement which identifies one's own sexual orientation as the over-riding criteria to judge others by. Thus, gay fascist skinheads are accepted as a legitimate part of the movement despite their politics, and self-indulgence regardless of the cost to others in emotional or physical terms is all part of the scene. Whilst challenging that situation by supporting the more progressive elements, the limitations and political inadequacies of the organised gay movement should not be allowed to obscure defence of an individual's sexuality. That point is not clearly spelt out but taken as read in the article.



# EDUCATION AND CULTURE

Women fighting for equality be it at work, at home, in public life or in bed, discover they are up against two immediate obstacles: firstly, men backed up by the social and economic system constructed by them to sustain male power, and secondly, the enemy within - their own psychology which is similarly, but less obviously constructed.

Take for example, the common problem of a woman wishing to return to paid work after having a baby. Firstly, she has to convince her husband that he must share in childcare and housework. And then, (as if this was not enough), she has to struggle against her own guilt and uncertainty at leaving the baby and entering a competitive job market.

The construction of feminine psychology is central to the process of female subordination and it works alongside, or as an alternative to, violence in keeping women down. It prepares women for their own appointed role, and leaves them poorly qualified to perform any of the roles that men have reserved for themselves. It ensures that women acquire certain knowledge and skills, but not others. And it equips them with a sense of what is appropriate and possible for women in general, and thus for themselves.

The process starts as soon as a baby is born. It is continued in schools and outside the classroom and in different ways by our culture. For many women, their identity as working class and/or black is also impressed on them in the same way, adding even further restrictions or contradictions to their own self-image.

## Teaching girls to be wives and mothers

This aspect of their oppression, more than any other, has been discovered by women coming together in small groups and has led to much feminist research into education and culture over the last thirty years.

From the first days of life, boys and girls are treated differently, with boys being praised and encouraged in active, boisterous, exploratory and self-willed behaviour and girls being talked to, cuddled and encouraged to be quiet and conforming. Pre-school children learn much from copying and modelling themselves on others and get the same message from home, television and books.

Once at school, not only does this continue, but the historical legacy of teaching girls to be wives and mothers has in no way been overcome.

Less surprising perhaps when we remember that although about 60% of teachers are women, 97% of the people involved in the "government of education" are male. In 1977, for every boy who passed O level cookery there were 61 girls. For every girl who passed O level woodwork, there were 166 boys.

The deep and hidden nature of discrimination in schools was revealed in the work done by Dale Spender into the way teachers behave. She discovered that teachers mete out preferential treatment to boys on an astonishing scale without realising they are doing it.

By taping lessons, she found that teachers spend about two thirds of their classroom time with boys. Girls had to wait longer for the teachers' attention. Teachers knew more personal details about their boy pupils, preferred teaching them and expected them to do better. They also commended some behaviour in boys whilst denigrating it in girls - for example, elaborate or careful presentation of work.

When these things are pointed out to the teachers, they find it difficult to give more than 40% of their time to girls, although once the students are told about it, girls are quite capable of asserting themselves and challenging the boys.

In addition to the methods used in teaching, all subjects tend to start from the male experience, from reading schemes through history (Egyptian queens?, suffragettes?); geography (Third World farmers mainly women?) and science.

Careers guidance still channel students into traditional sex-typed occupations. This is reinforced by what children see in the school hierarchy, where male teachers predominate in senior posts and the sciences and in headships, whilst low paid jobs of dinner ladies and cleaners are all done by women.

## Changing Education

Having made their second demand "equal education opportunity" the women's movement in the west has put much energy into trying to change the educational system. Except for the theor-



...or how women are taught their place

etical work, and some individual victories, it has been a difficult task and one where positive action is required from the educational establishment.

It has gradually become evident to feminists that what girls need is not access to boys' education, but for education to be redefined and transformed, and then to be made available to both sexes on an equal basis, in such a way as to intervene against inequality. Some women have demanded the retention of, or return of, single sex schools in order that girls may be treated more equally.

## Racism and sexism

For black women and girls, in imperialist countries such as ours, the role sexism plays in education and culture is often overshadowed by racism. In the book 'The Heart of the Race', the authors, and the women speaking through the book, are in no doubt as to priorities:

"For Black schoolgirls sexism has, it is true, played an insidious role in our lives. It has influenced our already limited career choices and has scarred our already tarnished self-image. But it is racism which has determined the schools we can attend and the quality of education we receive in them.

"So it is our consciousness as Black people, rather than as feminists, which has led us to take collective action against the education authorities. For us to campaign for non-sexist text books or career

guidance, when the racism in those areas has already determined what our daughters do, or to demand their right to do motor mechanics or play football, when our sons could aspire to nothing else, would be a denial of reality. Nevertheless, the campaigns we have taken up as mothers, teachers and schoolgirls, have been given added strength and direction by the experience we have brought to them as women."

Black women in this country have in some areas tackled the racist and sexist education system head on. Such campaigns as Saturday schools, where children are taught their own history and importance, and rejection of labelling black children as ESN and dumping them in special units, have won victories in the 1970's. At the same time, black women are taking up any adult education openings and struggling against all odds to catch up on what they were denied at school.

## In the Third World

In many Third World countries, women are denied any education at all except in the upper classes. Nawal El-Saadawi has written passionately of her own struggle for education in Egypt. One of the first tasks and one of the most popular, of any liberation movement, is to combat illiteracy, especially among women. Visitors returning from such places as Guinea Bissau, Nicaragua, Eritrea and Palestine always describe the enthusiasm for schools - usually held alongside work or military action. One of the big changes for women in socialist China has been the opening up of educational opportunities for all women.



## Images in Culture

Women's psychological subordination is not, of course, confined to formal education. Indeed, even as children, the images of women portrayed in the culture of society - the media, writing, music, art - have a tremendous and largely hidden effect. In a country such as Britain, people's culture has been largely taken over by imperialism and promotes imperialist ideology in a variety of ways.

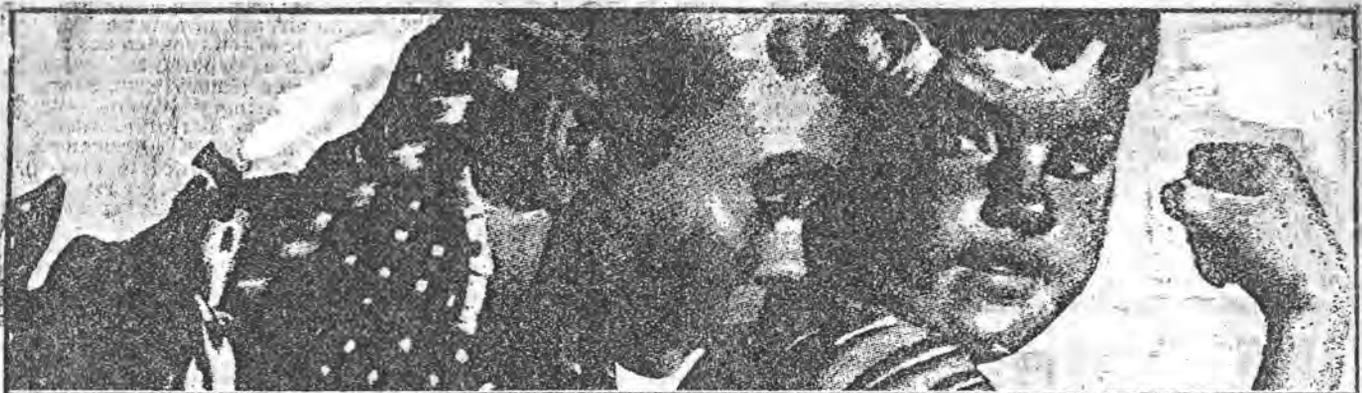
In complete contrast to this, there are cultures of peoples resisting exploitation, and cultures of socialist societies; so in examining our own culture, we must be clear about its nature and its particularity to British imperialism.

As well as promoting imperialism, and bound up with that very closely, our culture promotes men, and largely

ignores women, especially in the creative fields. Men control the means of expression - from the press and broadcasting, to advertising, film, publishing and even criticism - by occupying dominant positions within them.

It is also true to say, of course, that those controllers are also white, and ruling class, thereby promoting racism and anti-working class propaganda. Thus for most women in this country, culture is alienated on two scores. Black women are almost totally alienated although many turn to their own communities and culture which forms part of their resistance.

Even 'factual' aspects of the media, such as the news, are extremely sexist. A spot check on two national newspapers revealed that on 28th January, 1981, the news pages of 'The Guardian' included reports of 237 named individuals, of whom 19 were female. 'The Sunday Times' that week, featured 14 women among 181 individuals.



**We don't need another hero**



This illustrates that not only are women depicted in sexist ways - by advertisers, pin-ups etc. but also women are in all other respects just ignored. Women writers and artists have great difficulty promoting their work both now and historically - as in many other fields, our history has been taken away. The last decade has seen some progress in some aspects, especially publishing, with the Women's Press and Virago promoting women's work.

## **Bread and Roses**

The exploitation of women both within art, literature and other cultural expressions, and by their exclusion from it, is a large and complex area. There have been many clashes between the women's movement and the liberal left over such matters, as the latter often find it difficult to accept that any work of art can be sexist. But as Marxist-Leninists we need to be clear in our understanding of English culture as an expression of the ideology of the ruling class, and to be sharp in picking up the sexism within that.

In promoting socialism, do not let us forget the tremendous creative energy which can be set free in such a society. This side of life, denied to the working class and especially to women for so long, is one very important reason for pursuing the struggle.... Women want bread, but they also want roses.



# *Celebrate*

Women do two thirds of the world's work, earn less than five percent of the world's income, and own one percent of the world's assets.

# *Women*

*"The liberation of women is a  
fundamental necessity  
for the revolution,  
the guarantee of its continuity and  
the pre-condition for its victory".*

**WOMENS STRUGGLES  
ARE EVERYWHERE...**

# WOMEN AND SOCIALISM

## IC.S. CORRESPONDENT

This, the last article in the series on women, will look to the future, towards a society where women and men are free from oppression and exploitation in all its forms. The previous articles have traced a little of the history of women's oppression and their struggle against it, and of the many different forms it takes in society. For women to break free from these chains, it is necessary to understand the relationship between their oppression as women, to other, simultaneous, forms of oppression, whether because of their class or nation. Most women suffer from class oppression and many also suffer national oppression. In order to see the way forward, these three fundamental contradictions must be seen clearly, both in their particular features and their inter-relationship in most practical struggles.

For example, a black, working class woman in Britain, who is being beaten up by her husband is faced not only by the violent expression of her oppression as a woman, but also by the racist state which makes calling in the police or social services dangerous for her family, and her class oppression which makes earning a living wage as a single parent almost impossible. Every struggle in which women are involved shows a similar pattern of the complex nature of their exploitation and oppression.

## GLIMPSES INTO HERSTORY..... part six

### WOMEN'S STRUGGLE IS PART OF THE ANTI-IMPERIALIST FRONT

The global economic system of imperialism is built on the backs of all oppressed people. It could not exist without the super-exploitation of women, of whole nations and of working class people everywhere. It sets people against one another, sometimes buying off one section to control another - divide and rule.

Imperialism cannot be reformed because it cannot afford to stop exploiting women. It is possible that a strong section of women in a western country could force some changes in their favour. But imperialism will only give a little. If women really achieved equality, got equal pay, stopped doing domestic and subsistence labour, stopped looking after children for nothing, stopped their bodies being used as commodities etc. etc.... the system could not function.

So, women fighting against their oppression - in whatever sphere - are part of the anti-imperialist struggle. This is something for women to celebrate because to count on oppressed nations and the working class as our friends, and imperialism as our enemy, gives us strength. It is also something which complicates the issues. Many men within oppressed nations and the working class will oppress us as women. And this is where the struggles get not only intertwined, but knotted up.

But if the women's movement can be clear and strong about their own oppression, they will be able to educate and win over the majority of men, who genuinely want a just society. That is not to say that for some women, at some stages, the struggle against men is not very acute and antagonistic. We do not forget that men gain from their dominance over women. But overall, at this stage in world history, women and men have a common aim in overthrowing imperialism.

### WOMEN IN SOCIALIST CHINA

We have a lot of learn from studying women's movements in the world today. Theory should always be based in practice and reality. Undoubtedly, the greatest change for the greatest number of women this century has taken place in China.

It is still not forty years since many women in China were not even given names. They were under the complete submission of, first their fathers, then their husbands, and finally their sons. They were sold like animals and sexually abused by the rich and powerful. The well-known tradition of foot-binding is a vivid example of their complete lack of freedom.

In new China, since liberation in 1949, the Constitution has stipulated equality in all aspects of life. There is special reference not only to equal pay, but also to special protection for women and children, to divorce proceedings, against infanticide etc.

Life has changed dramatically for women, including poor peasant women, who are now allowed to lease land, earn an independent income, have access to cheap childcare, have an education etc.

Of course, Chinese society still has a long way to go before women reach full equality with men. The Constitution has to be followed up in many fields with specific laws, rigorously enforced, to see that the theory of equality is carried out in practice. With a committed leadership from the government, these laws will go a long way towards bringing about women's equality but most important will be the fight against, and the complete overthrow of old ideas. This is and will remain for some time an ideological fight for women and men which will need vigorous backing from the Communist Party and the government. Without the recognition of women's true value, an advanced socialist society cannot be attained.

### WOMEN AND NATIONAL LIBERATION STRUGGLES

The national liberation struggles in Nicaragua and Eritrea are other examples of movements that have included changes by and for women. Women have moved from the traditional position where they were not allowed any part in public life or education to the point where they now play a full part in democracy, in all facets of everyday life, and in the military struggle.

Other liberation struggles, such as that in Algeria, involved women during the war and greatly changed their lives in doing so. But after victory, consolidation of the new nation was given priority over women's equality. Many of the advances women made were undermined. There is evidence that the Palestinian liberation movement has learnt from this and has promoted autonomous women's organisations at the present stage of struggle in order to keep women's oppression firmly on the agenda.

The struggle in the Philippines illustrates this approach even more clearly. GABRIELLA is a broad federation of women's groups within which there is an organisation of working women, which influences both GABRIELLA and the KMU (the trade union federation). In this

A WOMAN'S PLACE IS IN THE STRUGGLE

NOT BEHIND BARS

THHERESA RAMASE  
CARBARA HOGAN  
ROW  
Joyce Leblond  
JOYCE MASIAHA  
CONNIE MORRIS  
JOHANNA MURPHY  
REBECCA

way, GABRIELLA works as a practical link between the different strands of struggle in the Philippines and ensures that women's oppression is not neglected in any aspect of the struggle.

### WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN THE WEST

The women's liberation movement in the west is made up of many different groups and strands. In the past, Marxist-Leninists have dismissed it as being "bourgeois feminist". But in doing this, we took a simplistic and basically incorrect view. The women's liberation movement has put the question of women's oppression back on the agenda, and through study and practical work has raised our consciousness, and that of society as a whole, about women's oppression.

The women's liberation movement is not a united organisation, let alone a socialist or a Marxist-Leninist organisation and there will inevitably be differences between its different sections and between them and Marxist-Leninists. But it is a movement of the oppressed, the different sections of which we need to understand, analyse and take part in.



Women from different strands of the movement are active on a variety of important issues, such as reproductive rights, women's aid, anti-deportation campaigns, stop strip searching, etc. These are issues which have a wide effect on many different women and it is vital that such work continues.

Without a long-term view of a strategy for change, which sees the immediate issues in the context of an overall world view, it is easy to become disheartened in politics in this country today.

It is the task of Marxist-Leninist women to be deeply involved in the day-to-day struggles of women and to learn from them, and at the same time to put them in the context of imperialism and the struggle against it, and of the possibilities inherent in a future socialist society. For men, there is also the constant and ongoing need to actively fight against women's exploitation and oppression in whatever struggle they are involved in.

Often, this will not be a popular position. It will be seen as diversionary and men will need persistence.

An important middle-term aim will be to work for the setting up of a unifying women's organisation, or federation of organisations, learning from the example of GABRIELLA in the Philippines, and closer to home, the Women's Front in Norway.

### WOMEN'S LIBERATION - WHICH WAY FORWARD?

The main contradiction in the world today is between imperialism and the people. Imperialism builds on and uses all the forms of oppression which existed in earlier social systems, makes them part of its general system, often changing the form in so doing. This is the case for both women's oppression, as for class and national oppression. Women cannot win their freedom without overthrowing imperialism.

In any struggle, it is vital to know who are our enemies and who are our friends. It is often necessary to unite to defeat the main enemy and sort out differences with everyone else in a non-antagonistic way. In the world today, it is important to remember that imperialism is the enemy, and other contradictions, such as that between men and women, should be handled as contradictions between the people. That in no way downgrades them, or makes them less important, indeed unless they are resolved there is no hope of winning the main struggle.

Women's oppression goes back many centuries and the women's movement has deep historical roots. This series of articles has highlighted the specificity of women's oppression and the way it affects women's ability to fight back. Men benefit materially from women's oppression and there is no doubt that in particular cases the contradiction between men and women can be antagonistic.

Under socialism, many of the different facets of the struggle against oppression will continue in a changed form. There will still be a danger of continuing class and national oppression under socialism. However, the struggle over the women's question will probably be even more far-reaching because of its deep historical roots. Even more reason for giving priority to the struggle for women's liberation here and now!

Until the struggle against women's oppression is actively taken up, imperialism cannot be defeated and a new society built. And until imperialism is overthrown, women's emancipation cannot be won.

# THINKING ABOUT WOMEN

Contributed.

March 8th is International Women's Day. On this day, we think of women all over the world who are suffering oppression, both because of the imperialist system and at the hands of men.

In every society on earth, to a greater or lesser extent, women are considered inferior to men. Women's oppression takes many forms: economic, political, social, cultural and sexual. Women are oppressed both directly and by means of ideology. Ideological oppression is particularly effective because it gives women an inbuilt belief in their own inferiority and takes away their will to fight back.

Although it is true that men as a sex oppress women as a sex, men cannot be blamed for being men. It is not their fault that they were born into the inherently oppressive sex: after all, someone had to be! On the other hand, it is very much their fault if, when they become aware of the advantages they enjoy at women's expense, advantages derived from a long history of the oppression of the female sex by the male sex, compounded at various stages in history by class oppression, they do all they can to exploit those advantages to the full. Not satisfied with being members of the sex which in this society dominates the state, the church, the armed forces, the legal profession, the medical profession, the civil service - in fact, every institution which makes important decisions regarding people's lives in this country - they still resort to patronising attitudes, threats, intimidation, physical violence, and in extreme cases, rape and murder, to assert their so-called superiority over women.

There are some individual men in this and other societies who are aware of women's oppression. They fight the impulse to resort to sexism in themselves and criticise it in others. We women welcome these men and the support they give us. But we are aware that they are unfortunately a small minority.

There are also many women, who, because they are victims of ideological oppression, collude with men in the definition of women as inferior beings, and behave accordingly.

## RELIGION AND WOMEN

One of the most important tools of ideological oppression in the world, throughout the centuries, has been religion - "the opiate of the people" as Marx rightly called it.

The dominant religion of this country is Christianity, and it has played a significant role in the oppression of women by men.

Christianity is, of course, a male-dominated religion: the central figure Jesus Christ, God, the Devil, the twelve disciples and almost all the main characters in the bible were male. Also male are: the Pope, all the hierarchy of all the different denominations, and until very recently all church ministers, priests, vicars, etc. Women scarcely get a look-in. But it is worth considering for a moment, the role played by the only two female characters of any significance in Christianity: Eve and the Virgin Mary.

Sexism in the bible is clear from the first chapter of Genesis. Adam was "the man in God's image" and Eve was his "help-mate". Part of Eve's



Joanne O'Brien

punishment for her sin of disobedience to God was "Thou shalt serve thy husband" because her sin was regarded as greater than Adam's. What exactly was her sin? She ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and she gave some to Adam. She wanted knowledge, so that she could make her own decisions, rather than accept the version of reality given her by God and Adam. Not a lot has changed in this respect, especially for Catholic women, who are still denied the right to make decisions regarding child-bearing.

According to Christian doctrine, we are all sinners because we are all descendants of Adam and Eve. So unforgivable was Eve's hunger for knowledge, that every human being the world has ever known is condemned to hell because of it. This is where Jesús comes in. He offers the way to salvation. His mother Mary, in order to be worthy of the honour of giving birth to him, had to be pure, therefore had to be a virgin. An impossible example for women to follow, however hard they tried!

But this is the significance of Mary: just as Eve offers women as "bad" example, Mary offers them a "good" one: that of denying their sexuality, and subordinating their own needs and wishes to those of men. An important aspect of the Christian message is self-denial and service to others: a message which has very definitely been aimed at women rather than men.

At certain periods in European and American history, women who sought and possessed knowledge other than what the church gave them, were persecuted as witches. Most notoriously, in the Middle Ages, nine million European women were burned alive.

Throughout the centuries in this country, women have fought against their ideological oppression. But until this century, their gains have been fairly minimal. History as we know it, has of course been written by men, and it is very likely that many women's struggles have been left out.

## MARRIAGE

The other major tool in the ideological oppression of women down the ages, and still going strong, has been the institution of marriage. In some societies, and historically in this society, marriage is a property relationship. It is a matter of debate as to whether it still is. The ritual of the bride

being "given away" by her father to her husband, with the accompanying words "Who gives this woman to be married to this man?" still takes place in most church weddings.

Before this century in this country, married women had very few legal rights. Even their children were not legally theirs. Wife and children were the property of the husband. Any property which a wife had before her marriage, became her husband's property when she married. In some working class industries, married women were not allowed to work.

Thus the ideology of the man's superior status within the family became firmly established. It was the man who held power within the family: he controlled the family's finances and made all the important decisions.

Even though the reality has changed in many ways, the ideology still holds strong. The reality has changed because some women's struggles have been successful: in particular, the Suffragists' struggle for the vote, the struggle for married women to own property; for easier divorce; for legal and safe contraception and abortion; for equal rights to children, house and property on divorce; for equal pay in some occupations; for DHSS benefits for single parent mothers and other important struggles. The effect of these legal reforms has been to open up the way for larger numbers of women to fight for liberation and equality in this country.



'As women, we all live in occupied country. We live under men's laws, in a male economy, where power is defined in male terms. If we were a race apart, we'd have taken up arms against men by now, but we're not. We steep with men, we give birth to them.' JUNE LEVINE (SR 190)

But there is still a long way to go.

As women gain strength, the oppression becomes more subtle. Women these days are not forced into marriage, they are socialised into wanting it. Marriage is still the social status which gives women respectability, and women who do not conform, whether lesbians, "old maids" or single parent mothers, have lower status than married women. Respectability for a woman is not achieved by earning her own living and supporting herself. It is achieved by becoming dependent on a man. Besides the carrot of respectability, what is it that so successfully persuades women to abandon their independence for the very dubious rewards of marriage? It is, in my view, the manipulation of the most ill-used word in the English language: love.

For women, the message is clear: it's the old Christian message again. If you love somebody, you put their needs first, and deny your own needs.

For men, the concept of love tends to get confused with sexual desire. The phrase "to make love" means to have sex. Tell a woman you love her and she'll do anything you want.

## POPULAR IMAGES

A whole host of social and cultural phenomena, products of twentieth century imperialism, further distort the relationship between the sexes, by playing on men's and women's sexual feelings for each other, and their genuine affection for each other. These include fashions, whose purpose, besides persuading people to spend a lot of money, is to overstate the importance of physical attractiveness, to the detriment of real understanding between individuals. Also pop music, which appeals to young women by promoting "love songs" by means of a modern macho image. In addition, there is a range of popular literature aimed at women: women's magazines, teenage magazines, romantic novels e.g. 'Mills and Boon' type, all instilling in women and girls the desirability of catching a man, and the myth that when you are married, you live happily ever after.

Imperialism sees to it that women swallow the bait, and men see to it that they do not live happily ever after.

In a short article such as this, it is possible to make only a few brief points. There is much more to be said about marriage and the family, and how it is oppressive to women. Hopefully, this article will provoke some discussion.

EQUAL PAY FOR WORK  
OF EQUAL VALUE

Dear Editor,

In September's 'Class Struggle' article on women, it was argued that if imperialism granted equal pay to women, provided childcare, ended domestic (i.e. women's) labour, etc. then imperialism could not function.

I am not sure this is true.

Equal pay for work of equal value is a progressive demand but it does not necessarily challenge the capitalist basis of economic exploitation, as so clearly exposed by Marx.

Many aspects of women's unpaid labour could be privatised and be a source of profit.

What working class men do in their homes is not an issue which challenges the fundamental nature of capitalist economic exploitation.

Obviously struggles to increase equality between men and women are progressive. But we should not underestimate the ability of the bosses (usually men) to grant reforms, in the face of strong opposition, to adapt to save their despicable (and male-dominated) system.

Obviously, imperialism benefits from the oppression and extra-exploitation of women. Opposition to this is one thing; to argue that to end these things would destroy the basis of imperialism, is another issue.

A mere male, Birmingham.

The letter above raises some important points about the position of women in imperialist society and the work they do. It is worth going into these points in some more detail.

The letter refers to the ability of the imperialist system to make reforms, when it has to, to save itself.

It is clear that, especially in the case of white-collar jobs, reforms have been made, for example for teachers, so that women get equal pay.

In the 19th century, women had to fight for their right to education and take up professions like medicine and science. This was clearly a reform that imperialism was forced to grant and one that it could accommodate.

In some working class jobs also, particularly in the textile industry, women traditionally got equal pay although this tended to be eroded by the practice of men getting the more highly-paid jobs. But there are also aspects of domestic work that can be made into a profitable enterprise. Examples of this are convenience foods, pre-packaged meals etc. Another current example is private old people's homes, one of the fastest growing businesses in Britain today.

These examples would seem to indicate that it would be possible for imperialism to grant equal pay for work of equal value. Men and women would be equally exploited and money could be drawn from taxes to pay for socialised domestic labour - the reproduction and maintenance of the workforce.

On the other hand, this seems pretty unlikely in the real situation of Britain today.

Imperialism does not only need a workforce that it can exploit to produce surplus value. It needs the flexibility to force wages down and cut living standards.

Women have always been used by imperialism in such a way that its profits are boosted. Women's labour has been, to say the least, flexible.

Women's domestic labour has been generally unpaid in the home. At the same time, they have been a low-paid source of labour, often used to break the hold of relatively well-paid men. They have been used as a reserve labour force as well as a cheaper labour force, prepared to work part-time and for low wages.

Whereas in the earlier days of capitalism, it remained a possibility that equal pay and an equal right to work could be won, this now seems unlikely for more than some limited sections of women. The trade union response was to demand the family wage for men and thus deny women the right to work and equal pay.

It is this political reality as much as the needs of imperialism that will prevent women from achieving the right to be equally exploited, even if this were possible in the abstract.

That is not to argue that the struggle for women's equality by itself will challenge the basis of the imperialist system. An alliance of forces is necessary of all those oppressed and exploited.

We welcome further contributions from our readers on this and other aspects of the discussion on women's oppression.

Class Struggle  
November 1988.

# WOMAN'S WORK IS

This article looks at the importance of women's paid work in Britain today and makes some comparisons with other Western European countries. It also looks at the link with women's unpaid work in the home and different ways that women can build links and work in solidarity with each other, both in Europe and internationally.

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## WOMEN'S PAID EMPLOYMENT

If we look at the official figures for women's earnings, we can see the gap between men's and women's earnings. At the top of the earnings league, average weekly earnings for the top 10% of women were £306.02 a week in 1989, compared with £391.07 for men. For the bottom 10%, the figures were £113.08 for women, compared to £147 for men. Averaging out the levels across the earnings scale, the figures are: £182.03 for women and £269.05 for men.

It should also be remembered that official earnings figures in Britain overestimate women's average earnings. Official statistics are based on the New Earnings Survey which only covers those who pay tax. Many part-time women workers, often the lowest-paid, such as cleaners, care assistants, homeworkers etc., do not count officially because they do not earn enough to be paying tax. The averages, therefore, are exaggerated.

In spite of the Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts, inequality at work persists and is in some ways increasing. This can be seen in two ways. Firstly, the figures show that women are a minority in many of the "top jobs". Even where there are a majority of women in a particular area of work, the senior jobs are held by men. Secondly, women tend to be concentrated in low-paid and undervalued occupations.



## TOP JOBS

6.5% of MPs and 13% of life peers are women. In the judiciary, only one woman sits in the Court of Appeal and a handful are judges, stipendiary magistrates etc. Women make up 0.5% of executive directors and 3.9% of non-executive directors. At universities, women are in a tiny minority in the top jobs.

## LOW-PAID SECTORS

1987 figures show the concentration of women in low-paid sectors of work: Almost 80% of those employed in medical and other health services are women. In footwear and clothing, 73.5% are women. In personal services (hairdressing, cleaning) 71%; hotel and catering 66.6%; in education 68.5%; in retail and distribution 63%; in sanitary services 60.4%. It is worth noting that many of these jobs reflect the jobs that women are traditionally supposed to do at home, domestic work servicing the family.

## PART-TIME WORK

The low pay associated with such sectors is reinforced by the growing importance of part-time work. Half the women employed in Britain work part-time and a growing number of jobs are being made part-time. Although we are always told that this is to suit women's needs, the spread of part-time work now means that many women who want to work full-time are forced into taking two or three part-time jobs. Part-time workers have been shown to be consistently lower-paid than full time, with fewer benefits such as sick pay or pension rights and fewer employment rights.

## HOMEWORK

The most extreme examples of low pay in Britain today are of those doing paid work at home. In a recent survey of 21 women doing paid work at home in West Yorkshire, over half (11 women) were earning less than 50 pence an hour. They were working in a variety of industries ranging from knitting and clothing, electronics to printing. In all but three cases, the women gave the lack of childcare as the main reason for taking on work at home, however badly paid.

Enough research has now been

done to show that homeworking, at these extreme low rates of pay, is common in many black communities in Britain. On top of the difficulties all women face in combining their work at home and outside, black women face racism both in the wider community and at work outside. For many black women, homework is the most important source of income.



## DOMESTIC WORK

In Britain, today women still do most of the work in the home, particularly caring for dependants, both children and elderly or disabled relatives. This work has always been undervalued. Unusually, in 1987, an insurance company, the Legal and General, actually put a figure on this unpaid work:

They estimated that: ...the British housewife had a commercial value of £370 a week, which was twice the average weekly wage. In working out the figures, our research revealed that a housewife is on call all seven days of a 92-hour week. Her jobs include shopper, waitress, window cleaner, nurse, driver, cleaner, cook and child-minder. She is also the financial expert. In nine out of ten households, the wife does the finances."

Only 1% of children under five have places in local authority day nurseries. Only 28% of women with children under five go out to work and the majority can only work part-time. Most women have to make their own arrangements with childminders and many have found that even with the low hourly rate of many childminders, they cannot afford to pay for childcare out of the low-paid, part-time wages they can earn.

The current campaign from the government and others to promote the 1990's as the decade of the working woman

# NEVER DONE



has had little impact outside some firms which are beginning to provide better opportunities for some of their top women and expensive nurseries for some top-paid women. The current cost of childcare in central London, for example, is over £400 a month,

Other campaigns have got off the ground to provide cheaper childcare to more women, with various schemes such as childcare vouchers, to be paid for by employers or workplace nurseries. These are, of course, to be welcomed. But they are mainly concentrated in the Southeast

It is widely known that Britain has the worst record on childcare in Europe. However, recent figures show that as important as childcare is the responsibility for elderly dependants or disabled relatives. As the state cuts back on care and promotes 'care in the community', this means more work for women in the home.



## FLEXIBILITY FOR WHOM?

Women in Britain and other countries of Western Europe will play an increasing role in the workforce but we are being told that we have to be flexible. Although women welcome any flexibility that fits in with their needs, present trends to make work more flexible seem to be more about reducing costs for employers and finding ways round employment law.

In Britain, by 1985 one third of all workers, and half of working women, could already be classed as "flexible" in that they did not have full-time permanent jobs. European employers look with envy at Britain, where temporary working is so widespread.

Present restrictions on temporary working are under attack in much of Europe. Holland has a ban on running more than one temporary contract end to end (a common trick in Britain).

It is feared that 1992 will be used as a reason to lower standards of employment law to the British level.

A newer form of casual labour has been widely used in the Netherlands where women have zero hour contracts. Women are not guaranteed any work or pay but break their contract if they take other work or stray from the phone and thus make themselves unavailable. 125,000 women in the Netherlands are on such contracts and supermarkets in Britain are beginning to use them.

In France, temporary employment crept in under a 1979 law which permitted fixed term (i.e. temporary) contracts for the first time. Since then, there have been a series of measures culminating in a 1986 order which gives the employer a free hand provided the contract refers to a task not a job. The West German government brought in temporary contracts in 1985, arguing that it would reduce overtime. Now a substantial number of new workers are only given temporary contracts.

Many more examples could be given to illustrate these trends. Most European countries also now have stronger employment protection than in Britain, for example, minimum wages. However there are many ways that employers find to get round such laws. For example, they make homeworkers self-employed to avoid minimum wage laws. In some countries, minimum wage legislation excludes part-timers.

## SOLIDARITY

1992 will be used to try and reduce gains that have been won. But we can learn from women's position in different countries of Europe that capitalism has compromised in different ways in different

countries. We should use the opportunity to build unity with women elsewhere and learn from positive examples of struggle and solidarity.

In Norway, for example, the Women's Front promotes the fight for a 6 hour day for all workers. As long as "normal" work is seen as being the eight hour day, women part-time workers will always be treated as second-class workers. The demand for a six hour day for all workers enables this gap to be closed.

In the Netherlands, the tradition of linking community and union organisation, has been revived through the Women's Union whose membership includes women in paid employment and those not in paid work. The Norwegian Women's Front also campaigns on issues other than workplace struggles, for example, against pornography and sex tours in Third World countries.

We know also from our own experience in Britain the importance of broadening struggles away from narrow trade unionism. The strength of the miners' struggle, for example lay in the broad involvement of whole communities, particularly of women. This was also the case in struggles fought by black workers, such as at Grunwicks or Imperial Typewriters. They relied primarily on the support of their communities not on the union bureaucracy.

Particularly important for women in Europe will be the need to build solidarity with national minority women here and women in the Third World. The steps to bring in "Fortress Europe", extending and strengthening controls and repression of black people in Europe and at the same time, increasing exploitation of the people of the Third World, are already underlay.

Homeworkers campaigns in Britain have already begun to make links with some organisations such as SEWA, the Self Employed Women's Association, in India who have internationally given the lead in organising women working at home and in the "casual" economy.

Imperialism operates on a world scale and it is also gives us many opportunities to build solidarity with women around the world, as the following example from the Philippines shows.

Women do two thirds of the world's work, earn less than five percent of the world's income, and own one percent of the world's assets.