manifesto

CPB

Women and Class

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WOMEN OF BRITAIN
COME INTO
THE FACTORIES
ASK AT ANY EMPLOYMENT EXCHANGE FOR ADVICE AND FULL DETAILS

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Ruby Loftus Screwing a Breech-ring (1943)
Laura Knight (1877-1970)
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Eleanor Marx
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Facing page image
1940 war production poster

Introduction image
Described by the *Guardian* as 'coronavirus slayer' Kerala health minister in the communist-led state government K. K. Shailaja – popularly known as Shailaja Teacher – is a member of the CPIM Central Committee. She is credited with devising and running Kerala's much-prised model response to the Covid-19 pandemic

Preface
Women and class

THE RE-ESTABLISHED Communist Party (CPB) held its inaugural congress in April 1988. It traces its history back to 1920 when the Party (CPGB) was founded. The re-establishment came about because of the moves to jettison the revolutionary tradition on which the Party was based. It was recognised from the start that the Communist contribution to the fight against women's oppression in Britain had been sadly neglected for many years. Initially, until the 1970's, this was due to the tacit acceptance of the predominant and age-old patriarchal ideology which permeated all aspects of society including the labour movement. Later, in the 1970s, one of the main causes of this negligence was rooted in the ideological confusion over the relationship of women to class, class struggle and socialism itself. This resulted in a situation in which the CPGB was reduced at best to a moral approach and, at worst, to an uncritical acceptance of a stance which led elements of the women's movement into a cul-de-sac. Hence it was, and remains, our view that in order to redress the mistakes of the past it is vitally necessary to re-examine the origins, history and present manifestation of women's oppression and super-exploitation in Britain. This process has begun but, as with other aspects of Marxist theory, this is a journey and not a destination. For Marx and Engels, the oppression of women and their super-exploitation as workers is located within the social relations of production. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to think that Marx and Engels said the last word on the subject. There are vital areas of social reality which Marxists (including Marx) have simply not addressed. If there is to be any renewal of Marxism, it is not simply a matter of going over old ground, but breaking the new. The most obvious omission centres on the realities of women and black people in society. Our challenge is to address this. Unlike most labour movement organisations, the Communist Party has begun to develop a Marxist feminist understanding of this vitally important issue: its product is *Women and Class,* first published in 1990. Now in its centenary year, the Communist Party has published this new, updated and revised edition. This centenary year also, unfortunately, coincides with the year in which the world is in the grip of the coronavirus pandemic, the economic, social and political repercussions of which are as yet unknown. However, the disproportionate effects of the virus on workers, especially black workers and women workers, is already clearly evident. What is also evident is that among the countries and states which have performed best in controlling the virus are three with communist governments: Cuba, Vietnam and Kerala.

As Communists, our role is to apply our historical materialist analysis creatively to such a project. This pamphlet is the result– now in its fourth edition. It was not conceived as a substitute for practical activity, but rather to give substance and meaning to it, since as Marxists we seek to understand the world in order to change it and as Leninists we also understand that a Party claiming to be revolutionary, must be guided by the most advanced theory on all issues. Communist women are, and will continue to be, closely involved in all the practical, day-to-day struggles which challenge women's oppression and super-exploitation, but we also recognize that the Party as a whole, in its ideological and practical work, has to embrace the cause of half the population (the female half).

Whilst not all readers of this pamphlet will agree with the analysis presented, we

hope, nonetheless, that it will stimulate debate and discussion on the important issues it raises. Above all we hope to inspire the forces of the left that our conviction that the fight for the liberation of women is central to the struggle for socialism.

The first edition of *Women and Class* appeared in 1990 and was written before the momentous changes in almost all European socialist countries. It is now widely accepted that the effect of the introduction of a capitalist economic system in those countries has had disastrous repercussions for working people – women in particular. Whatever the problems of the socialist 'command' economies with their attendant bureaucratisation and lack of democracy, women made substantial gains in the former socialist countries. Widespread and freely available nursery and child care, rights to control fertility, equal pay and opportunity are among some of the benefits women have now lost. Despite colossal economic problems, brought about by the American blockade, women still retain those rights in socialist Cuba and in other remaining socialist countries. The mounting evidence of deformations of socialism in some countries does not lead us to the conclusion propounded by many in the west, that socialism itself has nothing to offer humankind. We remain convinced that only socialism permits the fullest democratic aspirations of the will of women and men and hope that, in learning from the past, communists will be in the forefront of the struggle for a democratic renewal of progressive change and socialism throughout the world.

Mary Davis
2020

Introduction

THE OPPRESSION of women is consistently denied or trivialised by the mass media and institutions of the state. On the left, there is a tendency to subsume women's issues within the general class struggle, or to relegate them to a secondary position. The attitude is too often one of 'socialism will sort it all out'. In the meantime, any specific concentration on women's issues is seen as diversionary – a deviation from the site of the real struggle.

The fight for women's rights is thus divorced from the struggle for general change. The extent to which women's issues receive attention is too often determined by chance or personal choice. The oppression of women becomes something to be acted on, not on its merits, but only when pressure ensures it is not ignored. This tendency, unfortunately not a new phenomenon, has been fuelled by the fact that a vibrant women's movement no longer exists and when it did the direction it sometimes took in its halcyon days was often fraught with division and difficulty. It was to some extent understandable that the anger inspiring a new movement, as the women's movement was in the 1970's, gave theoretical and practical emphasis to the personal – the individual, subjective experience of oppression by men. From 'radical' feminism's assertion that the motor of history is the sex war, to 'cultural' feminism's notion of a 'special' female nature, the move has been away from a class and political analysis of, and strategy to combat, women's oppression. Today we face a dangerous new challenge: hostility to the very notion of women's rights and the outright rejection of feminism per se.

But the left must look to itself when seeking explanations or attributing blame. It has, by ignoring or relegating of women's issues, fed the anger and impatience of many women. For some it confirmed their mistaken belief that Marxism had nothing to offer women; that the way forward lay in alternative theories and forms of organisation.

Now, more than ever before, we need an approach to the 'woman question' which recognises that female oppression is indissolubly linked to the operation and maintenance of the capitalist system; that the fight to end women's oppression is no mere optional extra, but is an intrinsic and essential part of the struggle for progressive political, social and economic change.

Communists, building on the rich heritage of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Zetkin and others recognise there can be no question of personal choice, predilection or prejudice in the degree of attention accorded to women's issues. Communists recognise that all class societies are characterised by the subordination of women. The inequality of women has its roots in the inequalities and antagonisms of all class societies.

To understand the nature of women's oppression under capitalism and its relation to other forms of oppression, we have to begin at the level of the relations of production with the fact of the economic exploitation of the working class by the ruling class. Specific forms of oppression, most notably those of women and people of colour, serve to maximise the conditions for that exploitation by dividing and weakening the working class. The problem is that the subjugation of women (and black people) has been historically connected with class society for so long that it has become the accepted natural order of things. The oppressive ideologies sustaining subservience are so culturally rooted that they have passed beyond naked statements of class rule and entered into the very fabric of our lives including language itself. As such the ideologies of both sexism and racism have become universalised and hence disembodied from their class origins. They have thus fulfilled the ultimate goal

of ideology – namely to represent the interests of the dominant class as the interests of society as a whole. How else are we to explain the permeation of racist and sexist ideas within the working class and even within the socialist movement? Racism and sexism as material and ideological facts are central to the maintenance of capitalist and pre-capitalist class relations. However, this is not to put a narrow economistic interpretation on their force. These are not simply mechanisms for keeping black and women workers in a subordinate position since, as oppressive ideologies, they cut across class boundaries and depend, as all ideologies do, on their universalism. Hence they impinge on the lives of all black people and women, regardless of class, and determine society's perception of race and gender. They operate historically in varying degrees and forms through both the coercive and ideological apparatuses of the state.

The relationship between the economic 'base' and the forms of oppression conditioned by it, is not linear or mechanical. This pamphlet is concerned primarily with women, black and white. The key to understanding the situation of women under capitalism lies in the complex and dynamic relationship between exploitation and oppression. A full understanding of the relationship between women, exploitation and oppression is vital if we are to rescue the woman question from interest group politics.

The super-exploitation of women as workers and their oppression as women is a fundamental prerequisite for the operation of capitalism – economically, politically and ideologically. In this respect the assertion that the theory of class struggle is outmoded and irrelevant is as nonsensical as calling the woman question a 'bourgeois deviation.' To seek to divide that which is indivisible is the real deviation.

The question of the status of half the human race is not a matter to be left to the political whim of the moment. It must be rescued from such a fate and placed where it belongs, at the forefront of the struggle for progressive social change. By reasserting and consolidating communist revolutionary theory and practice in relation to women, this pamphlet is a contribution to that struggle.

One Origins of women's oppression: the marxist view

Engel's view

A GREAT DEAL of theoretical and historical work on the woman question has focused on a search for the origins of the oppression of women. The existence, in all known societies, of a sexual division of labour has led many to assume that, at some point in pre-history, men acquired power over women. The why and how of this varies, largely according to the political orientation of the individual theorist. The most popular explanations centre on males' greater strength and sexual aggression. Some have argued that men have used sexual violence, especially rape, as a 'conscious process of intimidation' (Susan Brown-Miller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, 1975). Others have argued that it is women's vulnerability during pregnancy and the demands of child rearing which is the basis of male domination (R. Dunbar, *Female Liberation as the Basis of Social Revolution*, 1970; M. Daly, *Gyne/Ecology*, 1978; A. Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 1977).

All such theories are based on the assumption of an inherent competition and conflict between the sexes, and of a biologically determined male aggression and/or female vulnerability. All the evidence however points to the opposite. Early human social organisation was highly co-operative and egalitarian. The success of human beings as a species lay in their ability to work and in the co-operative nature of social organisation. Sexual divisions of labour did exist and would certainly have been strongly influenced by the demands and constraints of child rearing.

However, these divisions are not antagonistic. It took a qualitative change in the productive forces (*i.e.* the possibility of the production and accumulation of a surplus) for the social relations to become ones of domination and subordination.

This pamphlet is not concerned with attempting to make a definitive statement about the pre-historical origins of the sexual division of labour, which necessarily involves a fair amount of speculation. It is our view that the oppression of women emerged at the same time as class society; that both class exploitation and female oppression have their origins in the emergence of property relations based on private accumulation of wealth and the appropriation of labour.

Exactly why it was that men emerged as the owners and controllers of this new form of property is an important and interesting question, but should not form the exclusive or primary focus of theoretical or historical enquiry into the woman question.

As stated above, a feature common to all known societies is a sexual division of labour – women and men generally do different work. The nature, extent and rigidity of this sexual division of labour varies considerably from culture to culture. But generally, in class societies, women have a greater responsibility for child care and domestic work, as well as participating in social production, while men have a greater responsibility for the provision of the means of subsistence. Although significant differences will exist between women of different classes, what women share in common is a general subordination to their male peers. This general subordination may be compounded by other factors such as colour, culture, religion, etc.

What characterises all women and distinguishes them from men is their capacity to bear children. Human infants are vulnerable in the first few months of life and in subsistence conditions are dependent on a lactating female. Throughout the first years of life, children need care and protection. It is reasonable to argue that woman's responsibility for child care

and domestic work stemmed from this dependence and from her increased vulnerability and decreased mobility during pregnancy. To argue this is not to accept that there is a natural link between child bearing and child caring.

The existence of a sexual division of labour in all known societies is often used as proof that this is a natural, and therefore inevitable, state of affairs arising from the immutable fact of human biology. Although there was a clear division of labour by sex in pre-class societies, women's work was not regarded as inferior to that of men. In contrast, in class societies, women's work and status is invariably seen as inferior to that of their male peers.

The movement from simple subsistence to the production of a surplus laid the material basis for the development of trade, the appropriation of labour and the concept of private property. The development of plant and animal husbandry, and more complex instruments of production could have reduced the sexual division of labour. But with the emergence of class societies came a deepening of that division and the attribution of an inferior status to woman's work, the appropriation of her labour and control over her reproductive capacity. Unless we want to explain female subordination in terms of genetics, hormones or the working of a supernatural force, we have to examine the interaction between the fact of female biology and the social construction of that fact in the context of class society.

To begin we need to restate some basic Marxist principles.

People need to produce in order to live. Production is a social process. What determines the nature of this process is the ownership of the means of production. This lies at the heart of the relations which develop between people in the production process – the relations of production. The productive forces and production relations constitute a mode of production which is characterised by the exploitation of one class by another: slave-owner over slave; feudal lord over serf; capitalist over proletarian.

Human beings are able to produce more than they need to subsist. In class societies, the ruling class exploits this potential for its own benefit by appropriating the labour of the subordinate class. Exploitation is an economic relation – the expropriation of the surplus labour of the exploited class by the exploiting class. It is this economic 'base', with its particular production and property relations that conditions, and ultimately determines, all other social institutions – the 'superstructure'.

Political, ideological, juridical, religious and interpersonal development is based on economic development, not as simple, linear, cause and effect, but in a dynamic interaction in which the economic base ultimately asserts itself.

The motor of history is the interaction between the productive forces and the relations of production. Within a particular mode of production, as productive forces develop they come into conflict with the production relations to which they originally corresponded. In the course of development the outmoded production relations inhibit the further development of the productive forces. In the tension which develops, class conflict is heightened with the possibility of social revolution and a qualitative change to a new mode of production.

Under primitive communism there is no exploitation because the possibility of producing a surplus – the material basis for that exploitation – does not exist. But as human social organisation and productive forces developed (in particular with the development of large animal husbandry with its possibility of producing surpluses), economic inequalities and relations of dependence emerged; importantly at this stage, so also did the subordination of women and slavery.

The first antagonistic classes emerged in which the slave owner owned both the means of production and the labourer, the slave. The need to control the enslaved masses and protect private property gave rise to the development of the civil state and to beliefs in the inherent inferiority of the lower orders. The exploitation of slave labour provided the material basis for the separation of mental and physical labour and the expansion and development of science and technology.

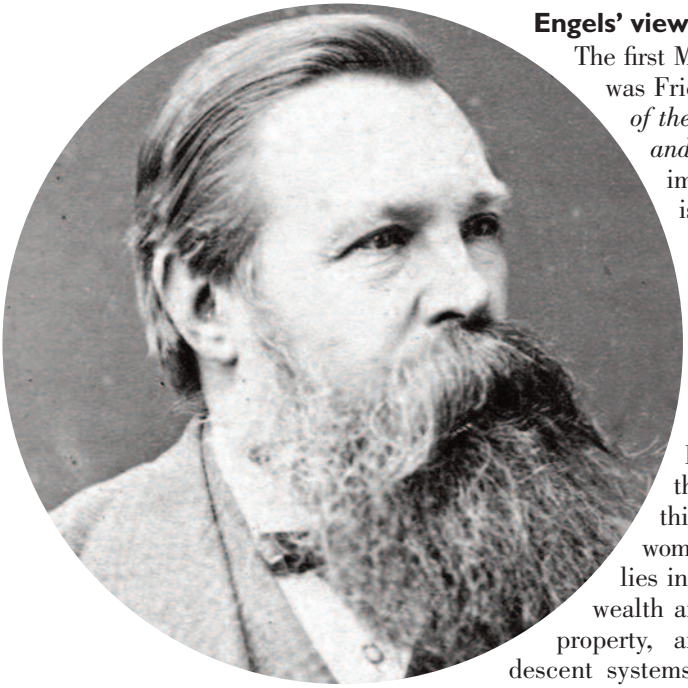
As productive forces came into conflict with production relations, feudalism emerged in which the feudal lords owned the means of production and partially owned the labour of the serfs or villeins. The feudal lords grew rich on the unpaid labour of the serfs which was extracted in exchange for their right to subsist on land owned by the lord. The ties of serfs to the land and service of their feudal lord, and of feudal lords to their king, inhibited the development of industrial production and of the emergence of the final antagonistic classes – the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Each socioeconomic formation builds on and incorporates aspects of those which have preceded it.

Under capitalism, surplus labour, the basis of capitalist profit, is hidden by the wages system. Marx revealed that the source of capitalist wealth – surplus value – is the workers' labour power, the capacity to work. Labour power is a commodity that has an exchange value (wages) and use value (the ability to create a value greater than its own). The capitalist exploits the worker by appropriating that greater value.

Capitalism is based on an apparent equality. The capitalist and the worker meet in the labour market for an equal exchange of commodities; the former with money, the latter with labour power. The wage bargain represents a contract of exchange of equivalents on the basis of equal rights. That is the worker must be 'free' in a double sense: free to sell his/her labour power, ie, free of slave or feudal bonds, and free in the sense of having no other means of utilising his/her labour power.

The individual wage bargain is reached in the sphere of circulation and requires political equality, equality of rights. However, in the sphere of production, the rules of economic exploitation apply. There is thus a contradiction between the tendency towards political equality and the necessity for economic exploitation. Out of this essentially exploitative relationship flows a variety of oppressions both overt and covert which serve to maximise the conditions for the extraction of surplus value. The oppression of women and of black people set up contradictions in denying, distorting or inhibiting the necessary tendency towards political equality.

In Marxist terms, exploitation and oppression are thus specific and distinct. Although all women may be oppressed in the sense of being treated as second class citizens, only those women who are engaged in wage labour are exploited. The level of women's exploitation is greater than that of their male peers as women's wages are historically and presently substantially lower. For this reason we refer to the super-exploitation of women. Women who are not involved in social production are not exploited in the Marxist sense of the word, although, since a source of exploitable labour power is essential to the continuation of capitalism, their role in the renewal and maintenance of labour power is of crucial importance to the continued functioning of capitalism. The question of the role of domestic labour, the family and women's paid work are dealt with in the discussion of the nature of women's oppression and exploitation in Britain.



Engels' view

The first Marxist text on this subject was Friedrich Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884). The most important thing to establish is that Engels saw women's oppression as 'a problem of history not of biology' (Janet Sayers, *Biological Politics*, 1972). Engels acknowledged the role of biology in influencing the sexual division of labour. However, he maintains that the social significance of this division of labour and of woman's child-bearing capacity lies in the production of surplus wealth and the concept of private property, and the development of descent systems for the transmission of accumulated wealth.

Engels starts from the position that pre-class, subsistence societies were characterised by simple foraging and hunting, and 'group marriage' organisation. Tasks were carried out collectively and the products distributed among the group for immediate consumption. Within this form of social organisation, which he termed 'savage societies' (in line with the language of 19th century social anthropology), there was no possibility of the private accumulation or appropriation of goods or labour. Women and men lived in relations of equality oppressed only by 'nature'.

Within group marriages, ie, a group of sisters having their husbands in common, and a group of brothers their wives, the ascertainable fact of maternity was of prime importance in the development of matrilineal descent systems. (This is not to be confused with the mythological 'matriarchy' which some people maintain was overthrown or undermined by men.)

Women's child-bearing capacity influenced the development of a division of labour in which women were primarily responsible for child care and for the tasks associated with the communal hearth. Men being more mobile tended to undertake the tasks associated with hunting larger game and the food gathering further afield. Women controlled the instruments of domestic production, while men controlled the instruments of hunting and warfare.

Far from being subordinate, there is powerful evidence to suggest that women's role was crucial in the development of skills and knowledge central to the advancement of human social organisation. They were largely responsible for the gathering and later growing of food; for the hunting and later husbandry of small animals; for the preparation of communal meals and the production of clothing; and for the development and production of the tools and utensils to carry out these tasks.

The move from these primitive societies to the slave-owning mode of production arose

out of the development of large animal husbandry, with which came the possibility of the production of a food source which could be guaranteed, and a surplus which could be bartered. Men, the mobile hunters, possessed the tools, skills and symbolic rights necessary to gain control of the herds, to become the 'owners' and controllers of the new wealth.

To explain why patrilineal descent systems largely replaced matrilineal systems, Engels argues that with the movement from food gathering, social organisation became more complex as did the rules governing marriage. 'Pairing marriage' – a union between two individuals – laid the basis for the development of monogamous marriage and the subordination of women. Within pairing marriage, both parents were identifiable and the basis was laid for the biological father's role in social identity to become significant. The combination of the accumulation of wealth under the control of men and the change to a form of marriage in which the biological father's role became important, gave rise to the desire in men to pass their wealth to their own children. Thus patrilineal descent systems emerged as the dominant form. Engels refers to this as the 'overthrow of mother-right' and the 'world historic defeat of the female sex' (Engels, *The Origins*).

The only way in which paternity could be guaranteed was through the sequestration of women and enforced sexual fidelity. From the patrilineal clan system emerged the patriarchal family in which monogamous marriage and patrilineal principles of inheritance formalised the complete subjugation of women.

For Engels, the patriarchal family represented the 'perfected form' of marriage for the transmission of property, and the institutionalisation of controls over women, by men. He argued that the emancipation of women lay in the possibility of involvement in social production, ie, the entry into paid work would decrease their isolation and financial dependence and bring them into contact with the trade union and labour movement. Because he saw the monogamous family as the instrument for the transmission of property, Engels believed that it would not survive among the working class for whom there was no property to transmit.

Engels was deeply committed to the principle of equality for women. He recognised the advances for women possible within capitalism, but saw full emancipation as possible only under socialism in which political, social and economic freedom would be combined. These themes were taken up by subsequent Marxist theorists and are addressed later in this section.

Many criticisms have been launched against Engels' work. Some are valid, others are mere anti-Marxist cant. Some of the arguments in *The Origins* have been widely misinterpreted and used to provide theoretical underpinning for non-Marxist analyses.

It is a fact that Engels did not give an adequate account of the emergence of the patrilineal descent system. His ascription of a male 'impulse' to overthrow 'mother-right' reduces a complex, long-term social process to an individual, psychological one. There are echoes of 19th century assumptions about physiological differences between the sexes in his account of the development of the sexual division of labour, while his account of women in pre-capitalist societies is sketchy.

Engels assumed that the working class monogamous family would disappear because there was no material basis for its existence. He did not take account of the impact on the working class of the ruling class ideology of the family. Neither did he address fully the subordinate status of working class women within the family, nor the role the family unit plays in the reproduction and maintenance of labour power.

Much is made of the empirical shortcomings of the anthropological evidence employed by Engels. Social anthropology has advanced since Morgan wrote his major study of Native North Americans (*Ancient Society*, 1877) from which Engels drew much of his empirical material, and some of the source material is flawed. However, such criticisms do not disprove Engels' thesis nor undermine his historical method.

Many socialist feminists have used Engels to support their argument that female and class oppression are separate systems; they cite this statement in *The Origins:*

> 'According to the materialist conception, the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of immediate life. This again, is a twofold character: on the one side, the production of the means of existence, of food, of clothing and shelter and the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species. The social organisation under which the people of a particular historical epoch and a particular country live is determined by both kinds of production: by the stage of development of labour on the one hand and of the family on the other.'

This has been interpreted as saying there are two motors to history, the class struggle and the sex struggle. The site of the former is the mode of production and the site of the latter is the mode of reproduction. However, Engels' statement can only be read ambiguously if read in isolation from his and Marx's other works. Engels is clear that the oppression of women, the institution of the family and all social relations must be dealt with in class terms, ie, in relation to specific modes of production.

He is also clear that the oppression of women and class exploitation appeared in history coincidentally because of their common origin in the development of private property. The accumulation of wealth under private ownership was the material basis for the establishment of class society, and the material basis for the oppression of women by the men who controlled that wealth.

The question posed by 'dual systems' theories, or theories which argue for the autonomy or primacy of women's oppression, is on what base does this oppression rest? The first editorial of the English radical feminist journal, *Trouble and Strife (*Winter 1983), stated the position very clearly:

> 'We consider men oppress women because they benefit from doing so . . . The social structure has been developed in such a way as to ensure that the collective and individual actions of men support and maintain them in power.'

It went on to call for a 'movement of all women to overthrow male supremacy'.

It is our view that the oppression of women appeared in a dialectical relationship with the emergence and consolidation of class society. Much feminist theory has concerned itself with a search for the origins of women's oppression, a project which primarily seems to be about proving the equivalence of women's oppression to other forms of oppression, or even its primacy. The search for the origins is necessarily speculative and is a matter for social anthropology. This historical enquiry is not the same as, nor is it a substitute for, the development and consolidation of a Marxist theory of women's oppression.

Clara Zetkin and Rosa Luxembourg

Before looking at what such an enterprise might involve, what theoretical and strategic insights into women's oppression can other socialist thinkers offer us? The emphasis much of modern feminism has placed on psychological and ideological aspects of women's oppression is not new.

Clara Zetkin (1857-1933) was very much at variance with most of her contemporaries in the emphasis she placed on property relations, democratic rights and exploitation. Zetkin addressed the issue of women's oppression in relation to all women. The oppression of women of the ruling class resided in their role as instruments for the transmission of property. She identified their struggle as being for control of their own property. For middle class women, Zetkin saw the struggle as being for full political and economic equality. Their fight was for equality with men in the fields of education and employment, and for personal fulfilment and achievement. The situation for working class women is created by capitalism's need for exploitable labour. The oppression of working women lies in their dual roles as worker, or potential worker, and as wife and mother. Therefore the solution for working women lies ultimately in the achievement of socialism.

Lenin, along with all Marxists, is often accused of having had little of value to say about the woman question. However, he had a great deal to say which is of both theoretical and political importance and relevance to today. His analysis of women's oppression concentrated on the questions of political inequality and the role of the family. His strategy to combat this oppression was two-fold: on the one hand to struggle for the full formal equality capitalism promises all citizens and, on the other hand, to campaign for the socialisation of domestic work to free women from the 'barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-racking, stultifying and crushing drudgery' of housework.

Lenin argued that women had to be drawn into politics; that women's issues had to be addressed and that special groups, comprising male and female communists, should be formed to work on specific women's issues. He also stressed the need to be sensitive to existing conditions, not to ignore or reduce the importance of the material circumstances of women, the constraints those conditions impose upon them, nor the influence of ideological and psychological factors. He further emphasised the importance of actively countering the patriarchal attitudes which were inherited from earlier, feudal social organisation. He urged the use of propaganda and education in the battle against male prejudice and privilege and was deeply critical of those male communists whose relations with women were based on unexamined patriarchal attitudes.

If Marx and Engels are approached dogmatically or mechanically or if feminist answers to the feminist questions are expected, they will be found wanting. Charnie Guettel says: 'just as Marx and Engels had no theoretical work on racism, a phenomenon that has become a central brake on progress in the working class movement in the stage of imperialism, so did they lack a developed critique of sexism under capitalism. Their class analysis of society still provides us with the best tools for analysing both forms of oppression, although concerning women it is very underdeveloped' (*Marxism and Feminism*, 1974).

What Marx and Engels and subsequent Marxist-Leninist theorists offer are powerful theoretical and political insights into the nature of exploitation and the various forms of oppression which arise from exploitative relations. These insights can be applied to the situation of women to build a theory of female oppression that can in turn be used concretely to analyse the situation of women at particular historical junctures.

TWO Rival theories

Biological determinism | Modern feminist theories | Liberal feminism | 'Radical' feminism | 'Socialist feminism' | Intersectionality | 'Post feminism' | 'Diversity' theory | Identity politics and gender identity | The politics of self-identity |

WHY ARE WOMEN popularly viewed as the 'weaker sex'? Why is 'woman' idealised, while women's bodies are fetishised? Is there a maternal instinct? Why have women always fought so desperately to control their reproductive capacity? Why do we colour-code babies? Why is it that a woman's place is in the home, while it is the man's role to be 'the breadwinner'? Why is women's labour, and the products of that labour, generally regarded as inferior to that of men? Why are women 'intuitive' while men are 'intellectual'? Where do the stereotypes of 'femaleness' and 'maleness', masculinity and femininity, come from?

So much of what we regard as 'natural' and inevitable about human social and sexual relations is anything but. The view that god and/or biology 'determines' relations between the sexes serves to perpetuate the major ideological underpinning of women's oppression.

Biological determinism

'What was decided among the prehistoric protozoa cannot be annulled by an Act of Parliament' (Geddes and Thompson, *The Evolution of Sex*, 1889).

Prior to the resurgence of interest in women's issues in the 1960s, the theoretical domain was dominated by analyses of women in which biology played a determining role. Very little attention was paid to specific issues of sex or gender by the left. Popular ideology, founded on biological determinist theories, went largely unchallenged, and at times was even adopted or incorporated uncritically.

The roots of biological determinist explanations of human social and sexual relations are to be found in a combination of religious dogma and Social Darwinism. Male and female rules are seen as determined by nature. The appeal is to that which is natural, and therefore inevitable; and to that which is scientific, and therefore irrefutable. Throughout the 19th century opponents of women's rights appealed to science and nature in attempts to legitimate their opposition to female access to higher education and the professions.

Some writers argued that the sexual division of labour was the result of evolution. For example, 19th century philosopher, Herbert Spencer maintained that female biology determined a 'parental instinct' as well as 'mental differences' between the sexes. He argued that the freeing of women from work to take up their 'natural' role as mothers served to maximise the conditions for reproduction and thus the society's fitness in the struggle for survival.

The false equation of human history with human evolution is fundamental to Social Darwinist theories. Such theories apply Darwinian evolutionary theory incorrectly to human social history and have served to legitimise and perpetuate a status quo of gross social, political and economical inequality.

The characteristics ascribed to men and women, then as now, were derived from sexist preconceptions of a universal 'maleness' and 'femaleness' and of sexual relations which are specific to a particular historical epoch, class and culture.

Sociobiology, the last outpouring of biological determinism, is arguably it's most subtle and effective form, and certainly has considerable popular appeal and impact.

Sociobiologists apply notions of genetic self-interest and innate male aggression to human social and sexual behaviour. Their vision is one of the battle of the sexes; mutual exploitation which is timeless, unchanging, unchangeable. Men, with their greater strength and capacity for violence, were able to dominate women, children and other, weaker men. This, it is argued, is the origin of patriarchy.

As we shall see later, it is an ironic fact that some feminists have incorporated versions of this ideology of male supremacy into their explanations of women's oppression.

These 'biological' theories have great popular appeal enhanced by their mass exposure on television. What they do is to use concepts and terms relevant to modern western, industrial societies to describe highly selective animal behaviour, usually that of birds and baboons. The behaviour thus observed and described is reapplied to human society as 'proof' of the biological basis of human behaviour.

For example, the double sexual standards of our society – male philandery and female chastity – are applied to selected animal behaviour. The 'scientific' study of that behaviour is then applied to the whole of human evolutionary and social history as 'proof' of the 'naturalness' and inevitability of existing social relations.

Engels attacked the circularity of the reasoning involved in early Social Darwinism. His argument applies with equal force to sociobiology:

> 'The whole Darwinian theory of the struggle for existence is simply the transference from society to animate nature of Hobbes' theory of the war of every man against every man and the bourgeois economic theory of competition, along with the Malthusian theory of population. This feat having been accomplished . . . the same theories are next transferred back again from organic nature to history and their validity as eternal laws of human society declared to have been proved.'
> (Quoted in R. L. Meek (editor), *Marx and Engels and the Population Bomb*, 1971.)

In the years following the Second World War, a massive ideological campaign was waged aimed at persuading women to quit work and take up their 'natural' place in the home. Arguments that work outside the home was harmful to women's health or detrimental to their child-bearing capacities, would have rung hollow in the immediate aftermath of the war campaign to persuade women to enter social production. The new appeal was to women's 'natural' role as child bearers and rearers and to the detrimental effects on children if deprived of their mother. The English psychologist, John Bowlby's 'maternal deprivation' theory, has entered popular beliefs about mothering so smoothly and absolutely, it is as though it was never otherwise.

Women were encouraged to see themselves as essentially and naturally domestic. A woman's most significant contribution was to do what only she could do; bear, rear and care for her children and service her husband within the nuclear family.

The ideology of the nuclear family as the basic unit of society and as a place of harmony and security, contrasted strongly with the reality for many women. For those whose husband's economic position 'enabled' them to stay at home, the family was often a place of dependence, isolation and oppression. For women whose economic circumstances demanded they work, domestic responsibilities were an additional burden. Facing both was the ideological ideal of 'supermum'; she who managed to combine all the contradictory and impossible ideals of womanhood.

'Liberal' feminism'

In the post-war years, the emphasis of the women's movement was on employment, maternity and legal rights. The women who dominated that movement were largely white, middle class and educated and their primary demand was full political and economic equality for women within capitalism.

The dominant image of the oppressed woman at that time was the 'housewife prisoner' of middle-America. This was a woman oppressed by her domestic situation, a woman whose husband's economic position provided a lifestyle characterised as much by its isolation, dependence and lack of personal fulfilment as by its affluence. Betty Frieden's best-selling book, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), captured the essence of this moment.

However, the special situation of working class women and of black women was largely ignored. Apart from a peripheral concern for the impact of poverty on women, the liberal women's movement, epitomised by the National Organisation of Women (NOW) in the USA, focused on the aspirations, needs and concerns of white, middle class women. The emphasis was on the attainment of equal civil and economic rights and personal fulfilment within capitalism.

Today, in the absence of a women's movement, there has been a revival of liberal feminism. Two popularly acceptable forms of feminism have arisen. Both of them can operate comfortably within capitalism and have thus penetrated mainstream ideology. The first can be labelled 'corporate feminism'. In a 21st century version of Samuel Smiles' exposition of Victorian Values, it is now argued that women can break through the 'glass ceiling' if they have enough self-confidence to try hard enough. Thus the women high achievers who now sit on the board rooms of multinational companies, or who are visible in the media as broadcasters or editors is taken as a sign of the triumph of feminism. The second variant on this theme is 'choice' feminism. It champions lifestyle options and hence consumerism – you can be a feminist, as many do, if you say you are one and, for good measure, wear the t-shirt. Even Tory politicians have done so. Both such alternatives are founded on the presumption of individualistic self-help and as such are relevant only to the few who can function effectively within the capitalist system. Feminism for them is equated with thrusting meritocratic ambition.

'Radical' feminism'

> 'In the intimate world of men and women there is no 20th century distinct from any other century. There are only the old values, women there for the taking, the means of taking determined by the male. It is ancient and it is modern; it is feudal, capitalist, socialist; it is caveman and astronaut; agricultural and industrial; urban and rural. For men, the right to abuse women is elemental, the first principle with no beginning unless one is willing to trace origins back to God and with no end plausibly in sight.'
> (A Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, 1981.)

Radical feminism emerged in the USA in the late 1960s in direct opposition to liberal feminism, and at the same time as socialist feminism. Against the backdrop of sharpening class conflicts internationally, capitalism in the west appeared to be as much under pressure at home. The 1960s and early 1970s witnessed the emergence and development of the black consciousness/liberation movement in the USA, of anti-war, anti-psychiatry and prisoners' rights movement, and of students' movements throughout

the west. New social forces seemed to be moving to the centre of the political stage.

This wave of 'revolutionary' movements came in the immediate aftermath of cold-war, anti-communism and of the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia. For the western working class it was a time of relative prosperity, of an apparent weakening and blurring of class divisions. Bourgeois academics triumphantly pronounced the end of class conflict as the 'post-capitalist' social order surged towards a predicted prosperous future for all.

The self-styled 'revolutionary' women's movement grew out of liberal feminism. With its slogans of the 'personal is political' and 'sister-hood is all-powerful', with its stridency and urgency, radical feminism caught the mood of the time. Not content with reforming the system, with enabling women to compete with men, it proclaimed that it wanted fundamental change – or did it?

The bottom line of radical feminist theory is that all women are oppressed – by men; that men's power to oppress originated in greater male strength, aggression and capacity for violence. This, and women's corresponding physical vulnerability, are seen by radical feminists as the determinant factors in sexual inequality. Sexual conflict thus predates and transcends all other forms of oppression.

Radical feminism asserted that male power reached its 'full-blown solidification' in 'patriarchy'. The conflict between men and women is seen as preceding and transcending class and race conflict. The strategies proposed to oppose and end male domination range from sexual apartheid to vegetarianism.

The assertion is that the enemy is man: all oppressing structures, institutions and practices as well as everything that had been set up in opposition to oppression, are seen as male creations and male controlled. To seek to work within 'male' organisations, using 'male' theories, accepting 'male' priorities and imperatives, is to 'don the chains of the oppressor'. Radical feminists argue that it is necessary for women to 'reconstruct' themselves and their politics – in form, content and priorities. The theoretical and political implication of this are considerable.

Attempts by feminists to advance a Marxist theory of women's oppression were swamped by radical feminism's claim to be going beyond Marxism's theoretical and political horizons. As Shulamith Firestone put it: 'The class analysis is a beautiful piece of work, but limited' (*Dialectic of Sex*).

Seminal radical feminist works emphasised ideological and psychological phenomena, sexuality and the continuity of female oppression across time, cultures and classes. These corresponded with a general critique of Marxism and existing socialism as being incapable of analysing, and of ending, women's oppression.

The assertion of a universal oppression of women entailed an implicit denial or downgrading of class exploitation and the oppression of black people. In so doing, radical feminism offended or alienated the vast majority of women whose primary concerns were not the same as those of women who were affluent, educated, middle class and white. When those silent voices began to make themselves and their concerns heard, political and theoretical differences began to sharpen and deepen.

Radical feminism took up aspects of female oppression which had been neglected or glossed over by the left. Much of the theory denied the possibility or desirability of a Marxist theory of women's oppression; much of it was idealistic, reactionary and divisive. The notion of timeless, biologically determined male dominance is a political and theoretical cul-de-sac.

'Marxism and capitalism are two sides of the same economistic coin that glorifies male achievement and reduces human life-enhancing values to the periphery in the interests of technological conquest.' (Dale Spender)

Biological determinism's latest stable-mates are the products of a determined march up that dead end. 'Cultural or 'eco' feminism, epitomised by the work of American, Mary Daly and Australian, Dale Spender, maintains the existence of an essential and antagonistic 'femaleness' and 'maleness'. It celebrates 'femaleness' for its gentle, nurturing, creative qualities, and that from which these qualities are supposed to flow – women's reproductive capacities. Daly calls the rule of men 'phallocracy'. Men are not just out of tune with the harmony of the universe, they are 'radically separated' from it. However, 'we women are rooted, as are animals and trees, winds and seas, in the Earth's substance. Our origins are in her elements' (M. Daly, *Gyne/Ecology*).

Women and men, characters drawn out of sexist stereotypes, are respectively revered and reviled. There is no hope for sexual relations based on co-operation and equality – the competition and conflict between the sexes is immutable.

Dale Spender has argued that it is men's control over knowledge and language that is the source and meaning of women's oppression. Men define women's experience out of existence: within male-controlled 'discourse' the voice of women cannot be heard. Women therefore have to engage in the construction of their knowledge.

'Socialist' feminism'

What can usefully be termed socialist feminism emerged out of the student radicalism of the 1960s alongside and intertwined with radical feminism. The difference between the two became much more apparent in years to come. At the time, in Britain in particular, most feminists were anxious to deny there was any profound political differences between the two strands. Most preferred to believe it was just a matter of theoretical emphasis.

Socialist feminists acknowledged, to some degree or other, the interconnection of women's oppression with other forms of oppression and with class society. They also acknowledged that women's liberation had to be from class society. However, they shared with radical feminism the belief that women also had to be liberated from men and that traditional male theories, methods and modes of organisation could not achieve this. Thus, 'new' theories had to be constructed or synthesised; and new ways of organising that were non-hierarchical and democratic, had to be developed. Most also shared a belief that existing socialism had not achieved full emancipation for women.

What is seen as constituting the appropriate areas of concern for many socialist feminist theorists and activists remain those defined by non-Marxist feminism – gender and power relations, hierarchy, authority, psychology and ideology. This focus led to the conclusion that Marx and Engels could not supply the answers to the woman question. Given Marxism could not provide the answers, and for some, could not even begin to phrase the questions, other theories had to be found which could provide the necessary categories and concepts.

Juliet Mitchell (*Women's Estate*, 1973) argued that all the early Marxist literature on the 'woman question' was 'predominantly economist in emphasis'; that women had to ask the feminist questions but find the Marxist answers. She maintained that the situation of women could be divided into four structures: production, reproduction, socialisation

and sexuality, the last three of which unite in the family as the institutionalisation of women's oppression. For her, sexuality was the site of most contradictions for women under modern capitalism and was therefore the 'weak link in the chain'. To attack this weak link required conceptual tools which, she argued, Marxism lacked. Mitchell turned to Freudian psychoanalytic theory to supply the concepts and categories she required.

Her assertions, that production, reproduction and socialisation 'are all more or less stationary in the west and have been so for three or more decades', and that women have been barred from production throughout the history of class society even under capitalism, are empirically indefensible. There are a number of other theoretical and historical problems in Mitchell's analysis, which overall lacks a consistent class analysis. However, she maintained the ultimate primacy of the economic and provided a significant theoretical focus on the interaction between base and superstructure in the condition of women.

The notion of 'patriarchy', with all its theoretical and empirical pitfalls, was adopted from radical feminism. As a concept it seems more appropriate to, and encompassing of, women's issues. But no common agreement has ever been reached on the meaning of the concept and it is variously used to describe the family and social relations. Nor has any theoretical or political clarity been achieved in relation to its origins, whether it exists at the level of ideology or has a material base in male control of women's labour.

The view that the domestic sphere and the mode of production are analytically equivalent gave rise to what has been described as 'dual systems' theories. These maintain that women's oppression derives from a relatively autonomous system of sexual division of labour and male supremacy in the home, ie, a mode of reproduction which is analytically distinct and essentially separate from the mode of production outside the home. Engels has wrongly been used as theoretical backing for the concept of a mode of reproduction as a 'twin motor of history'. The ascription of a political and analytical independence to the concepts of reproduction and patriarchy invariably involved a denial of the relevance of class. As with the concept of patriarchy, the concept of reproduction as employed by socialist feminists remains ill-defined.

For most socialist feminists, the economic and political realities of the 1980s have led to a reappraisal of the primary focus of feminist theory, and for some, a rejection of the notion of patriarchy as an effective analytical tool in the study of women's oppression under capitalism.

Unlike radical feminism's virtual denial of class, colour and cultural differences between women, socialist feminism sought to account for the obvious fact that not all women are oppressed by men. Until fairly recently socialist feminists have not addressed themselves to issues of race/cultural oppression. The omission was the result of a Euro-centric assumption that the concerns of white western women were the same as those of all women. The women's movement has been dominated to a degree that should not be under-estimated by women whose economic position, educational background and colour located them in a highly privileged section of the world's population. To their credit, feminists have highlighted issues of considerable importance which for too long were ignored or relegated to a political backwater. However, the failure to recognise and prioritise issues of concern to those women whose exploitation and oppression is compounded by racism, poverty, unemployment, poor education and bad housing, cannot be brushed aside as a minor omission. Black women feminists in the USA were understandably highly critical of what was evidently a white women's movement's. Its

failure to appeal or to involve black women inevitably resulted in a colour blind form of feminism which was incapable of theorising race. This void was filled by the Combahee Women's Collective, a group of black feminist lesbians who met in Boston from 1974-1980. Their 'statement' published in 1977 has been misinterpreted as being the origin of identity politics. The following extract disproves this assertion:

> 'We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. We are socialists because we believe that work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products, and not for the profit of the bosses. Material resources must be equally distributed among those who create these resources. We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and anti-racist revolution will guarantee our liberation. We have arrived at the necessity for developing an understanding of class relationships that takes into account the specific class position of Black women who are generally marginal in the labor force, while at this particular time some of us are temporarily viewed as doubly desirable tokens at white-collar and professional levels. We need to articulate the real class situation of persons who are not merely raceless, sexless workers, but for whom racial and sexual oppression are significant determinants in their working/economic lives. Although we are in essential agreement with Marx's theory as it applied to the very specific economic relationships he analyzed, we know that his analysis must be extended further in order for us to understand our specific economic situation as Black women.' (CBC April 1977)

Communist feminists will find little with which to disagree in this statement. We can learn from it. However, for some reason the CBC statement has been linked to and associated with a new theory developed twelve years later – the theory of Intersectionality.

Intersectionality

In 1989 Kimberlé Crenshaw published her now famous article 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics'. She wrote it to highlight dynamics within discrimination law which separated race and sex. Crenshaw's article, as its title indicated, was concerned precisely with this – the intersection of race and sex. Thus the concept of intersectionality was used by her in this specific sense only. Today, the concept goes way beyond theorising the intersection of race and gender. It has expanded massively in an attempt to conceptualise a complex amalgam of individual and group identities. Crenshaw herself is surprised by this and asserts that 'this is what happens when an idea travels beyond the context and the content' (quoted in *Vox* May 28, 2019).

Thus the current theory of intersectionality is far removed from its origins in the anti-racist struggle. It now argues that people are composed of multiple identities which include, race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, class, sexual orientation, age, disability, etc. Such identities, it is claimed, intersect to create a whole which is different and far more complex than each of its component parts – so far so good. But the problem is that intersectionality relegates class to a mere aspect of identity – thus defining it as a subjective choice rather than a material reality, and hence undermining the possibility of collective struggle against the very system which fosters discrimination, division and exploitation –

capitalism. Intersectionality is one of the theories which has comfortably lent itself to its logical, if unintended, outcome – identity politics, of which more in a later section.

'Post Feminism'

The collapse of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe has fuelled an already existing pessimistic pre-occupation with 'the end of history' and a rejection of all forms of 'universalist' philosophy. Instead, we are witnessing the burgeoning of 'post-modern' individualist, anti-societal theories which substitute consumers and consumption in place of workers and production.

This has found its echoes within feminism, or to be more precise, in a rejection of feminism since it too, along with other 'isms' is regarded either as a spent force or, in the case of feminism, is deemed to have achieved its purpose. Those who seek at a theoretical level to reconcile post-modernism with feminism (e.g. Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson 'An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism' in *Universalism Abandoned*, ed. Andrew Ross, 1998) do so on the basis of recognising 'the diversity of women's needs and experience', but this trite observation leads to the depressing conclusion that although some women have common needs and interests 'such commonalities are by no means universal, rather they are laced with differences even conflicts'. Hence rather than found political practice on what unites, post feminism stresses that which divides. Camille Paglia (*Sex, Art and American Culture*, 1992), although rejecting post modern categorisation, nevertheless reflects the ultimate individualistic rejection of feminism. Asserting that 'there was a point when feminism and I agreed...I was 13 though!' and arguing that feminist theory has not developed in 30 years, she goes on to nail her colours to a much older reactionary ideology. She identifies with 'that period of women where you had independence, self-reliance, personal responsibility and not blaming other people for your own problems.'

A new generation of visibly successful women tend to identify with the post feminist approach. Natasha Walter (*The New Feminism*, 1998), apparently missing the intense debates within feminist theory, erects a monolithic feminism and asserts that it is at a dead end – 'it has a particular image that can be alienating to young women: it is associated with man-hating and with a rather sullen kind of political correctness or Puritanism'. Based on her presumption of a new female confidence and the potential to change the nature of paid work, she advocates a new, less confrontational, feminism which will be able to gain the support of men. There are remarkable similarities between the 'new feminism' of the 1990s and the 'new feminism' of the 1920s espoused by Eleanor Rathbone *et al* (see section on the women's movement). It is difficult to see how the campaigns for child care, equal pay, abortion, etc will get off the ground (all issues which Walter still thinks of as important) given her vision of the needs of this generation:

> 'The problem of this generation is not so much that women must be encouraged to break free of domestic life, but that men must be encouraged to come towards it, and unless we can remember and celebrate what is poignant and exciting about domestic life, we will lose some of our most precious culture without having anything to put in its place. And then who will care for our sick and elderly, who will take care to give our children a sense of security and belonging, and who will prepare the meals where families can make a space of their own...' p.234

This fits well with the agenda dictated by cuts in social spending and the massive

attack on the welfare state, in which the domestic bliss she conjures looms as a crushing domestic burden from which, for women at least, there is no respite. It also ties in with the 'labour flexibility' arguments which have been embraced by some in the movement as offering a chance to break free from male dominated work patterns. Far from liberating women, the labour flexibility device is one which suits the interests of capital in constant drive to adapt to changing technology and unstable markets.

'Diversity' theory

Diversity theory is not dissimilar from ,intersectionalism. In one sense it represents the practical application of it in public policy terms. Post feminism and post-modernist underpinning lie at the heart of the new(ish) social policy which has replaced equal opportunity policy. This is the notion of diversity. At a common-sense level 'diversity' is a benign term, confronting the notion of uniformity and hence to be welcomed. However, diversity politics as an ideology is not quite so blameless. Celebrating diversity is fine, but unless the central questions raised by oppressed and discriminated groups are addressed, a state or business sponsored recognition of diversity will not pass beyond an appeal to toleration. The demand for equality encompasses a recognition of the barriers preventing it and a determination to dismantle such obstacles wherever they are found. Furthermore the fight for equality demands an answer to the question 'equal to whom?' These are social questions demanding changes in power relations. These are precisely the questions that diversity politics seeks to side-step. So what is wrong with diversity politics?

Firstly, we need to examine the nature of the diversity paradigm. This is best illustrated by contrasting it with the 'traditional' equal opportunity approach as used in practice, in the world of work. Equal opportunities (EO), the old approach, is nowadays perceived as being externally driven and resting on moral and legal arguments. Managing diversity (the so-called new approach), in contrast, is supposed to be internally driven, resting on a business case and thus recommended to employers as an investment rather than a cost. In addition the diversity approach is focussed on the individual, whereas EO is focussed on group discrimination.

In the UK, the logic of this development was fully spelled out by the New Labour government 1997-2010 and continued by Conservative governments thereafter: it has been to jettison the collectivist approach (based on the common interests of 'disadvantaged' groups) to equality altogether. This view lies at the heart of the abolition of the existing equality commissions (the Commission for Racial Equality, the Equal Opportunities Commission and the newly established Disability Rights Commission) and the creation of the single overarching Commission for Equality and Human Rights. The justification for this change in policy was presented pragmatically in terms of the need to incorporate the new 'orphan strands' of discrimination based on European directives on religion, age and sexual orientation. However, the theoretical approach underlying this is far more significant than the stated aim. The real root of the policy change is the belief in the new post-modernist mantra of 'diversity', the motivation for which is expressed thus:

> 'People are increasingly looking for equal treatment that respects the many facets of their identities. Everyone's identity has multiple aspects, drawing for example on their gender, age, ethnicity, and religious affiliations among other characteristics.' (*Equality & Diversity: Making it Happen* DTI, 2002)

Thus, at a stroke, identity politics has ousted equality politics. The reason for this is, according to Anne Phillips (*Which Equalities Matter*, 1999) connected with the decline and fall of the socialist countries. This has removed the pressure to tackle economic and group inequality, replacing it instead with a new (neo-Victorian) emphasis on individual responsibility as the cornerstone social policy. Equality now is seen as equality of opportunity to better oneself, mediated by a minimalist State whose role is 'to ensure that opportunities for self-advancement are available to every citizen' (A. Phillips). Despite its juridical limitations, the old concept of equal rights later did at least recognise collective rather than individual solutions: diversity politics encourages the opposite. It assumes that individual differences outweigh any group identity. Indeed, we are invited to construct our own identities – a superficially attractive prospect designed to mask the reality of centuries of discrimination and oppression based on our most noticeable differences – our gender and our skin colour.

Identity politics and gender identity

As we have seen intersectionality assigned equal status to all forms of oppression and discrimination. It invited individuals to construct their own identities from an amalgam of categories. Whereas originally intersectionality was predicated upon a critique of feminism, the newest form of identity politics – gender self-identity – explicitly rejects feminism. It goes further by even questioning the commonly understood categories of male and female, and hence doubting the fact of biological sex itself.

The politics of self-identity

The powerful new attack on feminism and women's rights has assumed an ideological and concrete form as a result of the seemingly innocuous government proposal to amend the 2004 Gender Recognition Act (GRA). The 2017 Bill sought to amend the 2004 GRA's 'medicalised' definition of gender in favour of self-declaration. In other words, anyone not identifying with their sex assigned at birth may self-declare as a gender of their preference. Whilst this appears both egalitarian and harmless, it nonetheless has important implications for women. This includes the possible removal of the protected characteristics for women enshrined in the 2010 Equalities Act, especially the elimination of 'safe spaces' for women only. There has been robust campaigning on this issue, despite the frenetic and sometimes violent opposition of some transgender activists.

In contrast, the campaign to retain 'safe spaces' has never sought to deny the rights of transgender people to be free from discrimination, to have access to the services that they need and their absolute right to be treated with dignity and respect.

There are those who argue that the sex/gender divide is just a socio-political construct. Certainly this is not true for those individuals with gender dysphoria where there is a mismatch between their biological sex and gender identity. It is also the case that class society has nurtured an ideology of femininity and masculinity which fits the profit motive rather than peoples' lived experience. But all of this this does not invalidate the fact that the vast majority of humans (unhelpfully labelled 'cis') do not experience a mis-match between their biological sex and their gender. This does not mean that all is well for women who are, by virtue of both sex and gender, historically and currently oppressed in patriarchal class societies.

However, this is not the core issue. The largely unaddressed, underlying question in relation to gender self-identity is an ideological one. Marx and Engels wrote in *The German Ideology* that the ruling ideas in any society are those of the ruling class. Self-identity, as an ideological construct has become just this – its theory and practice have permeated deeply into civil society including in the labour movement, the repercussions of which are steadily emerging. There is now, following government advice, the widespread use of non-binary classifications in many institutions – youth clubs, schools, the Church of England and possibly the 2021 Census. The Office for National Statistics (ONS), which organises the census, is currently consulting on the inclusion of a gender identity question because, according to them:

> '…gender identity is a personal internal perception of oneself, and as such, the gender category with which a person identifies may not match the sex they were assigned at birth'.

This reflects official HM Government advice (2018), which states: '... if you have to ask about gender, you should list the fields in alphabetical order: 'Female', 'Male', 'Unspecified". It goes on to suggest we should avoid using pronouns:

> 'You should address the user as 'you' where possible and avoid using gendered pronouns like 'he' and 'she'…. You should only ask about gender or sex if you can't deliver your service without this information. If you do need to ask, use 'sex' when you need biological data (for example, if you're providing a medical service). In all other cases, use 'gender".

It goes on to give examples of 'how to ask about gender; Trans, non-binary, gender variant and gender questioning'.

In other words, the categories of male and female are downgraded as is the use of singular personal pronouns. Thus, the ideological construct of gender has usurped the material reality of biological sex and has become a ruling ideology, as evidenced by the above-mentioned State support. Therefore, it has stealthily penetrated all aspects of civil society, including the labour movement.

Should this be a cause of concern? It is alarming for two reasons. Firstly, identity politics is the antithesis of class politics and thus its theory and practice should be of great anxiety for the labour movement. Secondly, the gender identity issue is of particular concern for women because it conflates biological sex and gender, and thus errantly fails to understand women's oppression. Trans people (and many other groups) experience intolerance and discrimination but this is not the same as oppression. Discrimination itself is not a function of class society even though it is an almost inevitable by-product of the inherent inequalities within all forms of class society. Women, however, are oppressed, and the basis of such oppression is class exploitation. This is why it is impossible to understand women's oppression without understanding the varying forms of exploitation in class society – capitalism in particular. This, therefore, impels us to use and update a Marxist analysis of this hitherto almost abandoned aspect of social reality

Women lead a demonstration of the Communist Party of India Marxist

Three The marxist response

Oppression | Ideologies of oppression | Class | The family and domestic labour

FOR MARX and Engels, the oppression of women and their super-exploitation as workers is located within social relations of production. However, it would be a mistake to think that they said the last word on the subject. There are vital areas of social reality which Marxists (including Marx) have simply not addressed. If there is to be any renewal of Marxism, it is not simply a matter of going over old ground, but breaking the new. The most obvious omission centres on the realities of women and black people in society.

Oppression

A general conceptual framework has been laid in the works of Marx and Engels which may be roughly summarised as follows. Women and black people whilst not forming classes are, as oppressed groups, intimately related to the class system in that all oppression is in itself based on class exploitation. But apart from some conceptual clues, throughout much of Marx's writing, and the more direct contribution of Engels (see above), there is very little that deals systematically with the question of oppression and its form and function in class society, to be found in the writings of Marx and Engels. This is significant insofar as such an omission (and the failure of subsequent marxists to rectify it) has meant that the experience of well over half the world's population has only been half understood – only half understood because

Marx's theory of class is relevant to those women and blacks (the majority) who sell their labour power for a wage, but their position in the class structure does not address the totality of their existence. Indeed, without an understanding of the specifics of their oppression, it is not possible to understand fully their position as workers.

A theory of oppression can be extrapolated from the works of Marx and Engels (and to some extent from later classic Marxist theoreticians of the Second International period e.g. Lenin, Bebel and Clara Zetkin), but without further development and concrete application, it is far from adequate. Indeed, the common (and lazy) way of doing this in the past was to extract selected quotes and then publish them as 'Marx, Engels and Lenin on the woman (or something else) question'. In fact, of all the 'questions' to be examined in this way or by subsequent Marxist writers, that of oppression has received the most scant attention. Apart from the vast corpus on Marxist political economy, there are tomes to be found on the marxist view of ideology, nationality, religion, alienation, etc. There is, however, very little by comparison, on oppression. This could mean one of two things: either that as a concept it is genuinely not very important, or that the predominantly white, male Marxist intelligentsia, in common with its generally colour-blind and gender-blind approach to politics, has simply chosen (in line with much of its practice) to ignore oppression in the sphere of theory. It is clear thus far that the latter explanation is to be preferred.

So, what is oppression? Is it the same as discrimination or disadvantage? Discrimination or disadvantage is experienced by many groups in society because of the difficulties they experience at some or all points of their lives to fit in with the dominant norm. In this sense almost everybody experiences disadvantage – because they are too young or too old, because they are not 'handsome' or 'pretty', because they are too fat or too thin etc. For others, like those with a disability, the discrimination is an ever present feature of their lives. However, discrimination itself is not a function of class society even though it is an almost inevitable by-product of the inherent inequalities within all forms of class society. The term 'inequality' in itself is misleading as much of the more radical anti-racist and feminist literature has shown. Redressing the phenomenal form of aspects of inequality by attempting to 'level the playing field', welcome though this is, does not address the essence of the problem which has its roots in the unequal division of wealth (and therefore power) in class society.

Oppression, however, although it may take the form of discriminating against the oppressed, stands in a different relationship to class society. It is the most important means of maintaining the class relations which support class exploitation and as such oppression is a function of class society as well as being a product of it. This is because oppression, unlike discrimination, is linked materially to the process of class exploitation as well as operating at 'superstructural' level through oppressive ideologies which serve to maintain class rule by dividing the exploited. (This is particularly clear in the case of capitalism which will henceforth be used as the 'exemplar' of class society.) Such ideologies are not simply explained by 'false consciousness' operating as an invented infecting agent. They are themselves so rooted in the material world of production that they have become integral to it.

Seen in this way, it is evident that the oppressed are a very explicit category. Let us now look at the way in which oppression operates at these two levels. Firstly, at the material level, the fact of oppression is responsible for the super-exploitation of the oppressed at the point of production. Historically, an inbuilt inequality within the labour force, expressing itself through low wages and job segregation, has reproduced itself as the normal process when workers sell

their labour power. Its victims are the most easily identifiable workers – black people and women. At the level of sociological observation this fact – super-exploitation and job segregation based on gender and race is not in doubt. All indices of wage rates nationally and internationally show that the wages of women and black people are lower than that of white males. This fact operates to the material advantage of the owners of the means of production – the capitalists for whom any increase in profit is dependent on an increase in the rate of exploitation. It is hence no accident that despite conventional morality about the sanctity of family life and the key role of women within it, the labour of women is often preferred to that of men because it 'attracts' lower wages. Similarly the transfer of production to the low wage economies of the ex-colonies in Africa and Asia performs the same function for capitalism in its relentless pursuit of profit. Indeed the function of slavery in establishing the conditions for the take-off of industrial capitalism in Britain in the late 18th century provides the most telling example of the historic de-humanisation of black people who became commodities in themselves (E. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, M. Davis, *Comrade or Brother?*). This fact which even today, long after the abolition of slavery, together with the aggressive imperialism of the late 19th century, has laid the foundations for the continued super-exploitation of black people within the imperialist nations as well as in the neo-colonial world.

Hence there is a material basis, historically and at present, for our suggestion that women and black people have, for different reasons, been used and are used as a source of cheap labour and that this fact has been integral to the operation of class exploitation. Women in particular are historic victims of job segregation and have continuously performed undervalued and sometimes unnoticed jobs outside the home. It is simply not the case that they have been used as a 'reserve army' of labour, their presence within the labour force has been constant. Whilst the fact of super-exploitation is not controversial, the significance we attach to it is more so and 'raises' the status of women and black people beyond that of discrimination. Their role within capitalist relations of production as super-exploited workers is woven into the very fabric of these relations and is not a chance or transitory phenomenon and it is here that we must extend the analysis founded on historical materialism to more fully understand it.

The fact of class exploitation (and super-exploitation) as the central pillar of the capitalist mode of production does not in itself explain how the relations of production are maintained and reproduced. This can only be understood by examining factors which exist outside the economic relations of production through the operations of ideologies, whose function it is to maintain (whether consciously or not) class relations in a more general sense. There is a huge range of literature on the meaning of ideology attempting to interpret the already voluminous writings of Marx and Engels on the subject. The interesting point about the theoretical discussion of ideology is just that it is entirely theoretical with only rare references to a specific ideology and the way that it functions. What concerns us here though is something specific, namely the identification of ideologies which maintain the historic subservience of women and black people – in other words, the ideologies of oppression.

Ideologies of oppression

What about specific oppressive ideologies? As mentioned earlier this is where Marxist theoreticians have been strangely silent. We have already noted the particular and super-exploited place of women and black workers within class society. It seems that the specific ideologies supporting this – racism and sexism – have operated so insidiously and so

successfully over centuries in the concealment of contradictions that the ideologies have passed unnamed and unnoticed until this century. Indeed a gender blind and colour blind approach to class politics has, until relatively recently permeated even the most class conscious sections of the labour movement.

As ideologies, racism and sexism, can be seen to have a direct material connection to the maintenance of capitalist relations of production in two important ways. Firstly because they are related to the very real need of capital to maintain profit by pushing the value of labour power to its lowest possible limit. Secondly, the ideologies of racism and sexism are the chief non-coercive means of preventing the unity of the working class and thereby facilitating the perpetuation of the domination of the minority class over the majority. Hence these ideologies, unlike for example liberalism or nationalism, appear as an almost pure reflection of the material needs of the exploiting class. They perform a very obvious function in the maintenance of the existing relations of production. This may seem to be a very crude and deterministic interpretation of ideology, failing to do justice to the sophistication of its lived form.

Other ideologies like religion are much harder to analyse from a historical materialist standpoint. They seem to have a life and history of their own unrelated to the mode of production and this has given rise to a major debate among western marxists who get round this problem by one of two means. Firstly, by suggesting that ideology is in itself a material force giving rise to its separate study as a means of representation which interacts with the economic base. Or, secondly, in an attempt to avoid economic determinism, the suggestion is made that ideology has a 'relative autonomy' within the superstructure but is connected to the economic base by being determined by it 'in the last instance'. We do not appear to need the 'relative autonomy' waver clause when analysing racism and sexism. That is not to say that as ideologies they do not have their own histories or that their form is at all times strictly determined by the economic base. It is, however, clear that their form and function as ideologies have a very direct relationship with the economic base, more so than most other ideologies (other than economic ideologies themselves, especially that of the 'free' market and the 'free' sale of labour). It is perhaps for this very reason that the ideological form of oppression has remained hidden.

The subjugation of women and black people has been historically connected with class society for so long that it has become the accepted natural order of things. The oppressive ideologies sustaining subservience is so culturally rooted that it has passed beyond naked statements of class rule and entered into the very fabric of our lives including language itself. As such these ideologies have become universalised and hence disembodied from their class origins. They have thus fulfilled the ultimate goal of ideology – namely to represent the interests of the dominant class as the interests of society as a whole. How else are we to explain the permeation of racist and sexist ideas within the working class and even within the socialist movement? Perhaps the same could be said of all ideologies, but this misses the very direct function of oppressive ideologies, the force of which in the capitalist epoch is dependent on their ability to disunite the working class. It is of course true that women and black people do not constitute a class, but this fact, while explaining that not all women and blacks are exploited, should not obscure the fact of their oppression is based on race and gender. This is the real meaning of the oft quoted statement that all oppression is based on class exploitation.

Racism and sexism as material and ideological facts are central to the maintenance of capitalist and pre-capitalist class relations. However, this is not to put a narrow economistic

interpretation on their force. These are not simply mechanisms for keeping black and women workers in a subordinate position since as oppressive ideologies they cut across class boundaries and depend, as all ideologies do, on their universalism. Hence they impinge on the lives of all black people and women regardless of class and determine society's perception of race and gender. They operate historically in varying degrees and forms through both the coercive and ideological apparatuses of the state. It is not my place here to examine the ways in which these ideologies are produced and reproduced – there is a vast literature on this, but it is only necessary here to re-state the critical importance of one aspect of oppressive ideologies and oppression in general for us today. That is its specific function in relation to the definition of the working class.

Class

The point made earlier about women and black people not constituting a class has often obscured the relationship of these two huge groups to the class structure. Seen as non-class entities, socialist political practice has often assigned women and black people (along with other groups) to the newly invented category of 'new social forces'. At best this has been a well-meaning attempt to avoid class reductionism and to respect the autonomy of black and women's liberation groups, but at worse it represents a failure of Marxist theoreticians to confront reality. In practice such a failure has meant that no credible alternative has been posited to that of 'identity politics'. After all if the oppressed and disadvantaged) exist outside classes, that is outside society, then the logic must be an increasingly atomised self organisation based on self identity. This is not to deny the importance of autonomy and self organisation as a necessary complement to class politics. 'Identity politics', however, is a founded upon conscious rejection of class and is seen by its post-modernist advocates as a substitute for it. If we take the so-called 'broad' definition of the working class, that is to say all who sell their labour power for a wage (as opposed to the narrower definition: those who are directly engaged in the production of surplus value), then it is clear that the vast mass of women and black people are workers. Indeed all projections show that the proportion of 'economically active' women is set to rise despite the often high rates of male unemployment. Whilst the same cannot be said for black people in the western capitalist world, the prevalence of racial discrimination means that there is little likelihood of them owning capital or joining any intermediate self-employed strata.

Marx anticipated that society would, because of changes in the means of production, become increasingly polarised into two classes. Indeed this is the main change that has taken place in the composition of the working class albeit masked by the decline in the proportion of those workers involved directly in the production of surplus value. The ranks of the working class have been renewed and replenished by women workers in the only growth sector of the national economy in Britain: the service industries.

The decline in industrial production in the 'developed' capitalist world, which has accounted for the decline in the traditional proletariat (usually white male workers), has occurred partly because of the utilisation of new technology, but partly because of the domination of production by transnational corporations who choose to invest in low wage economies where the rate of exploitation is highest. This, in global terms means the substitution of white male labour for cheaper black labour in the neo-colonial world. (This is accompanied by the appearance of 'core' and 'peripheral' workers in the capitalist heartlands, a factor which has affected all workers, but the declining 'core' has served to

displace white males whilst at the same time confirming the disadvantaged status of the disproportionately high numbers of women and blacks in the periphery.) Hence the relationship between class exploitation and oppression has become in our day a very tangible issue for class politics, provided we jettison traditional gender and race blind preconceptions about the nature of the working class. This does not mean that oppression is thus subsumed by class exploitation but it does mean that the traditional call by socialists for the unity of the working class has to be understood in a different way. Unity cannot be built by refusing to recognise differences. The argument here is that the most crucial divisions within the working class are based on race and gender oppression and that these have to be recognised as ideological practices in themselves if they are to be overcome. It is the fact of oppression which determines the super-exploitation of women and black people as workers as well as their inequality as citizens.

A class analysis of the two major oppressed groups is thus vital for the understanding of the nature of the working class today. This avoids the twin problem of either not assigning half of the population of this country (and the majority of the population of the world) to any class whatsoever and of failing to notice the realities of today's class structure and the specific status of oppressed groups within it. This is not a class reductionist argument – it does not mean that the oppressed form a class, rather that they belong to a class and the overwhelming majority of them are workers. Whilst it is true that class interests may divide the oppressed, this is probably less important now than in the 19th century because of the relentless tendency of capital to sweep intermediate strata, small producers and the petty bourgeoisie into the ranks of wage/salary earners. This 'broadening' of the working class creates its own problems for socialists, namely the existence of strata within the working class and the consequent lack of perception of class consciousness among those whose exploitation is more masked, or who have less access to collective struggle and organisation. But lack of class consciousness should not be confused with an objective analysis of class position.

For communists, the way forward for women, at the theoretical level, lies in the further development of such a theory of oppression which recognises its interconnection with class exploitation. As we have seen, Marxists draw a distinction between exploitation and oppression. The oppression of women facilitates their super-exploitation as workers and is something distinct from all other forms of oppression. The control of women's labour and the products of that labour, and the control of their reproductive capacity, laid the material base for the emergence of full-blown class society.

Whilst the rights of women of the exploiting class were limited, women of the exploited class had no rights at all. Their primary importance to the ruling class was as a source of exploitable labour in themselves, and as a source of future generations of exploitable labour. The ruling class ideology of female chastity was superimposed on the exploited class, mainly through the medium of religion.

The concepts of freedom and equality to which we relate today arise from capitalist relations of production as yet unrealised in the ancient world and Middle Ages. Under capitalism, the principle of freedom and equality was in the beginning only applicable to men of property as bearers of state and private authority. For propertyless men and for all women, the extension of democratic rights promised by capitalism had to be fought for. The major hurdle to full formal equality – the right to vote and be counted as a legal and independent entity – was not achieved for women until the 20th century.

But for Marxists, women's liberation is about more than political rights. Even the

fullest extension of bourgeois democracy will not liberate women because it cannot abolish the material basis of female subordination, in capitalist exploitation.

The achievement of political equality, however, is an essential part of the class struggle and no mere reformist exercise (Vogel, 1984; A. Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, 1982). The struggle for political rights forces capitalism to fulfil its promise of formal equality for all; it reduces divisions within the working class, and it points to the true inequality of society, the exploitation that lies at the heart of capitalist relations of production.

For women, contemporary Britain is a mass of contradictions. Even though most of the gross civil inequalities have gone, women remain unequal and an array of formal and informal social practices support their continued oppression. As formal equality is increasing, albeit slowly, so the material means of realising that equality is decreasing. Women still remain the most exploited section of the workforce.

The family and domestic labour

Although relations of production operate in general according to processes which are technically sex blind, they take the form of a division of labour in which ideology is deeply embedded (M. Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today*, 1984). The ideological construction of sexuality and the family is exploitative of women and any programme for change has to address this fact. However, many on the left have found it easier to try to change attitudes and practices at the individual level rather than seek to understand and challenge the roots of these ideologies in capitalist relations of production.

The way forward for women lies in struggle for and achievement of socialism. Part and parcel of the struggle is for a government committed to an expansion of the economy and the creation of well-paid and secure employment, of educational opportunities and of socialised domestic services (in particular care for dependents).

Angela Davis says that one of capitalism's most closely guarded secrets is the 'real possibility of radically transforming the nature of housework' by incorporating it within the industrial economy (Davis, 1982). 'Child care should be socialised, meal preparation should be socialised, housework should be industrialised – and all these services should be readily accessible to working-class people.'

Davis sees the birth of the 'housewife' as a comparatively recent phenomenon which arose as an important ideological by-product of the structural separation of the domestic home economy and the profit-oriented economy of capitalism. Bourgeois familial ideology portrayed the housewife and mother as universal and timeless ideals of womanhood. For working women, the ideology of a 'woman's place', had the effect of forcing down their wages and working conditions. On the basis of this super-exploitation, sexism became a source of greatly inflated profits.

The women upon whom the burden of housework rests most heavily are those who have to combine paid work with domestic work and child care. Working class and black women not only carry a double burden, but are least likely to be able to afford such 'domestic labour-saving' devices and services as are available. The irony is compounded in that, historically, the only alternative to factory work open to working class women, and black women in particular, was domestic service.

Capitalism must be forced to yield up the resources for social provision instead of being allowed to exploit the need created by increasing numbers of working women for ready-prepared foods, services, etc. The struggle for equal pay for equal work, for

subsidised child care and for the socialisation of other aspects of domestic work, and for other issues of importance to women, such as reproductive and full legal rights, points ultimately to socialism. It is around issues such as these that women are most likely to be mobilised and united.

The socialisation of housework and child care is a fundamental socialist demand and at complete variance with the campaign which, on the basis of attempts to prove theoretically that domestic labourers are exploited productive workers, argues for wages for housework.

Early attempts to develop a theory of women's oppression at the level of relations of production foundered. The Domestic Labour Debate, as it came to be known, is still with us mainly in the form of the Wages-for-Housework Campaign, which centred around Selma James. This debate was primarily concerned with the question of the relationship between wages and domestic labour and whether domestic work is productive or unproductive. Articles like Margaret Benston's and Peggy Morton's on the nature of women's unpaid work in the family and its relation to the reproduction of labour power were attempts to theorise women's oppression at the level of relations of production (M. Benston, *The Political Economy of Women's Liberatio*n, 1969; P. Morton, *A Woman's Work is Never Done*, 1970)

Benston argued that it is women's domestic responsibility which is the material basis for their oppression and which serves to bind them into the reserve army of labour. Although some aspects of her analysis are questionable, her practical prescription for ending oppression, ie, the socialisation of domestic work, restated a key socialist argument. Peggy Morton identified the family as the social unit, the primary function of which is the maintenance and reproduction of labour power. Unlike Benston, Morton argued that women's participation in waged labour is crucial to the economy in filling those jobs in which wages are low. Again, although her arguments were flawed, the attempt to locate women's oppression in relation to material factors, and in particular in the operation of class society, made it a significant contribution to the debate.

As Angela Davis points out, domestic labour is not productive in the capitalist sense – it does not generate profit – rather it produces use values for immediate consumption. The domestic labourer is not therefore exploited, although her labour is an important part of the maintenance and renewal of labour power which is an essential precondition of capitalist exploitation. The form that this maintenance and renewal takes within a nuclear monogamous family unit – the 'norm' – is convenient but not essential.

In pre-capitalist societies, there was no structural separation between private (home) and public economy. Women's role within the family may have been subordinate but her work was part of a collective effort and indeed 'women were valued and respected as productive members of the community' (A. Davis, 1982). It was with the separation of private and public spheres of production that women's labour became undervalued.

There is much work to be done in understanding women's role in the reproduction of labour power and the reproduction of the relations of production. Attempts like Lisa Vogel's (1984) to develop a 'unitary theory' of women's oppression at the level of relations of production wrestle with the question of the role of domestic labour. Vogel argues that working women's dual role as a source of surplus labour, and as the primary source of new generations of labour, sets up a contradiction for the exploiting class.

She follows Engels and Zetkin in arguing that women of the exploiting class may be subordinate to men of their own class and that, where such subordination exists, it rests on the female's role in the continuation of patrilineal inheritance principles, ie, the transmission

of property. For these women under capitalism, the problem is primarily one of equal rights. For women of the exploited class their subordination to all men (and women of the exploiting class) derives from their roles both in relation to child bearing and caring, and to social production.

Vogel argues that domestic labour is a part of necessary labour, ie, that it is part of labour which is necessary for the reproduction of the labourer and which replenishes the worker's capacity to work. Labour power, the capacity to perform the surplus labour which the ruling class appropriates, is unique in the way it is reproduced, ie, the bearers of labour power reproduce themselves. Women are both a source of surplus labour in the workplace and the primary source of new generations of labour. Women's diminished capacity to work during pregnancy decreases her capacity both as a source of surplus labour and as a participant in necessary labour.

The logic of class exploitation is to reduce the amount of necessary labour thus increasing the amount of surplus labour to be appropriated. During child bearing, necessary labour has to increase to meet extra subsistence needs, and consequently surplus labour decreases. But at the same time, the exploiting class needs the new generation of exploitable labour. This sets up a contradiction which the ruling class seeks to resolve by various strategies, like making the provision of the means of subsistence the responsibility of male kin.

This generally occurs within some sort of family unit in which women take on a greater responsibility for necessary labour and child care, and men take a greater responsibility for the provision of subsistence and involvement in surplus labour. The ruling class encourages male supremacy within the exploited class in order to stabilise the reproduction of labour power as well as keep necessary labour to a minimum. However, until capitalism, there was no clear distinction between necessary and surplus labour. In addition, the family is the repository of the ideological myth of the family wage. This is based on the false construct of the 'ideal type' of family – mother, father and two or more children in which the father is the male breadwinner on whom other family members are dependent. Apart from the fact that the 'ideal type' doesn't correspond to the lived reality of the vast numbers of single parent households, the accepted notion of the family wage is the convenient justification for unequal pay and unequal state benefits.

The conditions under which the process of the reproduction of labour power takes place are determined by the class struggle. For the exploiting class, as long as the contradictions of exploitation are maintained, how the reproduction process is carried out is of no concern. For those engaged in the process, it is a central concern. The logic of exploitation will tend toward a reduction of the conditions of reproduction to a minimum in order to maximise profits. The actions of the now defeated racist regime in South Africa in the creation of, and forcible removal of women and children to, the 'Bantustans', while housing male workers in township barracks, is a stark illustration of this ruling class disregard for the 'family life' of the workers.

A class theory of the oppression of women and black people will not of itself supply the political strategy to achieve liberation, nor will it account for differences in women's situation across time and cultures. It is important to avoid the pitfall that a lot of feminist theory has encountered, ie, attempting theoretically to deduce answers to historical questions (Vogel, 1984; Barrett 1984). What a class theory can do, and is essential for, is to provide the framework for the much needed political and historical analysis.

Four Women workers, women's rights, class, capitalism and the labour movement in the 19th and 20th centuries

Women workers over two centuries| The women's movement over two centuries | Working class women and the labour movement |

Women workers over two centuries

AS HAS BEEN shown in the preceding section, the oppression of women is not a natural fact of 'human nature', rather it coincided with the development of class society. Class exploitation created the material basis for women's oppression. The ways in which different forms of society – slavery, feudalism and capitalism – have oppressed women have assumed various historical forms as has the precise nature of class exploitation. Not nearly enough is known about the position of women within slave and feudal societies, although it is clear that their status was subordinate to that of men. More is known about the oppression of women within capitalist society, especially industrial (as distinct from merchant) capitalism.

The so-called 'industrial revolution' occurred in Britain earlier than in any other country in the world. Between the 1780s and 1850s, Britain was transformed from a predominantly agricultural and rural society into an urban society whose main source of wealth lay in industrial production. Starting with cotton textiles, one industry after another was transformed from small-scale artisan production into larger scale, factory-based manufacture using new forms of motive power – first water and then steam. Whilst many branches of manufacture remained small scale and workshop-based, it was nonetheless the case that the general features of this industrialisation had a direct or indirect effect on the entire economy, including systems of transport, banking, finance and national and international trade. By 1850, Britain was the 'workshop the world', the prime producer and exporter of manufactured goods. The epoch of capitalist full-scale commodity production had arrived and with it the modern working class was born.

This process had very important consequences for women. It not only sharpened the already existing inequalities bequeathed by centuries of subordination in pre-capitalist class societies, but also, for the first time, highlighted the contradictions in the roles that women were supposed to fulfil. It was nothing new for women to work, but hitherto much of the work that women had done was an offshoot of their domestic responsibilities or was closely linked to them. For example, the domestic or 'putting out' system of manufacture (especially of woollen textiles) was based on the employment of the whole family, women and children included, in their homes. Now, with the onset of industrial production based in factories, a sharp separation was wrought between paid work and domestic work within the home. For women workers this had dire consequences and posed great contradictions between their role as workers and their role within the family. In practical terms it meant that women entered the labour market on even more unfavourable terms than ever, having to accommodate their domestic responsibilities with the demands of paid employment. This was a situation which employers were anxious to exploit. Marx (*Capital*, Volume 1) quotes a cotton manufacturer, Mr E., who gives a decided preference to married females, especially those who have families at home dependent on them for support: 'they are attentive, docile, more so than unmarried females, and are compelled to use their utmost exertions to procure the necessities of life'.

This attitude, far from being untypical, explains why it was that women comprised the bulk of the factory proletariat in the early days of industrialisation in the cotton industry, the first to be fully mechanised. In both spinning and weaving, the labour of women (and children) was used in preference to men for the reasons mentioned and because the female wage rates were low as could be. Dr Ure, a factory inspector, reported in 1834, that the adult labour force in textile mills in the UK employed 191,671 of whom 102,812 were women. In one of the most telling pieces of contemporary evidence, James Mitchell, a British Factory Commissioner, unwittingly revealed a (pre-Marx) Marxist analysis of the fact and purpose of the super-exploitation of women! In 1833 he wrote:

> 'Some persons feel much regret at seeing the wages of females so low. . . but perhaps such persons are wrong; and nature affects her own purposes more wisely and more effectually than could be done by the wisest of men. The low price of female labour makes it the most profitable as well as most agreeable occupation for a female to superintend her own domestic establishment, and her low wages do not tempt her to abandon the care of her own children. Nature therefore provides that her designs shall not be disappointed.'

Unequal pay was and has remained a feature of women's employment in capitalist society. It is to be explained in Marxist terms by the fact that the value of labour (the monetary expression of which is wages) is determined by the amount of socially necessary labour time (the time required to produce and reproduce the labourer); this has wide variations, none more so than the variations between the sexes. Due to women's already existing inequality the assumption is made that women require less labour to reproduce themselves than men – a fact which the early millowners were quick to seize upon in their drive to recruit the labour of women and children. This helps to explain why it is that when men and women are doing exactly the same work, the female rate (until 1975) has always been lower. This was supported by the myth of the male breadwinner who earned the 'family wage'. Hence not only was unequal pay accepted as a norm, but women's work was only tolerated if not threatening to the man. In any case it was seen as a mark of shame if a man permitted his wife to work, hence the widespread practice, hardly contested by the unions until the twentieth century, of barring married women from employment altogether. Such attitudes and practices help to explain women's increasing job segregation and the fact that so much female labour was literally hidden.

Apart from pay inequality, the other important fact of female employment in the period of industrial capitalism was and is the phenomenon of job segregation. The existence of 'women's jobs' within the labour market must surely disprove the myth that women workers are a transitory element of the capitalist workforce, constituting some kind of industrial reserve army to be called to the colours when male labour is scarce as in times of war. Although the example of women workers in the cotton factories was cited earlier, such work was the exception rather than the norm and aroused much interest at the time precisely for this reason. It laid bare, in a very visible manner, the contradiction in the moral notion of the sanctity of the family and women's place within it, as against the drive of capitalism to exploit a section of the workforce which had already been rendered vulnerable precisely because of domestic responsibilities. The super-exploitation of women workers existed outside factory production but remained (and still does) much more hidden from public scrutiny and hence largely ignored.

Bryant & May Matchgirls worked 14 hour days

Apart from cotton textiles and pottery, women were not to be found in large numbers in many of the other factory-based industries as they developed during the course of the 19th century. In fact, taken as a whole, women factory workers remained a small minority of the female working population. The vast majority of women workers were to be found in more 'hidden' areas of work – in domestic service, home working of various kinds or in small 'sweated' work-shops in such trades as lace making, glove making, straw plaiting and millinery. A similar kind of sexual division of labour can be found in Britain today where women workers are clustered in a narrow range of 'women's jobs', prime amongst them being clerical work, shop work, sewing and textile work, caring, cleaning and catering work.

Two world wars disprove the comfortable myth that women are only suited to 'women's jobs'. World War One saw the massive entry of women into wartime production, taking over 'men's' jobs in engineering, munitions, transport and every branch of industry from which they had been traditionally excluded. They did not receive male rates of pay. 'Dilution' was the euphemism used to describe the underpayment of wartime women workers performing exactly the same jobs vacated by men recruited or conscripted (from 1916) into the army.

The Second World War witnessed once again the massive entry of women into social production in non-traditional jobs, on a scale far greater than 1914-1918. However, the centrality of the family and women's role within it meant that the war sharpened the contradictions which had existed since the advent of industrial capitalism between the private nature of reproduction and the social nature of production geared around the needs of a male labour force. These contradictions could be and were more masked when women were confined to their traditionally segregated and often hidden spheres of employment. Now that the war accorded women workers a high profile (conscription for women was introduced in 1941), and publicly acknowledged their role in social production (especially in the highly

important munitions industry), the conflict between their dual roles now burst into the public arena. This did not mean that the state, in spite of some temporary concessions, had any intention of meaningfully addressing women's 'double burden'. To do so would have undermined the social fabric of society, which remained firmly based on the centrality of the family and the ideological construct of the family wage based on the male bread winner. Despite the logic behind the mass mobilisation of married women, public policy during the war accepted by Labour and trade union leaders alike, did nothing to challenge the underlying causes of women's oppression and super-exploitation even though there was some discussion and tinkering with the effects of it.

An uneasy contradiction existed in the official mind between the obvious necessity to maintain wartime production on the one hand, and on the other the desire not to destabilise women's role in the family. It manifested itself in an unwillingness to ensure any lasting or general changes to the social order in favour of meeting the needs of working wives and mothers. Even the frequently cited provision of state day nurseries for working mothers, which was undoubtedly an historic initiative, was in itself the locus of intense ideological debate between the realists of the Ministry of Labour and the traditionalists of the Ministry of Health. Although the former appeared to win as witnessed by the fact that 1,345 nurseries had been established by 1943 (compared with 14 existing in 1940), this did not represent a real victory for women workers. Firstly, it failed to satisfy the enormous demand or indeed to provide childcare for the duration of the mothers' working day, hence the great increase in private child minding arrangements and, secondly, it was always clear that this was a wartime expedient only – what the state provided the state could also easily remove.

There was discussion, although little action, on other ways to ease the double burden of women war workers. Sheer economic necessity forced such 'women's issues' as child-care facilities and maternity benefit on to the political agenda with undoubted advantages for women, albeit of a temporary nature, as the post-1945 period was to show. As it was, even during the war, projects like the provision of nurseries and other attempts to relieve the 'double burden' were ultimately regarded as far too radical and were rejected in favour of the more convenient and ideologically acceptable expedient of adjusting women to their 'double burden' by permitting them to work part-time. Such a 'concession' was one of the few wartime changes which remains as a permanent feature of women's labour and of course helps to account for continuing low wages and lack of job opportunity. Part-time work was a consciously preferred solution to the problem of the 'double burden' of women workers with family responsibilities at a time when, uniquely during the war, such a problem was given official recognition.

Two factors characterise this sexual division of labour historically and currently. First, that these jobs are always very low paid and, secondly, that much of this work represents an extension of women's work within the family. In other words the centuries-old division of labour within the family, which pre-dates capitalism, has been transferred from the realms of the private household to social production. This partly explains why women's skills within these 'women's' jobs have been and continue to be so undervalued. Given the undervaluation of women's work within the home, it is hardly surprising that when similar tasks are transferred to social production their undervaluation persists to the point where women themselves collude in the process, with give-away phrases like 'I'm only a typist' or 'I'm only a cook'.

This attitude is reinforced by the belief that women's jobs are somehow peripheral to the economy and hence can be fitted in with women's role in the home. The prevalence of

part-time work for women is made to appear as a great concession by capital to enable women workers to perform their dual responsibilities. In reality it is nothing of the sort. Part-time work accounts for a staggering 44% of female labour in Britain today – the highest by far of any European country. Far from being a kindly concession, it is an important device allowing the maximum flexibility of the female labour force at the minimum possible cost – in terms of employment rights, job opportunities and pay – to the state and to capitalism.

Historically, the trend towards part-time work for women coincided with the social reforms implemented after the Second World War. This may seem paradoxical, but can be explained by the fact that the benefit system was based on the pre-supposition that everyone is a member of a family which is looked after by a male breadwinner. Women therefore should not need to go out to work and, anyway should not want to because their place is at home. It was particularly convenient to reconstruct this hoary old myth in the 1950s since it was (and still is) far cheaper to administer a system which only entitles adult males fully to its benefits. However, while ideology decreed that women's place was at home, the labour market determined otherwise. The years following world war two witnessed a labour shortage. Then, as now, increasing numbers of women workers (especially married women) filled gaps, even though the fashionable theories of maternal deprivation (popularised in the 1950s by John Bowlby) issued dire warnings about the harmful effects on children of anything less than 100% of their mummies' attention in the first five years of life. Given the gradual closure of war-time nursery provision, the only solution to the conflict between the demand of paid work and the demands of family and home was the compromise of part-time work. Guilt and the 'pin money' myth, and even more rigid job segregation, is the price women workers still have to pay.

The women's movement over two centuries

The organised struggle of women against various aspects of women's oppression took on a more widespread and effective form in the 19th and 20th centuries. This is not to deny the importance of the role of women in pre-capitalist societies, but rather to acknowledge that, because capitalism poses the sharpest contradictions for women, it also encourages the development of a more acute women's consciousness.

This of course is not a mechanical process, just as the development of class consciousness arising from a sharpening of class antagonisms under capitalism is not automatic. However, capitalist society lays the preconditions for the development of such consciousness and the growth of an organised movement to challenge all or part of the existing order.

Although it was (and still is) true that the experiences of oppression by women from different classes varied greatly, all women in the 19th century shared the common experience of having all political and most legal rights denied them. All women shared the experience of being considered inferior in every way to men. Victorian ideology decreed that women had no other function in life but to attend to the needs and desires of men. For working class women this meant untold drudgery in the home and at work. For upper class women, it meant a life of stupefying boredom in a round of meaningless social duties in which they 'are never supposed to have any occupation of sufficient importance not to be interrupted' in a system which 'dooms some minds to incurable infancy, others to silent misery' (Florence Nightingale, *Cassandra*, 1859).

It is perhaps surprising that the first salvoes in the long battle to improve women's status came from women from privileged backgrounds like Florence Nightingale. Marian

Ramelson in *The Petticoat Rebellion* (1972) points out that the demand for rights for women could not and did not predate the demand for political rights for men.

Until 1832, the only men who had the vote were landowners. In Europe, the demand for an extension of political rights for the majority had become a powerful force by the end of the 18th century (although it had surfaced even earlier, especially in England, during the English Revolution of 1640). The American War of Independence (1776) and the French Revolution (1789) were important landmarks in this struggle. The French Revolution, with its slogan of 'liberty, equality and fraternity', succeeded in challenging the centuries-old domination of the aristocracy. The 'old regime' was based on the notion that only a handful of men (the owners of large estates) had rights. Everyone else had only duties. The challenge to the old order was based on a new theory – a theory which was as revolutionary in its day as communism in our era. This theory, expounded by French philosophers and popularised in England by Thomas Paine, asserted simply that all men are born equal and hence should have equal rights despite the inequalities that society creates.

This new notion of 'natural rights' was an important springboard for radical political movements all over the world even though, in practice, the French Revolution subsequently limited its democracy to exclude the vast mass of working people. Nonetheless the idea didn't die and of course had important consequences for women. For if all men are born equal then why shouldn't the logic of this argument hold good for the other half of the human race – women? Three years after the French Revolution, Mary Wollstonecraft published her book *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) which argued precisely this point. This was the first book published in English which challenged the traditionally accepted ideas of women's inferiority; ideas which were (and still are) so deeply ingrained that only the most advanced radical groups were prepared to take them on board, and then only as an afterthought. Without a strong women's movement campaigning for the rights of women, it was hardly likely that such views would be taken seriously.

During the late 18th and most of the 19th centuries there was no such cohesive women's movement prepared to challenge the dominant ideology in total. There were, however, many separate challenges to different aspects of women's low status in a variety of different areas; political, cultural, economic and social. Against great odds individual women made breakthroughs as authors, as doctors and nurses, as educators and as social reformers.

Whether such women were consciously fighting their corner as feminists, or whether they were conscious at all they were challenging oppression, does not detract from the fact that the aggregate of their achievement – even though it was limited in class terms – acted as an encouragement for other women and helped to dispel at least some of the nonsense of female inferiority.

The Bronte sisters and Mary Ann Evans all had to adopt male pseudonyms in order to get their novels published. Elizabeth Garrett Anderson and Sophia Jex Blake had to undergo appalling male hostility, including physical violence, in order to become doctors. Florence Nightingale and others were pilloried as 'sex crazed prostitutes' before nursing was established as a respectable profession. Dorothea Beale and Frances Buss had to contend with indescribable prejudice in order to establish the propriety of education for girls, as did Emily Davies and Jemima Clough in establishing the provision of higher education for women. Society denied women their brains. As Florence Nightingale put it, '... a woman cannot live in the light of intellect, society forbids it, those conventional frivolities which are called her 'duties' forbid it'.

It was no mere accident that these (and many other) issues were taken up by women in the 19th century. The challenge was a reflection of the fact that the Victorian ideal of womanhood was a parody of the lives of the tiny handful of the idle rich. For working class women the image had always been a hollow sham, but now it was posing sharp contradictions for women from more well-to-do backgrounds, especially for those who remained unmarried or who were widowed. Such women remained a drain on their families' economies and were often doomed to dire poverty without the financial support of fathers, husbands or elder brothers. As Jane Austen puts it in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), marriage 'was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want.' Like the Bronte sisters, these women were forced to find paid work outside the home in order to survive – but the opportunities open to them, other than as governesses, were extremely limited.

This partly explains why so much of the movement in the 19th century was to widen these opportunities and why education for women and girls was seen as a crucial part of the process. Although for us it appears that their horizons were still limited in a narrow range of professions – especially teaching and nursing – part of the fight was to improve the status of what was already seen as 'women's work'.

Thus far, at least until the 1870s, the women's movement remained disparate. It was the fight for the right to vote which ultimately provided the single issue around which women could unite and create a mass movement for the first time. This, however, was not accomplished overnight, indeed even at its height the suffrage campaign was riddled with internal dissention over tactics, strategy and even principles. Nonetheless, the suffrage movement was vitally important, not only for what it achieved, but also because it was the very first time that women mobilised by themselves and for themselves in a way which demonstrated their power as an organised force.

It was this fact, rather than the over-glorified and well-publicised acts of arson, suicide and vandalism which marked the later stages of the suffragette campaign, that presented the greatest challenge to the existing order. The mass involvement of working class women in the suffrage societies and in the co-operative women's guilds of the urban industrial areas alarmed 'respectable' society both male and female. It led the Women's Social and Political Union (*i.e.* suffragettes) by 1907 to drop its links with the labour movement and concentrate its efforts around more influential women in a less democratic, pressure-group style of political campaigning.

The suffrage campaign is linked closely to the Pankhursts. The division within the Pankhurst family which led Emmeline and Christabel to expel Sylvia from the WSPU in 1914, was much more than a family rift. Rather it represented in microcosm the ideological divide between socialist feminism and bourgeois feminism. Such tensions were unspoken throughout most of the 19th century, but the Pankhursts symbolised the open acknowledgment of ideological disunity in the women's movement (which survives to this day) – a disunity based on class division as well as ideological difference.

Sylvia Pankhurst was the champion of socialist feminism which saw women's oppression linked indissolubly to class exploitation. Her feminism, which was always more genuine than that of her mother and sister, led her towards communism. From 1912 she built a strong base among working women in the East End of London (the East London Federation of Suffragettes). She chose the East End because 'it was the greatest homogenous working class area accessible to the House of Commons by popular demonstrations. The creation of

a woman's (sic) movement in that great abyss of poverty would be a call and a rallying cry to the rise of similar movements in all parts of the country.' (S. Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement*). Sylvia was expelled from the WSPU in 1914. She was summoned to her sister Christabel in Paris for the purpose. She reports her sister's remarks on this occasion: 'you have a democratic constitution for your Federation [the East London Federation]; we (the WSPU Leadership] do not agree with that.' Moreover, Christabel insisted that 'a working women's movement was of no value; working women were the weakest portion of the sex: how could it be otherwise? Their lives were too hard, their education too meagre to equip them for the struggle! Surely it is a mistake to use the weakest for the struggle! We want all our women to take their instruction and walk in step like an army!' (S. Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement)*

Just a few months later this 'women's army' was instructed by Christabel and Emmeline to forget the battle for the vote and join the real war effort – the 1914-18 war – the Imperialist War.

The commonplace assertion that women followed the WSPU lead in 1914 and welcomed the war is simply untrue. While Emmeline and Christabel devoted their energies to ranting against strikes and pacifists and later urged Lloyd George to smash Bolshevik Russia in its infancy, other women's organisations involving working class women in the East End and elsewhere were accomplishing more productive projects. They were drawing attention to the acute hardships faced by women in wartime as well as campaigning for peace and, of course, the vote. When, in 1918, the first instalment of women's suffrage came it was not as a reward for war work (as bourgeois historians would have us believe), but rather because of continuing mass pressure from progressive women's organisations. This pressure was maintained until 1928 when complete suffrage was finally won.

From 1928 until the 1960s, the women's movement became once again more disparate. However, the experience gained by many women in the fight for the vote led them to fight for women's rights in other organisations. The labour movement was richer for the contribution of leading suffragists like Charlotte Despard and Sylvia Pankhurst, the Pethick-Lawrences, all of whom remained active in the labour movement, and countless women who continued to fight the good fight in their trade unions, trades councils and other labour movement organisations.

The revival of the women's movement after the First World War offered little to women who had been radicalised by the militancy of the labour movement during the war. Compared to the pre-war years, it was a feminism of a very different type. Eleanor Rathbone, president of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC) championed the 'new feminism' as expressed in the objective of NUSEC, which was to 'obtain all other reforms, economic, legislative and social as are necessary to secure a real equality of liberties, status and opportunities between men and women'. Working class women were largely uninvolved in its organisational work. That is not to say that their interests were ignored, but rather that they were subjects of what was primarily a middle class movement which adopted pressure group style lobbying tactics. There was little in the way of mass campaigning and mobilisation which had characterised the suffrage struggle. A multiplicity of causes emerged, the chief amongst them being birth control and family allowances and equal pay. However, the ideological basis of these demands fell far short of any socialist theoretical perspective. Rathbone, as the leading ideological light of the 'new feminism' saw all three issues as linked. She advocated the payment of family allowances (or 'family endowment' as she termed it) in

order both to assist the eradication of child poverty and to compensate for women's low wages. Birth control, by reducing the size of working class families, would also help to combat poverty. Women's role in the family lay at the centre of her concerns as did the eugenic consideration that the 'national stock' must be improved and 'endowing motherhood' was the chief means of ensuring that 'the less fit elements' in society could be assisted to combat the degeneration of the British race. Her pioneering work in campaigning for family allowances, whilst in itself a progressive aim, ultimately fulfilled in 1945, was pursued for reasons which were not quite as laudable as the outcome. In essence, Rathbone saw state provision of family allowances as the means by which the growing demand for equal pay for women could be circumvented.

Working class women and the labour movement

Thus far the account of the women's movement has taken us from the late 18th to the late 20th century but, apart from being sketchy, it is also incomplete. Very little has been said about the role of working class women other than during the campaign for votes for women. The drudgery and the hardship of life for working class women did not mean, as Christabel Pankhurst and many others like her thought, that they were incapable of comprehending their oppression and exploitation, but it did mean that they could not readily relate to the concerns of more well-to-do women. The latter tended to regard their downtrodden sisters as objects of pity and there are many instances of campaigns being waged on their behalf by well-meaning philanthropists. An example of this in the early 20th century was the very successful campaign to expose the evils of the 'sweated trades'. Today there is a tendency among middle class women to campaign on behalf of working class women. While the greater awareness of issues facing the most exploited is to be welcomed, there is no substitute for working class women themselves acting on their own behalf. The 1984/85 miners' strike showed that this was possible and effective.

Historically, apart from the suffrage societies in industrial areas, working class women were to found the Women's Co-operative Guild. Formed in 1883, by 1931 it had 1,400 branches and 67,000 members allied politically with the Labour Party. It was a vigorous campaigning organisation and was an important agent in the education of working women.

Other than the Guild, the main arena in which working class women have found a place for direct participation is within the trade union and labour movement. As the one time secretary of the Co-operative Women's Guild, Margaret Llewelyn Davies said: 'these movements are very different from philanthropic and social reform organisations. Trade unionism and co-operation are woven into the very fabric of the workers' lives' (*Life As We Have Known It*, 1931). The degree of involvement of women in the labour movement and the movement's responsiveness to women's needs has, and still does, reflect the level of real class consciousness and understanding. This, of course, has varied throughout the history of the movement, reflecting, as it does, the degree of absorption or rejection of capitalist ideology. Facile generalisations about the labour movement being a 'men's movement' do no justice to the struggle within the movement over its 200-year history between reactionary and progressive ideas – the struggle between class struggle and class collaboration.

In general, the period up to 1850 saw a very broad level of women's involvement in the political and industrial struggles of the working class. Women were involved in the Corresponding Societies of the French revolutionary era. There existed a heightened consciousness of women's oppression at this time, induced not only by Mary Wollstonecraft's

book but also because the best seller written by Tom Paine (*The Rights of Man,* 1790) contained demands which would benefit women – specifically, maternity benefit and child care.

Women were also involved in the struggling trade associations like those of the framework knitters. When the pace of industrialisation increased at the end of the 18th century and during and after the Napoleonic Wars (1793-1815), the emerging factory proletariat contained a majority of women. This was reflected in the formation and composition of many unions (which existed illegally until 1824), especially those among cotton spinners. Women played an active part from the outset. The post-1815 radical movement, which was brutally repressed by the Tory Government, also contained many women activists, as the casualty list of the Peterloo massacre (1819) and the Spa Fields Rising clearly indicated. The general unions (like the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union 1833-34) were more like political organisations than modern trade unions, campaigning for complete social change. Women were strongly involved in them. Indeed women even formed their own separate lodges within the GNCTU and *The Pioneer*, the GNCTU newspaper, had its own women's page. Indeed, in 1834 the GNCTU advocated the demand for equal pay in the pages of its journal *The Pioneer.*

After the failure of the GNCTU, the focus of attention shifted to more specific issues, like the movement for factory reform and the struggle against the implementation of the Poor Law Amendment Act (1834). These campaigns involved massive demonstrations – police records and contemporary newspaper reports indicated that there was no shortage of women participants.

The Chartist Movement (1837-1852) represented the high spot in working class political achievement in the 19th century. Chartism was the first political party of the working class and was all the more significant for the fact that it existed at a time when no worker had the vote. Although female suffrage was not included among the six points of the *Charter*, there is ample evidence to show that women were active within the Chartist Movement and that the demand for votes for women, although not official policy was supported by many activists, male and female.

Many female Charter associations were established (especially after 1840 when the National Charter Association was established and organised on a branch basis). In 1847, Ann Knight, one of the Chartist leaders in Sheffield, wrote the first pamphlet demanding votes for women. Other women, like Mary Ann Walker, Mathilda Roalfe and Helen Macfarlane were known speakers and propagandists for the movement. (Helen Macfarlane made the first English translation of the *Communist Manifesto*; it was published in 1850 in *The Red Republican.*) We know little of the detail of women's participation in all these movements. Working class women did not record their lives and their thoughts, and no one took the trouble to do it for them. The reticence and modesty of the working class, other than the leaders and self-publicists, has long been recognised as a problem for labour historians in trying to create an accurate picture of any popular movement at grass roots levels. If this is true for the men, the difficulties are compounded 100-fold for the women.

Nonetheless, despite the fragmentary nature of the evidence, it would seem that such women's involvement as did exist fell away sharply during and after the 1850s and did not revive again until the 1880s (although there was a brief flurry in the 1870s). It is difficult to be very precise about this, for all the reasons mentioned above, but one important change was clearly observable between the pre- and post-1850 labour movement. In most of the organisations formed after 1850, women were specifically excluded. With the decline of Chartism came a more exclusive pre-occupation with trade unions, but the unions formed

were for skilled or better paid workers, which by definition meant male workers. These unions, modelled on the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (which was formed in 1851), represented the interests of that section of the working class which Lenin termed the 'labour aristocracy'.

The 1850s mark a new epoch in Britain's capitalist development. The sharp fluctuations of a society in the state of industrial transition which characterised the previous half century were now becoming less acute. In addition, industrialisation had now spread beyond the cotton industry. This meant more than just recovery from the doldrums of the early 1840s – it spelled immense economic advance, enabling Britain to acquire the complete domination of world trade and world markets. The super profits thus gained by those industries best placed to participate in this export bonanza provided the material basis for a division or split within the working class. Those workers, the 'labour aristocrats' who, albeit temporarily, shared in the fruits of prosperity in terms of improved wages, job security and a better standard of living, began to identify their interests more in terms of getting the best out of capitalism rather than overturning it. The trade unions they formed reflected this philosophy and, in the sense that they existed to defend and improve wages and conditions, they resemble our own unions today, more than say, the GNCTU. What was missing in the 1850s and 1860s was any political organisation of and for the working class. The new model unions, despite legal difficulties, went from strength to strength; but they not only excluded all women, they also excluded the vast bulk of male workers, the low paid. Women workers suffered a great defeat. The only trade in which they still remained organised in any numbers was that of weaving. Reflecting ruling class patriarchal ideology, Henry Broadhurst, secretary of the TUC, speaking in 1875 proclaimed that the aim of trade unionism was:

> '...to bring about a condition...where wives and daughters would be in their proper sphere at home, instead of being dragged into competition for livelihood against the great and strong men of the world.'

In the absence of any more conscious anti-capitalist organisation of the labour movement, it is easy to see how the ruling class which had been so seriously troubled by the militancy of the 1840s was able to re-establish its control, not only economically, but also ideologically. This meant that oppressive notions of women prevailed and took root among the class which had hitherto begun to challenge them. Women were not the only casualties of these years – the emerging socialist consciousness of the Chartist period was also a victim.

The turn of lower paid workers, including women, to reap the benefits of trade unionism (let alone political organisation) did not come until the 1880s. However, there was some activity among women workers ten years before this due to the activities of the Women's Protective and Provident League. This organisation was formed in 1874 by Emma Paterson in order to encourage the growth of separate unions for women. But, whether the organisations thus formed among milliners, upholstresses, umbrella makers, etc., can be accurately designated as trades unions is questionable. The League's object was to promote, as they put it, an 'entente cordiale' between the labourer, the employer and the consumer, hence strike action was frowned upon. The League also opposed any form of protective legislation for women workers. The secretary of the League, Emma Paterson, was the first woman to attend a TUC Congress. She argued there, and elsewhere, that if women were to have equal rights, they must compete on the same terms as men and be free to do any work (including coal mining) without legislative interference. Although debate on this issue is still topical,

the organisations formed by the philanthropic endeavours of the league were not so long lived. However, in view of the male hostility to women at work, let alone them organising, it is not surprising that this move was made and, however erroneous its class collaborationist philosophy, it was certainly no worse than that practised by men of the right-wing 'respectable' leaders of craft unions at the time.

Only a regeneration of socialist consciousness, as in the Chartist era, could provide the basis for challenging the backward notions (not only on women but on a range of other issues), which had permeated the labour movement and were enshrined politically, after 1867 when the better-off section of the male working class were enfranchised, in 'lib-labism' (*i.e.* working men allying themselves for parliamentary purposes with the Liberal Party). The 1880s witnessed a socialist revival, albeit not on a scale sufficient to weather the tub-thumping racist jingoism of the massive expansion of the British Empire which got capitalism off the hook in the last quarter of the 19th century.

Hence, although women made advances in the labour movement after the 1880s, it would be wrong to exaggerate their scale and importance, especially when one considers that the vast majority of women workers were occupied in trades which were not (and still are not) covered by union organisation of any kind. The trade union expansion of the 1880s, inspired by the socialist consciousness of the Social Democratic Federation, was concerned with organising unskilled and lower paid workers. Women, especially Eleanor Marx, played an active part in this campaign.

The new unions which were formed as a result opened their doors to women from the outset. Women workers helped to influence and were affected by other developments. One was directly influenced by the militancy of women themselves (especially the successful match women's strike of 1889); some existing male unions admitted women members for the first time – for example, the non-cotton textile unions (cotton unions already had women members since the 1820s) and the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives.

Most significant was the work of the National Federation of Women Workers formed in 1905. Under the presidency of Mary Macarthur, the NFWW strove to unionise women and to campaign for minimum hours for women in the sweated trades. The NFWW was rooted in the militancy especially of the great unrest from 1910-1914. Also, during the early years of the 20th century, women found a place in the newly formed trade unions for white collar workers. The remaining resistance of the leadership of unions to women members was a matter which was increasingly threatened by the new militants especially in the Amalgamated Society of Engineers. In short, women's advance was (and is) linked to the advance of the labour movement in genuinely representing working class interests. In numerical terms, the overall figure of women's trade union membership was still paltry, although there was a staggering increase from 37,000 in 1886 to 236,000 by 1914.

This improved trend was greatly accentuated by the massive entry of women into commodity production during the First World War. Combined with the militancy of the emergent shop stewards movement, this meant that not only were women recruited into previously hostile male unions, but that the efforts made by government and employers to drive a wedge between male and female workers using the weapon of 'dilution' (*i.e.* lower rates for women doing skilled jobs) failed, with the rank and file mounting vigorous campaigns for 'the rate for the job'. This trend of militancy and rejection of class collaboration continued until the early 1920s. By 1920, women's membership of trade unions was at its peak reaching 1,342,000 (this represented 25% of the total female

workforce). By 1939, the figure had dropped to half a million, despite the fact that the percentage of women in the workforce had risen.

The downward trend cannot be explained (as some have sought to do), by assuming that women were reluctant trade unionists and that their fickle nature induces a lack of lasting commitment to the movement. Neither can we assume that such a downward trend was inevitable because of the inherent male chauvinism of the movement. Such reasoning, whilst it marks a trend, does not explain why such a trend is more dominant at some periods rather than others. In other words, it abstracts such trends from their political, social and historical context.

The years following the General Strike until the Second World War were bleak ones not only for women but for the entire labour movement, dominated as it was at leadership level politically and ideologically by right wing, class collaborationist views. It was a period of mass unemployment and savage wage cuts. The labour of women was used as part of the cost cutting exercise. Despite male unemployment, the percentage of women in the workforce increased from 27% in 1923 to 30% in 1939. The response of the trade union leadership was both positive and negative at the same time. It was recognised that the only way to prevent women being used as a source of cheap labour was to recruit them into trade unions. In fact, until 1939, this issue dominated the TUC Women's Conference (established in 1925) and the TUC Women Workers' Group and its successor the Women's Advisory Committee of the TUC (founded in 1930). However, the existence of these structures within the TUC and the welcome concentration on recruitment did not betoken a more enlightened attitude to women.

Within individual unions with a high proportion of women members, appallingly backward attitudes prevailed. For example, in 1925, NALGO adopted a motion on equal pay but at the same time opposed the employment of married women. Unions representing teachers, postal workers, boot and shoe makers and civil servants, all meekly accepted wage settlements which increased the differential between men and women. The National Union of Women Teachers felt that the prevalent backward attitude to women was linked to the rise of fascism in Germany and Italy with its uncompromising view of women's place (kitchen, children and church).

The recruitment campaigns launched by the TUC Women's Committee had been greeted with almost complete apathy, so the TUC itself intervened in 1937 and 1939 with its own campaigns. These campaigns were based on the assumption that trade unionism would only appeal to women if it was concerned with 'womanly' issues such as health and beauty: trade unionism was the 'ticket to health and beauty'. Apart from the fact that such male-designed campaigns were grossly insulting to women's intelligence, they didn't work either, as the membership figures showed. Women workers, then as now, needed to be shown the tangible benefits of trade union action on the issues most concerning them as workers rather than as putative beauty queens.

Of course, the real issues facing the working class as a whole were obvious in the 1920s and 1930s and could only be tackled by the kind of militancy which was an anathema to the leadership of the movement, preferring as it did cosy talks with the employers (Mondism following the 1926 General Strike) and disastrous attempts by Labour to govern (the minority governments of 1924 and 1929-1931). Only the Communist Party and such organisations as the National Unemployed Workers' Movement, the National Minority Movement and later the campaigns to oppose fascism – the Popular Front and the United

Front – offered a fighting alternative to the gradual seepage of capitalist ideology into the labour movement. Not surprisingly, women played a dominant part in such organisations.

The left trend within the movement, which was the sure guarantee that women's advance would be permanent, was itself tenuous, as witness the Cold War hysteria of the late 1940s and 1950s in which the infecting germ of anti-communism once more nourished the right wing.

The fact that most of the gains women made during the war were lost cannot be explained, as in previous periods, by high unemployment or economic recession. Although women were ousted from the 'men's jobs' they had occupied during the war, the proportion of women (especially married women) in the labour force increased continuously over the following three decades. A previous section of this pamphlet has attempted to provide an explanation. What concerns us here is the attitude of the labour movement to the reverses suffered by women in the post-war period. It is summed up in a section of the 1948 TUC Annual Report dealing with the Labour government's closure of day nurseries (a policy which the TUC did not oppose). The General Council stated that:

> 'home is one of the most important spheres for a women worker and that it would be doing a great injury to the life of the nation if women were persuaded or forced to neglect their domestic duties in order to enter industry, particularly when there are young children to cater for.'

This underlying philosophy remained largely unchallenged until the late 1960s and helps to explain why very little progress for women workers was made (except where, as in the case for equal pay, women themselves took the initiative) and why, as a consequence, women's participation and membership of trade unions remained low in proportion to the numbers of women in the workforce.

The fact that the late 1960s marks a turning point for women in the labour movement is due to a combination of two factors – the growing influence of the left in a number of key unions and the development of the women's movement, in particular, although not exclusively, the Women's Liberation Movement. However, the extent to which real change for women was brought about should not be exaggerated. The turning point was marked more by a change in attitude in that women workers were perceived as having problems rather than being problems. This led to a number of unions and the TUC itself looking at policy issues and structural changes to encourage greater participation and membership of trade unions by women. It is a process that could hardly be resisted once women demonstrated their collective power, as for example, in 1968 at Ford's Dagenham plant when the women sewing machinists struck for pay regrading. Even more important was the equal pay victory won by women workers at Trico as a result of their historic strike in 1976. But likewise this forward march of women workers is a process that can either be reversed or remain at the level of good intentions unless the forces that gave rise to it in the first place remain strong and united. It is thus appropriate, at the end of this brief historical survey of women in the trade union movement in Britain, to make some assessment of how far women have managed to break down the barriers and whether the forces that gave rise to the challenge remain strong and united enough to weather the current inhospitable climate.

Five Today: women workers, women's rights, class, capitalism and the labour movement in the 21st century

'The feminisation of poverty' | The wages struggle | Black women | The women's movement today | Women and trade unions today |

ALTHOUGH THERE was a temporary halt in the growth of women's employment in the early 1980s, it is clear now that women, over 50% of the labour force, are a vital and permanent part of social production. However, the expansion of women's jobs (indeed jobs of all kinds) is based on a much narrower range of employment, reflecting the chronic decline in British manufacturing industry. So, for women and for black people – already the victims of job segregation – the expansion of the labour market will mean more of the same: low paid and low status jobs, the majority of which will be temporary, part-time or casual. The preponderance of such contractual arrangements is frequently justified in the name of 'flexibility' and they are commended to women as being 'family friendly'. In fact the opposite is true. Uncertainty about a regular source of income, together with poverty wages and lack of affordable child care, increases the burden on women and perpetuates a cycle of deprivation. The establishment of a national minimum wage is welcome, but set at the rate dictated by the interests of capital, it will do nothing to resolve the widening gap between rich and poor in Britain, a gap which has reached the highest level recorded since the Second World War, resulting in an increase in the number of workers (nearly three million, mostly part-time) earning less than the threshold for National Insurance contributions. Women are twice as likely to be low paid as men. It is in this context that we must view the government's drive to get women off benefit and into work – a policy that would be laudable were it not clear that their (as other governments before and doubtless after) intention is to maintain the status of women workers as a source of cheap labour. But we must also note that the growth of poverty pay (below the National Insurance threshold), 'has set a welfare time bomb ticking ... Today's low paid workers are set to become tomorrow's pensionless elderly underclass' (TUC *The New Divide*, 1995).

'The feminisation of poverty'

Of all the countries of Western Europe, Britain has witnessed perhaps the most savage and prolonged assault on the Welfare State. This neo-liberal attack on collectivist welfare has and is having its most serious impact on women, especially women workers. Whilst it is the case that the erosion of collectivist social provision affects all but the very rich, women have been the hardest hit resulting in what may be termed 'the feminisation of poverty'.

It has long been recognised that women have a higher incidence of poverty than men. Why should this be so? The reasons have already been touched upon and they are connected: namely – job segregation and the long standing and persistent gender pay gap. These two issues are connected by the root cause of women's inequality founded upon the contradictions between the social nature of production and the private nature of reproduction, *i.e.* the conflicting demands of paid labour and family responsibilities (still seen in practice and theory as the primary function of women of whatever their marital status). It is in this context that the erosion of the welfare state bears most heavily on women for the following reasons.

Collectivist social provision could relieve some of the caring responsibilities of the women's role in the family. At its maximal level, such provision could, and did in wartime and in the former socialist countries, include the socialization of some household tasks including childcare. This has long gone in Britain which now has the most expensive, and hence unaffordable, childcare of any European country. However, the privatization steamroller has now ensured that the care of the elderly is completely outside the state sector. Hence at both ends of the age span, the very young and the very old are, unless they come from well off families, cared for by women in the home. At a more minimal level the erosion of hospital provision; the insistence that recuperation after serious illnesses takes place at home means that the care of the sick is also a 'family responsibility' – *i.e.* women's responsibility. To this may be added the countless other erosions of caring services such as home helps, after school clubs, etc

The female employment rate reached a record high of 72.4% in October-December 2019. The male employment rate was 80.6%. 40% of women in employment were working part-time compared to 13% of men. (House of Commons Briefing Paper; 'Women and the Economy' March 2020) Why should this impact on women's poverty? The high rate of part-time work for women explains why the gender pay gap is still an astonishing 17.3%. Part-time work is more common for mothers: two thirds of women with children under five who are in employment work part-time. (Source *Labour Force Survey Autumn 2013*). The pay gap between part-time women workers and full-time male workers is 41%.

Thus, family formation and women's role within it impacts significantly on the type and nature of women's employment and the lack of social provision not only prevents choice but ensures the perpetuation of job segregation with consequential limitations on promotion prospects and the equal pay of women. Women do 60% more unpaid (*i.e.* domestic) work than men – accounting for an average of 26 hours per week (*Labour Force Survey 2016*). Job segregation is a main cause of the pay gap. In every occupational group reported in the *New Earnings Survey* women earned less on average than men, even where they made up more than half the workforce.

In 2018, the analysis of the Workplace Employment Relations Survey, a project, first conducted in 1980 and which has been repeated in 1984, 1990, 1998, 2004 and 2011, stated that:

'The participation in employment of women of working age has increased since 1980, almost entirely due to an increase in part-time employment. Women still earn substantially less – approximately 20% – from their employment than men. While the differences may vary, the pattern is consistent and unambiguous: women doing broadly comparable hours and broadly comparable work earn less than their male counterparts. Among full-time employees, twice as many men are in the top quarter of income earners as women. Women's earnings are considerably lower than men's in places that employ more women; women's earnings also tend to rise more slowly with age and experience.'

Almost all workers in the most highly paid manual occupations are men, whilst the majority of those in the low-paid occupations, *i.e.* cleaners or sales assistants, are women (ranging from 60% to 90%). Even in occupations such as primary school teaching that are relatively well paid, and where women tend to predominate, the average earnings of women are still 17% lower than men.'

The wages struggle

In considering how to challenge this dire situation, we must pay urgent attention to the wages struggle – a struggle which, over the decades, has failed fully to embrace the aspirations of women workers.

The TUC passed its first resolution on equal pay in 1889. Over 100 years later, despite legislation (ie, the 1975 Equal Pay Act and the 1984 Equal Value amendment), women still only earn roughly two-thirds of men's wages (based on average hourly earnings). Yet, despite the breakthroughs in enshrining the principle of equal pay for work of equal value, it remains the case that the law as it now stands is a serious obstacle to the fulfilment of that principle.

Must women workers wait another 100 years to achieve this most basic of all rights? Naturally, all the protestations from the labour movement will be to the contrary. After all, every trade union has policy on the issue – but policy is one thing, the fight for its implementation is quite another. The time to fight is now.

Although the law as it stands is fraught with loopholes and obstacles, the principle which it enshrines is of fundamental importance; it is this principle which has not been properly understood, let alone fought for within the trade union movement to date.

Up until 1984, some excuse for inaction could be found in the fact that the law itself was deficient. The 1975 Equal Pay Act only permitted claims where the woman was engaged on 'the same or broadly similar work' to that of a male 'comparator'. Quite clearly this had a very limited application, since so few women are engaged on 'like' work with men. Thus, the Act failed to get to the roots of women's unequal and low pay – the problem for the majority of women workers being that they are in 'women's work', that is to say they are the victims of decades of job segregation. All research confirms that women predominate in a narrow range of occupations, including catering, cleaning, clerical, retail and repetitive assembly work.

However, in January 1984 the Equal Pay Act was amended. The amendment was forced on an unwilling Tory Government as a result of trade union pressure and a ruling from the European Court. The amendment provides another and very important criterion for claiming equal pay. Now claims can be admitted if it can be shown that the value of the work a woman does is the same as that of her male comparators. The law does not lay down hard and fast rules as to how 'value' is to be determined, but mentions the possible use of such factors as effort, skill and decision making. This new principle of equal value is of major

significance and merits brief consideration.

Firstly, if applied correctly, the amendment would enable women workers to embark on a major wages offensive in their own right, particularly benefiting low paid women in 'women's jobs'. In the limited number of cases taken up to date, the pay difference between women and their male comparators was massive. Second, and perhaps more fundamentally for the working class as a whole, women have the potential to challenge and re-determine the social value accorded to their labour power by the capitalist system.

As we have, seen this super-exploitation has been largely overlooked by the trade union movement as a whole (with, of course, some notable exceptions). The tendency has been to regard it as part of the 'natural order' of things. If we allow this attitude to persist, women will have to wait another 100 years before any progress is made. There is no excuse for inaction any more – the principle of equal value is now enshrined in law and if the movement itself, under the weight of other pressing issues, does not grasp its significance, there will be no point moaning when the employers and governments fail to act within this law or even threaten to alter or remove it.

This is not to say that we should pin our hopes on the law alone. Recent experience in equal value cases has shown that the law is a minefield (even provoking complaints from judges). The tribunal mechanism is strongly weighted in favour of the employers and the average time from submitting a claim to a decision on it is two years. It comes as no surprise to learn that only a tiny minority of the thousands of cases which have gone to tribunals since 1984 have been won. (Hundreds of cases don't even get as far as a tribunal because preliminary hearings rule them out if, for example, there is a 'valid' job evaluation scheme covering the jobs to be compared, or the employer can show a 'material factor' preventing equal pay.)

So if, in practice, the law isn't much good, what's the answer? The simple, but effective solution, is to use the legally-enshrined principle of equal value in the preparation of claims for targeted groups of women workers and to negotiate such claims via the normal machinery of collective bargaining. The essential prerequisite for the success of such a strategy is for unions to accord it a very high priority, accompanied by the necessary campaigning and membership education to ensure it wins mass support especially from men. It will be important to show that the ensuing wages push, while initially benefiting women, will not disadvantage men. Quite the contrary, it is never in the interest of men to tolerate a permanent pool of cheap labour. This only serves the general tendency of capital to reduce the value of all labour and thus push all wages down. Indeed, one of the reasons that the employers are so worried about equal value is that they fear 'leapfrogging' claims by male workers.

Some unions are grasping the importance of equal value to a greater or lesser extent, but the majority of TUC affiliates have not considered a strategy, let alone pursued any claims. The net result is that the labour movement has an appalling record of under achievement for women workers; pay differentials between men and women in this country are among the highest in the EU. There is a tendency, however, to presume that the situation can be resolved by a wave of the legislative wand from Westminster or from Strasbourg. Of course, this simply will not happen. Change for women workers will only come about through the determined efforts of our own trade unions. Women will wait no longer.

However, the Glasgow Equal Pay strike of 2018 shows the way forward. In the words of one of the organisers:

'The 2018 equal pay strike of women in Glasgow was the largest such action in Scotland

and the UK, even beyond. The strike represented a significant change in Scottish trade union strategies around equal pay because it included a combination of public campaigning and using industrial muscle. Providing inspiring images of working-class women on picket lines and demonstrations, the strike was solid, member-led and received great public support throughout the city. It was not just a strike; this was mass action by the women of Glasgow to demonstrate their power and, inspiringly, they won.' (Jennifer McCarey, 'Equal Pay Struggles on the Clyde' *Theory & Struggle 2020*)

Black women

Black workers in Britain already know that racism is endemic in British society and that, despite mission statements, the law, trade union policy and a variety of initiatives over the years, racism is, nonetheless, still an ever present factor in the workplace. This may be seen as an uncomfortable assertion by those who believe that the issue of race has occupied the collective consciousness of progressive people for long enough and that there is very little else that can be done to eradicate it. Some might argue that it is no longer such an important issue anyway; that it is far more 'complex' than was once thought – that racism is no longer a 'black and white' issue and indeed the term 'black' does not reflect the 'diversity' of ethnicity and thus the term BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) is now used. However, recent research (*Working Against Racism: the Role of Trade Unions*, M. Davis, R. McKenzie, W. Sullivan, TUC 2006) has shown that such a 'nuanced' approach fails to recognise the reality of racism and hence dissipates the fight against it. It is for this reason that the term 'black' is used. If correctly understood, it is a unifying term signalling an acknowledgment that racism does not distinguish between shades of blackness. Clearly the term 'black' is not a descriptively accurate term. Like the term 'white' it cannot encompass the diversity of ethnicities which are sometimes misleadingly and incorrectly termed 'race' (a phenomenon which exists only in the mindset and ideology of racists). The term 'black' is used in much the same way (although less accurately) as we use the term 'worker' as an all compassing word covering all who sell their labour power for a wage, regardless of skill, status or professional qualification.

The failure to tackle racism outside the workplace has repercussions throughout civil society. Immigration and Asylum legislation requires employers to check on the immigration status of all their current and would-be employees. The 'hostile environment' propelling the Windrush scandal represents the nadir of racist immigration policies. The fact that racist murderers and attackers escape punishment, the alarmingly high number of black deaths in police custody remains unchecked and the subliminal racism of the mass media is largely unchallenged, perpetuates a climate in which racism is tolerated at work and in the streets. The insidious ideology of racism can only be challenged when its existence, in all its forms, is recognised.

Surveys and experience show that black women experience an additional ration of inequality in the labour market, suffering higher unemployment rates, lower wages and poorer prospects than their white counterparts. However, it should be noted that, apart from census figures ,there is no local data on black unemployment – there is no ethnic monitoring of unemployed claimants at job centres. The *Labour Force Survey* (LFS) is the main source of information. This is a sample survey which includes only a very small number of black people. Over the last decade or so a consistent pattern has emerged. The LFS indicates that the unemployment rates for male and female black workers are more

than double the rate for white workers. The unemployment rate for black women is not as high as that for black men, although there are considerable variations between ethnic groups with African and Pakistani women having unemployment rates four times that of white women, compared to Caribbean women who have the highest employment rate of all black women.

Despite this, black workers have historically been more likely than white workers to join trade unions in Britain. This is particularly marked among black women, and is only partially explained by the tendency of black workers to be employed in highly unionised sectors. Those black workers who migrated from the Caribbean and other former British colonies to the UK were active trade unionists in their countries of origin. Many such workers came to the UK from politically active communities, and continued their tradition of activism, despite facing many obstacles, to full involvement in British trade unions.

Black women workers are concentrated in particular areas of employment – namely in semi-skilled or unskilled manual jobs mainly in the private sector, at the lower grades and on the lowest pay. Black Caribbean women are roughly equally divided between the public and the private sectors and are least likely to work part time than any other group of women, black or white. Overall black women are more likely to work in the service industries, although Indian and Pakistani women are twice as likely as other women (black or white) to work in manufacturing industry, particularly textiles.

Hence black women not only experience the inequality of opportunity faced by most women in the labour market, but suffer additional discrimination based on race. All the evidence shows that black women workers disproportionately experience the problems of low pay, poor career prospects and vulnerability to redundancy. The disproportionately high rate of unemployment among black women appears to be mainly due to their concentration in vulnerable jobs, racial and sexual discrimination and the economic recession.

Economic disadvantage due to racism and sexism permeates not only the world of work but all other aspects of British society. Black women suffer disproportionately from the worsening social conditions experienced by the working class as a whole after continuous attacks, since 1979, on all aspects of the welfare state. In short, black women suffer triple oppression based on race, sex and on class.

Whilst there is now some understanding of this triple oppression, there has been a tendency to adopt a mechanistic approach to it. Such awareness as has existed among predominantly white Labour local authorities, political parties and feminist organisations has failed to touch the average black working class woman, hence the lack of any real progress in spite of some positive action initiatives.

Policies developed in the 1980s to give black women their own space by encouraging separate organisation of specific disadvantaged groups often with financial help from local councils, have done little to change the lot of the vast majority of black women. When the money ran out, the groups were left high and dry, divided and split. At the same time, there has been a gradual shift to the right as more and more local authorities toed the line and started to abandon the policies they had adopted a few years earlier. Some of these policies were misguided anyway and were based more on white middle class guilt and moralism. Very often, reasonable initiatives were subsumed in a welter of equal opportunity policies which reduced the needs of black women to the competing claims of any and every disadvantaged group.

Black self organisation within the trade union movement has played a role in raising awareness of the persistence of racism within the workplace. It has also led to some degree of visibility of black people in their own unions and the TUC. However, given that union density is higher among black people, and is remarkably high among black women, the progress of black people in their trade unions is extremely limited and a cause for great concern. Similar initiatives as were used to raise the profile of women trade unionists must be applied to black members. Care will have to be taken to ensure that black workers decide their own agenda and that the specific needs of black women form a part of it.

More and more black women and black people generally are becoming suspicious of progressive political organisations and trade unions, which do no more than pay lip service to their concerns. To some this is proof that existing political and women's organisations are racist. It is a simplistic approach, but is founded on the fact that these organisations have themselves either ignored the issue of racism or have, alternatively, adopted a line and then proceeded to tell the black community what to do. It is not surprising that today many black women, although politically active, still feel isolated and do not believe that they really belong. For far too long they have been ignored, tagged on a list of worthy causes, or worse, been patronised into 'participative politics'.

The ability of black people to organise themselves against racist discrimination since the beginning of mass immigration to the UK in the late 1940s is well documented. The political influence of such organisations has affected many of the changes in today's society, whether this has been through legislation, bringing issues out in debate or putting them on the agendas of political parties of all shades of the political spectrum.

The solidarity that exists among the diverse ethnic, cultural and political black organisations provides an indication of the real needs, problems and aspirations of black people. Within these groups, black women play a central role as they do in their own community and home life. The problems of black people with which they deal are not solely immigration rules, racist abuse, police harassment, discrimination in housing, education, etc. They are also concerned with the oppressive and exploitative effects of capitalism and imperialism.

Black women will respond to, and work with, political organisations which understand and are willing to listen to them, to share their problems and to fight alongside them for the same goals. The challenge for us is how this can be achieved. Patronage, ethno-centrism and middle class moralism (each or all sometimes masquerading as left progressive politics), have resulted in further alienation and a trend to develop totally separate self-organised groups. The opportunity presents itself for the labour and women's movement to go to black women, to the organisations established by them and their communities and, from a socialist perspective, to learn of and from them, open out the political debate on the real issues raised by them and thus strengthen the struggle both here and abroad.

The women's movement today

Women's organisations like the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and later the National Assembly of Women (founded 1952) continued the feminist struggle in the bleak cold war years. Campaigns on issues like maternity benefits, women's health and nursery provisions were also organised, especially during and after the Second World War. However, nothing like the mass involvement of women during the suffrage campaign was to

be seen during these years. As an organised movement the real breakthrough occurred in the late 1960s with the development of the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM).

Some of the theories of women's oppression which influenced the development of the WLM have already been discussed in an earlier section. What is necessary now is to assess the contribution of the WLM in practice, both in the terms it set itself and as a movement capable of organising and mobilising women in a variety of ways to challenge their oppression in practical forms.

We are at once presented with a difficulty in making such an assessment for, despite its name, the WLM was always more of a current than a movement. It did have the potential of becoming a movement, especially in the early days when the 1970 Oxford Conference drew up the original four demands: – equal pay, rights to abortion and contraception, child-care provision and equal education and job opportunities. Apart from abortion, such campaigning as did take place on these demands was organised despite the WLM rather than because of its active intervention.

This surprising state of affairs is to be explained by the fact that, in these early days, greater emphasis was placed on 'consciousness raising' and taking up those issues which most sharply confronted sexist or patriarchal attitudes. This is hardly surprising given the theoretical underpinning of the movement described earlier.

Coupled with this lack of desire to engage in organised campaigning and mobilisation, went a rejection of formal organisation structures and formal decision-making bodies, other than a loosely organised annual National Conference (now discontinued). This was a conscious decision from the outset, since committees and 'leaders' mirrored the kind of male-dominated organisation which are alleged to have discouraged and intimidated women's participation. Rather, much thought and effort was expended in finding a feminist mode of organisation which gave as much room for individual expression as possible. Without commenting on the validity or otherwise of such premises, the net effect of jettisoning any organisational structure was both a reflection of the lack of willingness to campaign and also a barrier to it. It is thus hardly surprising that by the late 1980s most feminist writers agreed that there was no cohesive women's liberation movement in this country (or in many others).

However, matters cannot be left at this. It cannot be assumed that the impact of women's liberation is to be judged solely in terms of the fate the organisation (or lack of it). The fact is that feminism and feminist ideas remain a 'strong if diverse political force' (L. Segal, *Is the Future Female?*, 1987). Although as women we cannot record any startling advances in our conditions in the recent past (even in terms of the original four demands of the WLM), it is nonetheless true that there is a far greater awareness of women's issues in all aspects of political, cultural and social life and a much greater determination by women themselves not to submit to the degrading stereotypes which society has forced upon them. In other words, the consciousness of many women has indeed been raised because the anti-sexist ideology pioneered by the women's movement has become a material force. We certainly owe a great debt to the main achievement of the women's liberation movement – the detailed exposures of the manner in which women are oppressed.

As communists we have fundamental disagreements with the idealist analysis of the causes of women's oppression, but laying bare the prevalent anti-women ideology builds on the finest traditions of the early feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft and socialist

feminists of the suffrage era. Modern feminists have relentlessly exposed the overt and covert discriminatory attitudes and practices which women experience daily. Sexism and sexist attitudes have been uncovered in the legal system, in the fiscal system, in the education system, in children's books, in employment practices, in our very language and, above all, in male attitudes. Once all this has been revealed, there can be no going back.

The important question for us now is: do we bask contentedly in the new enlightenment or do we project a course which will build on the new consciousness in order to challenge the causes rather than the effects of oppression? Despite this flowering of collective consciousness and the legislative gains made in the 1970s under the Labour government, all the evidence shows that women have made very few gains (indeed have even suffered reverses) on the equality front. Given that the overall oppression and exploitation of women is as bad now as it has ever been (despite the greater awareness), it remains for us to ask whether we can any longer be satisfied with a 'current' rather than a fighting movement which could begin to mobilise as well as analyse. As has been said, the WLM was always weak on this front and as a result, like the suffragette movement, it failed to address, let alone involve, the most exploited and oppressed – working class women, black and white.

It is too late to care now as the WLM no longer exists (except in terms of its legacy), but we can at least learn from this experience. Many feminist writers have recognised the deficiencies, having been shocked into self-mortification by criticisms made by black women here and in the USA. Other feminists have presumed that the new phase for women is to use their political weight to import their own brand of feminism into other political organisations. In other words they have learned nothing from the past. The voluntarism of the WLM, its unwillingness to campaign, its failure to involve black and white working class women (except the already converted), its ethno-centrism, are all to be transported lock, stock and barrel into 'the men's movement' as the price for involving women. It is the weaknesses – rather than the strengths – of the WLM on which they wish to build and all this will be at the expense of both women and the working class.

Women need a movement of their own as much as they have ever done. They also need to and already are involving themselves in the existing organisations of the labour movement. It is not an either/or situation – both tasks have to be accomplished. Historically, as we have seen, it is far harder to achieve the former. Working class women and black people have always been involved in the labour movement, although they have had to, and still have to, fight their corner. The creation of a broad-based non-sectarian women's movement capable of issuing a challenge on a wide range of issues affecting women is a project around which there is as yet little agreement although we can detect in 2020 a glimmer of hope. Today, 50 years after the first Ruskin Conference which launched the WLM, a conference of 1,000 women took place in London (1st February, 2020). Its title was Women's Liberation 2020. It was organised by Women's Place UK and supported by Southall Black Sisters and the NAW. It is possible that this could lead to a much needed revival of the women's liberation movement. Certainly there is no shortage of issues – racism; equal pay, opportunity and training; maternity rights and child care facilities; domestic violence and rape; women's wealth; pension rights, maintaining women's protections – to name but a few! Communist women will work to ensure that such a serious perspective is considered and taken up in a serious way, no matter how long it takes and what difficulties we have in our path.

A Charter for Women

It is precisely because of this need that communist and other women in the labour movement launched the *Charter for Women* which has been adopted by many trade unions at a national level. The rationale for the Charter was the recognition that historically women have always fought for their long-denied rights and that we must do so again. In this context the aim is to inspire a new and inclusive socialist feminist theory and practice that will motivate a new generation of women activists and revitalise the fight for women's liberation. One of the ways of doing this is to unite around a campaigning programme. This is the purpose of the *Charter for Women*. It does not offer new policy but instead seeks to bring together the key demands for which progressive women are fighting in various arenas. The *Charter* covers three broad areas; social policy, the labour market and the labour movement. It raises the main progressive concerns and campaigning points under each heading. We want it to be discussed, adopted and promoted by all progressive women's groups and organisations. The demands of the *Charter* are printed at the end of this pamphlet.

Women and trade unions today

If the late 1960s marked a turning point in the movement's attitude to women, we must assess how far and to what extent this has resulted in changed practices.

Women can certainly record some very real gains since the 1960s. (It must be stated from the outset that very few black women have shared such gains and that for 'women' in the subsequent paragraphs, read 'white women'.) Many surveys conducted by the TUC, by Labour Research and other organisations confirm this. Of the ten unions with the highest numbers of women members, the rates of women's participation at most levels have shown an increase. This is measured, in the main, by looking at the percentage of women holding seats on their union's executive committees, attending as delegates to union annual conferences and to the TUC. Many unions have adopted special policies to encourage women's participation, including such measures as establishing women's committees at national and regional level; running special courses for women members and women stewards; providing crèche facilities; taking up more vigorously issues which directly affect women members at work, and some unions now have reserved places for women on their executive committees or some other device which ensures that women are represented on elected committees which reflect their proportionate membership.

However, we must set all these positive changes into a context and also look at some of the deficiencies. The context is that women account for roughly 70% of the workforce and over 50% of total union membership and that this latter figure is rising. Many unions report that the percentage of new recruits is higher among women than men, and this is despite the fact that women often work in areas which are traditionally much harder to organise. In the face of falling union membership generally, it is not surprising that there is a warmer welcome for women members than hitherto. But given the figures quoted, we should perhaps be more surprised that participation rates still do not nearly reflect membership levels.

In addition, it must be pointed out that in a number of areas women have made little or no progress at all. Some unions have no women at all on their executives. There are still far too few women general secretaries – three of them are from teaching unions. Fewer than 10% of all trade union full-time officials are women. Above branch or chapel level there are very few women lay officers. This, of course, means that there are very few women who have responsibility for negotiations. Women are still not represented in proportion to their numbers

at national delegate events like the TUC Congress. (Women activists must, though, record a minor victory in that our long battle to change the timing of the TUC September Conference, so that it does not take place in the first week of the new school year, has at last been won.)

In 1989, the TUC changed its rules for election of the General Council. One of the effects of this change was to increase the number places reserved for women from 6 to 12. Unions with more than 200,000 members, and which also have more than 100,000 women members are obliged to include at least one woman among their representatives on the General Council. In addition, another four women's seats are elected by a ballot of all unions with fewer than 200,000 members. There is also a reserved seat for one black woman. The overall size of the General Council has been increased to 'accommodate' these changes. Welcome as they are, these changes raise the broader question of the relationship between the TUC Women's Conference and its elected Women's Committee to the General Council, since it is by no means certain that issues relating to women trade unionists will get a higher profile as a result of the electoral changes.

So, despite the advances, there is still clearly much room for improvement, especially bearing in mind that history shows that many of the advances women make can be transitory. In fact some of these advances have already been reversed. The TUC conducts an Equality Audit every two years. The 2018 audit revealed that in line with HM Government's decision to merge all six equality 'strands' into a single Equality Commission, many unions have followed suit. In practice this has meant a reduction in the number of women's committees, reserved seats for women, women's conferences and women's officers. The simple but uncomfortable fact is that trade unions are still predominantly white male organisations and as such mirror the hierarchy in the world of work. The low status of women and black people in the workplace is reflected in their continuing low status within the labour movement. Women, 54.6% of total union membership, now have to compete unequally for attention in generic equality structures, instead of guaranteeing that their issues are integral to every aspect of trade union organisation and collective bargaining.

It is far from divisive to point this out. Indeed to fail to do so would be to collude in the very sexism and racism which trade unionists are pledged to fight against at the point of production. There can and must be no double standards. The ability of the trade union movement to unite all workers and to champion their common interests will continue to be compromised by a failure to address the serious disunity in its own ranks. Women and black people will not remain passive in the fight for equality in their own unions.

Six Women and the Communist Party: history, policy and perspectives

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CPGB and women

IN RECTIFYING our theory, our policies and our practices, we also have to acknowledge that the labour movement including the Communist Party is not immune from male historical myopia and sexist prejudice. Put simply, women are hidden from our histories. Analysing the foundation of the CPGB in its 100th year, enables us to reveal some of what has been hidden. Two women in particular played a prominent role in the CPGB's early years. The fact that all labour movement organisations were (and still are) dominated by men, should not prevent us from acknowledging the contribution of the brave women who managed to break through the male barriers. Fortunately, we can see immediately that two women, Dora Montefiore and Helen Crawfurd, stand out. We do not need to search for them, but we do need to question why they have been ignored for so long and so little has been written about them. Thus, unsurprisingly, most of the information about these women comes from their own writings. Crawfurd wrote an unpublished autobiography and Montefiore's autobiography, *From a Victorian to a Modern,* was published in 1925.

Both these women had played an important part in the women's suffrage movement

Dora Montefiore *left*
and Helen Crawfurd

and were, in addition, active socialists well before 1920. They were socialist feminists. As such, both contributed to the formation the CPGB – Montefiore was a foundation member and Crawfurd joined in 1921 and became the first Communist Party national women's organiser. Of the 252 delegates to the Communist Unity convention in 1920, only fiftenn were women. Three other well-known women with long service to the labour and women's movement were nominated for the Executive Committee alongside Montefiore. These were Melvina Walker, Nora Smythe (both activists in the East London Federation of Suffragettes) and Cedar Paul (an activist in the Plebs League). What is surprising is that ,despite this wealth of talent, only Montefiore was elected.

On an international level, attitudes to women were far in advance of the newly formed CPGB. The third Comintern congress in 1921 adopted a lengthy document entitled *Methods and Forms of Work among Communist Party Women: Theses.* It instructed all communist parties to pay much closer attention to involving women in the struggle for socialism. Its enlightened outlook was clearly influenced by the pioneering policy and practice of the Zhenodtel – the Soviet Union's feminist movement. As an example of this forward thinking attitude, the Comintern argued that:

> 'The vote does not destroy the prime cause of women's enslavement in the family and society…. …..But as long as the proletarian woman remains economically dependent upon the capitalist boss and her husband, the breadwinner, and in the absence of comprehensive measures to protect motherhood and childhood and provide socialised child-care and education, this cannot equalise the position of women in marriage or solve the problem of relationships between the sexes.'

Clearly the CPGB did not comply with this revolutionary women's policy. For this it was subjected to outspoken criticism at the 4th Comintern Congress in 1922. Clara Zetkin led the attack on the CPGB:

> 'In England, organisation for conducting systematic agitation among the feminine proletariat is altogether lacking. The Communist Party of Great Britain excused itself by its weakness, and has continually refused or postponed the setting up of a special body for systematic agitation among women. All the exhortation of the International Women's Secretariat have been in vain. No Women's Secretariat has been established: the only thing that has been done is the appointment of a women comrade as general Party agitator…. The attitude of the Executive of the Communist Party of Great Britain is, in my opinion, not only an outcome of its financial weakness, but partly also to its youth and the shortcomings resulting from it. I do not want to submit the Party to severe criticism here… .The British section of the International cannot remain indifferent to the fact that in its country many millions of proletarian women are organised in women's suffrage societies, women's trade unions of the old type, in consumers' co-operatives, in the Labour Party and in the Independent Labour Party. It behoves the Communist Party to struggle with all these organisations for the capture of the minds, the hearts, the will power and the actions of the proletarian women. Therefore it will in the long run realise the necessity for the organisation of special organs by means of which it will be able to organise and train the Communist women within the Party, and make the proletarian women outside the Party willing fighters for the interests of their class.'

So, the advanced wing of the international communist movement had shown the way in its rejection of the dominant ideology which had for centuries kept women 'in their place'. Clearly, the CPGB had a great deal of work to do to catch up. Its first 20 years witnessed uneven, although sometimes energetic, campaigning addressed to women members and supporters. Its progress was marred by the prevalent hostility to 'bourgeois feminism'. In practice this meant an acceptance of the view that women's struggle was separate and secondary to the class struggle. Thus the early Comintern advice to establish women's structures within the Party and to adapt its campaigns to incorporate a women's agenda, was tacitly precluded in practice.

In the so-called Third Period 1928-32 (the Comintern's *Class against Class* policy), there was, briefly, a change of orientation. The 1930 CPGB Congress adopted a resolution stating:

> 'The question of women's work …has been much neglected by the Party and must be taken up with the utmost energy'.

This change was influenced by the militancy of women textile workers, especially those in the women dominated trades of weaving and woollens. Here women were taking strike action against the Bedaux system's 'scientific' labour intensification methods which were used extensively to maintain profits especially during the great depression of 1929-31. A party pamphlet published in in 1930 reflected on the current state of women's employment, the effect of government policies and the decline of the staple industries. It welcomed the fact that 'women are on the march' (the title of the pamphlet). It boldly stated that:

'For generations working class women have been kept in the background, held back by the stupid idea that 'women's place is in the home', although millions of women are thrust into industry and are the most exploited of workers.'

It went on to argue that Ramsay MacDonald's minority Labour government (1929-1931) had done nothing to alleviate unemployment. For women workers, this was a particular disaster because they received much reduced or no unemployment benefit. The 'solution' offered by the Labour government was that such women should choose between entering domestic service or the workhouse.

The 'march of the women' was a reality in 1928. Beth Turner, the Communist Party's national women's organiser, arranged and led a March of the Women on International Women's Day that year. She said that it marked a landmark in the history of British working women because, in her words:

'For the first time in their lives, many women broke away from the traditions that in the past had chained them in silent submissive slavery to the factory or the drudgery of poverty-stricken homes, and came out in the streets to protest against the infamous conditions inflicted on them and their children by British capitalism. Three hundred of them travelled from Yorkshire, Lancashire, Nottinghamshire, Durham and South Wales under conditions of extreme discomfort, and at the cost of tremendous sacrifice, in order to register that protest in London – the heart of the Empire and the seat of the capitalist government.'

A similar march was organised by the Communist Party in the textile areas of Yorkshire. The women then travelled by train to London for the 1930 May Day rally in Hyde Park.

Several communist women played a prominent role in the 1920s and 1930s in the fight both against unemployment and the rise of fascism. Lillian Thring and Maud Brown were both well-known in the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM). Lillian Thring edited the NUWM journal *Out of Work*. Isobel Brown, later the CPGB's national women's organiser, had attended the Lenin School and was a key figure in the 'Aid Spain' campaign. Ellen Wilkinson was a foundation member of the CPGB and, in 1921 attended the inaugural conference of the Red International of Labour Unions in Moscow. She was still a Communist Party member when elected to Manchester City Council in 1923 on a Labour ticket. She left the party in 1924 when she was elected as an MP for Middlesbrough East. Later, in 1935, as the MP for Jarrow, she was one of the organisers of the 1936 Jarrow march protesting against mass unemployment. Jesse Eden, an outstanding trade union activist in Birmingham, was elected to the Party's Central Committee in 1935.

Whilst it is important to acknowledge the often forgotten contribution of these and many other remarkable communist women, the impact of their work was more significant in the labour movement rather than in the Communist Party itself. The brief ideological challenge to 'women's place' in the Party was not sustained. The inclusion of a 'Home Page' in the *Daily Worker* from 1937 is testimony to this reversion. It was clearly a page addressed to women and included items such as recipes, knitting patterns, advice on baby care and other womanly/wifely issues.

It was not until 1943 that the party established a National Women's Advisory Council. Its secretary was Tamara Rust. Whilst, as we have seen, women's organisers had been

appointed since 1920, this, on its own, did not betoken systematic attention to work among women outside or inside the party. However, during the popular front and war years, reflecting societal changes, attitudes to women were modified. Many trade unions displayed opposition to women's entry into 'male jobs' and were reluctant to admit women members into their unions. The Communist Party was quick to challenge such behaviour. *Clear the Lines*, a Party pamphlet published in 1943, was particularly critical of the treatment of women by the railway unions. These unions campaigned for women's entry into the industry to be limited to 'starting grades' only. Using its influence in the shop stewards' movement, the Party argued for the mass unionisation of women as the only way to combat male prejudice. The first ever conference of women shop stewards was held in London in 1941. Another was held in Birmingham in 1942. Many of the women shop stewards were Party members. These included Peggy McIver (later Aprahamian), a shop steward at Standard Telephones. Peggy Stanton was convenor at West London Aircraft. Muriel Rayment was a shop steward at EMI, West Middlesex and Agnes McLean at Rolls Royce.

Responding to the attendant problems of the mass mobilisation of women, the CPGB played a leading role voicing women's concerns through the mechanism of women's parliaments. In 1942, the first parliament met at the Bedford Music Hall in London. It discussed training and part time workers' rights, the provision of nurseries and works canteens in factories but it also found time to make clear its support for a Second Front. A fourth meeting of the Women's parliament, despite a campaign by the TUC to ensure unions did not get involved, brought together, 800 delegates (November 1943) with 255 directly elected by factory committees. Women's parliaments were not confined to London – they were also held in Scotland, Wales, Yorkshire and Lancashire.

As we have seen in a previous section, the accepted notion of 'women's place' was never far from the surface. It re-asserted itself with renewed vigour after 1945, resulting in the Labour government's abandonment of most of the gains made by women during the war. The Communist Party was not immune from the seepage of this patriarchal ideology. It continued to fight for women's rights to pay parity and equal treatment but failed to capitalise on the potential which had been created by women's mass mobilisation. The capitalist state's post war alternative for women workers was ideologically driven. It sought to resolve the conflict between women's dual roles – at work and in the home – through the 'concession' of part-time work. This shallow expedient, then as now, perpetuated women's super-exploitation in the interests of capitalism.

After the war, Communist women were actively involved in the establishment of the National Assembly of Women (NAW). This organisation was founded on 8th March 1952 at St Pancras Town Hall, London. It brought together over 1,390 women from across the country and from many walks of life who wanted to preserve the social provision enacted for women during the war and were determined to fight for women's political, social and economic rights. They recognised that the only way of consolidating and extending women's rights and children's well-being was through peaceful international co-existence. Later, in the 1980s, the title of the NAW journal, *Sisters,* was an acronym for its underlying mission – sisterhood and international solidarity to end racism and sexism. However, in the early years, the NAW's focus was on peace and internationalism and the rights of women and children. It was, and remains, an affiliate of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), which, until their collapse, included the socialist countries of Eastern Europe.

By the 1970s the impact of the women's liberation movement (WLM) had a slow but

profound effect on the labour movement in general and the Communist Party in particular. The CPGB women's advisory committee was well established by this time. It was the site of the major debates initiated by the second wave women's movement. The WLM was founded on versions of feminist theory which attempted to analyse the causes and manifestation of women's oppression. A powerful challenge was launched against the age-old presumption of male supremacy within the labour market, the labour movement, the family, politics and social life. The magazine *Red Rag*, published without a King Street licence, reached beyond communist circles on a socialist-feminist platform, but at the same time antagonised some of the older activists within its women's department. The official women's journal, *Link*, did, however, come to embrace some of these concerns and it recorded the not insubstantial communist inputs into campaigns over abortion law, employment rights and the whole gamut of feminist politics.

In the period up to the liquidation of the CPGB, the party saw three women's organisers – Jean Styles, Rosemary Small and Maggie Bowden. All had to adapt to the twin challenges of the WLM and the emergence of Eurocommunism. Within the CPGB these movements often intersected. Both of them asked the right questions but, Eurocommunists especially, gave the wrong answers. The confusion was compounded in 1977 with the adoption of the highly contested new edition of the *British Road to Socialism*. This edition embraced the seemingly innocuous concept of a 'broad democratic alliance' in place of the 1968 formulation of an 'anti-monopoly alliance'. At one level, for women, this was a welcome, albeit belated, recognition of inherent sexism within the left and the role of the women's movement in combatting it. However, implicit within the new formulation was the acceptance of the theory of intersectionality, discussed in a previous section. Thus although the CPGB in its death throes was beginning to jettison the patriarchal attitudes which had beset the labour movement for so long, it was hamstrung by an inadequate theory which projected its practice into a cul de sac.

CPB and women

It was not until the Communist Party of Britain (CPB) was founded in 1988 that a Marxist feminist theory of women's oppression slowly emerged which inspired its praxis in the form of a *Charter for Women*. In 1990, the CPB began the process of developing a Marxist feminist analysis of women's oppression and super-exploitation. This theory informs the CPB's campaigning work, notably through the *Charter for Women*, which was adopted by the 2002 party congress and launched in the labour movement in 2004. The aim of the *Charter* was, and remains, to inspire a new and inclusive socialist feminist theory and practice that will motivate a new generation of women activists and revitalise the fight for women's liberation. It suggests that one of the ways of doing this is to unite around a campaigning programme as outlined in the *Charter for Women*. The *Charter* does not offer new policy but instead seeks to bring together the key demands for which progressive women are fighting in various arenas. It covers three broad areas: social policy, the labour market and the labour movement. It raises the main progressive concerns/ campaigning points for which women have fought under each of the three themes. The aim was to ensure that it would be discussed, adopted and promoted by all progressive women's groups and organisations. The success of this endeavour was realised by 2012, in that by then the campaign around the *Charter* had secured the affiliation of 27 trade unions (including 18 national unions) and trades councils. It has been re-launched in 2020 under the aegis of the NAW. (The newly revised *Charter*

can be found at the end of this pamphlet.)

Communists have paved the way in opposing a divisive form of identity politics which seeks to fracture and undermine the mobilisation of women and, at the same time, malignly contests socialist feminist theory and practice. Post-modern identity politics, in particular its newest form – self-identity – focuses on individual rights. This has led to women's collective rights being undermined and threatened. We have engaged in the present debate around self-identification and have exposed the confusion arising from the mistaken conflation of "sex" and "gender". Communists challenge and oppose the specific prejudicial discrimination faced by trans people, but argue that the just cause of the trans community is not best served by undermining resistance to the centuries-old oppression of women as a biological sex.

The epithet 'woke' is often incorrectly used to describe identity politics. However, such a term fails to do justice to the gravity of the political and cultural shift now infecting society. Class politics is based on an understanding that there is a conflict between labour and capital in which those who sell their labour power for a wage are exploited by those who buy it. This is central to the capitalist mode of production. But this is not the concern of identity politics. The version of identity politics which is most damaging steps beyond the collective identity of historically marginalised sections of the population and has, in the 20th century, given rise to important liberation movements, chiefly of women, black people, gays and lesbians. But identity politics turns its back on such collective movements for social change. It renounces class and collectivism in favour of individual self-identity. It has traversed the boundaries of whacky theories to become a mainstream narrative which has permeated all aspects of civil society, including the labour movement.

For women, the result of identity politics is that their collective rights as a group are currently being undermined through the weaponisation of a post-modern identity politics, focused solely on the rights of individuals. Communists recognise that women's rights and protections, fought for and won through struggles over the last two centuries, are now facing sustained and serious ideological attack. This has been the result of the growth and ascendancy of neoliberalism and its accompanying ideological attack on collective identity and unified class struggle. We are therefore committed to defending existing, albeit inadequate, rights for women, as well as campaigning to greatly extend them.

This entails, at a very minimum, retaining reserved and separate spaces and distinct services to protect women from violence and abuse, as well as defending and promoting the sex-based rights and protections of women and girls. We are committed to ensure that our members and indeed, the labour movement, clearly understand the distinction between sex and gender, and the relationship between oppression and exploitation in Britain and around the world.

The women's movement today

The 55th Congress of the Communist Party of Britain was held in London on 17th and 18th November 2018. The Congress passed a historic resolution on *Women and Gender*. This resolution was passed with overwhelming support from delegates to the Congress. In accordance with our democratic centralist practice, this resolution has thus become the policy of the Communist Party.

Once passed, the CPB became the first political party, or labour movement organisation, in Britain to have a Marxist and class-based position on the subject of women

and gender. It has also marked the beginning of building a branch education programme and internal party discussion on sex and gender, focusing on the distinction between them, and the relationship between women's oppression and exploitation in Britain and around the world.

'Congress reasserts its commitment to women's emancipation. This commitment must be accompanied by robust campaigning based on a Marxist understanding that women are oppressed and that the source of their oppression is class exploitation. Women's biological sex, reinforced by gender stereotyping, means that they face a double burden in their role as workers in social production and in their position in the private role of domestic reproduction. This double burden accounts for the super-exploitation of women.

Congress opposes all forms of discrimination. In doing so, Congress recognises that the challenge to any form of discrimination should not impinge upon or impede the struggle of women to end oppression.

Congress recognises that women's rights and protections, fought for and won through struggles over the last two centuries, are now facing sustained ideological attack. This has been the result of the growth and ascendency of neoliberal ideas and philosophy across a range of intellectual fields over the past four decades. Post-modern identity politics, focusing on individual rights, have seen women's collective rights threatened and undermined.

We oppose this divisive form of identity politics which seeks to fracture and contest socialist feminist theory and practice. The road to socialism will be unattainable without an understanding of the link between women's oppression and class exploitation.

We must be deeply concerned at the divisive debate around self-identification, which conflates 'sex' and 'gender', and which could threaten the rights of women and girls. The need to distinguish between discrimination of trans people and oppression of women highlights the need for Congress to support:

• Evidence based discussion to ensure protections for women on the grounds of their sex, which must remain enshrined in the 2010 Equality Act.

• Retaining reserved and separate spaces and distinctive services to protect women from violence and abuse.

Congress commits to:

• Defend and promote the sex-based rights and protections of women and girls

• Equip Party members to fight for this within the trade union movement by developing a branch education programme and inner party discussions on sex and gender, focusing on the distinction between them, and the relationship between oppression and exploitation in Britain and around the world.'

Marx and Engels wrote in *The German Ideology* that the ruling ideas in any society are those of the ruling class. Self-identity, as an ideological construct, has become just this: a ruling ideology and thus its theory and practice have permeated deeply into civil society including the labour movement. This ideology now poses in practice as an egalitarian policy. We regret that many sections of the labour movement appear not to recognise the fallacy of such pseudo-egalitarianism. The ideology of self-identity serves not only to impede the struggle for women's rights, but also undermines a class understanding of the nature of capitalism and the necessity for unity in struggle.

As communists we will ensure that this analysis is respectfully discussed in the labour movement, in the hope that unhelpful policies might be reversed. Communists recognise that the oppression of women, and of people of colour, is fundamental to the maintenance of class society, and the struggle to overcome this is not only central to the class struggle, but crucial for its success.

The struggle ahead: a marxist-feminist perspective

The road to socialism will be unattainable without an understanding of the link between women's oppression and class exploitation. A regenerated women's movement is a vital core element in such a struggle. The building of a broad-based women's movement and a strengthened labour movement which rejects capitalist ideology must go hand in hand. However, without a robust renewal of Marxist-feminist theory, which challenges the dominant ideology of identity politics, such a project will remain a distant vision.

The fundamental and most important principle underlying the Marxist analysis of the 'woman question' is that the oppression of women is rooted in class exploitation. The super-exploitation of women as workers and their oppression as women is a fundamental prerequisite for the operation of capitalism – economically, politically and ideologically. Hence, the eradication of class exploitation is the essential precondition for the liberation of women. Socialism provides the only means by which the most complete form of class exploitation (*i.e.* that represented by the capitalist system), can be ended. Hence, with unavoidable and irrefutable logic, we must face the fact that our long-term goal has to be a socialist system of society. There is no other choice.

From the foregoing we are able to conclude that women have the particular 'distinction' of suffering oppression and super-exploitation within class society – a double burden which reaches its 'highest' form within capitalist society. This being so, communists draw the inescapable conclusion that the pre-condition for the liberation of women must lie in the ending of class society itself.

Socialists, from Marx onwards, have understood that the struggle between classes has always been the motor of social change and that, in the capitalist epoch, the class rule of the bourgeoisie will only be ended by the efforts of the working class. It would thus be tempting for women to allow history to take its course, content in the knowledge that our time will come after the revolution.

As communists we must reject such a sterile and simplistic view of Marxism which confines women to the role of an audience in the drama of life. But whilst rejecting such a simplistic view we must not, as many radical (even socialist) feminists have done, lose sight for one moment of the basic truth of the point (elaborated elsewhere) that the basis of all oppression is founded in the material reality of class exploitation.

The practical conclusion to be drawn from this is that the progress of women's liberation is inextricably linked to the progress of the class struggle itself. The history of the labour movement in this country and elsewhere has shown that the level of class consciousness at any given moment is a crucial factor in determining the extent to which women's oppression is challenged. But whilst this is a crucial factor, it is not the only determinant. Equally important is a powerful movement among women themselves as a focus for articulating our oppression. Both these two movements – a strong and class conscious labour movement and a broad-based women's movement – are essential together as the twin pillars of the challenge to women's oppression and super-exploitation.

Before going on to examine how, in practice, these two movements can and should work separately and together for the good of women, let us look at some possible objections to such a project. It has been argued that the labour movement alone should be the vehicle to represent women's interests. Leaving aside for the moment the objection that over its history the labour movement has been riddled by male domination, let us imagine an ideal labour movement in which women are participating fully at every level and as a consequence are exercising a real influence. In such an, as yet, imaginary situation with a labour movement fully capable of articulating women's demands, would there still be the need for a separate women's movement?

Firstly, it must be said that there is little chance of the labour movement arriving at such a happy position without the presence of a strong women's movement in the first place. Second, there is no reason to suppose that all women would find a comfortable home in any labour movement organisation. Women are not a class; as an oppressed group they cross class boundaries, although the vast majority amongst us who are exploited are, of course, part of the working class.

Many of the demands women make as women, eg, for freely available rights to abortion, for an end to male violence, cut across class, although it is true that such demands are more keenly felt by those women (the majority) who cannot buy their way out of their difficulties. It is also true to say that the vast majority of women (or men come to that) are not socialists and certainly do not identify the capitalist system as the source of their difficulties. Hence, while women may be prepared to fight around 'women's issues', they would be unconvinced of the necessity to link this to the wider interests of the labour movement and to the struggle for social change in general.

A women's movement is necessary therefore to provide the means by which women can be drawn together from their varied social backgrounds to pursue those many interests which they share as women. This remains true whether or not the labour movement is sufficiently enlightened also to pursue such matters. Indeed, Lenin observed that even when the material basis for women's oppression had been removed – that is in a socialist society – a women's movement would still be necessary.

Having thus established the need for a broad-based women's movement – even in the imaginary ideal conditions of an ideal labour movement – how much more necessary is it for women to organise themselves in the current reality of a labour movement which pays scant and inconsistent attention to our needs. This does not mean that socialists should write off the labour movement as an unchangeable male-dominated edifice. For socialists, the goal has to be the forging of working class unity based on a recognition of its diversity; a diversity founded principally on race and gender. Black people and women are not the optional extras to be pulled off the subs' bench when the game needs a boost. They are part of the very fabric of the working class itself, and hence must be an integral part of the workers' movement if it is to get anywhere at all.

So far, we beg the question of the precise nature of the women's movement and the role of communist women within it. But now we must address the question posed by radical feminists who argue that the women's movement on its own, separate from the labour movement, is both necessary and sufficient to accomplish women's liberation. After all; they argue, if women are not a class but can be drawn together through their common interests as women, why should they need the working class and its organisations? It is quite true that the first prerequisite of any oppressed group is to understand and confront its oppression

through its own self organisation. But this alone is insufficient to eradicate oppression. We have tried to show thus far that the basis of women's oppression is class exploitation. Hence, the challenge to oppression, like it or not, can never be neatly confined. It always has wider implications within society as a whole. If this is true at the first level of identifying and challenging oppression, then how much more is it the case if the challenge is to be successful? In other words, the task is long and hard and women will find that they cannot go it alone if they are to win more than just the gaining of a concession or two. Women need allies, both from other oppressed groups and also, most importantly, from the working class whose basic objective interest lies in challenging class exploitation, the root of all oppression. For women and for black people this approach is even more salient since the vast majority are themselves the victims of super-exploitation. Their oppression and exploitation are fundamentally linked; to deny such a link makes a real challenge to racism and sexism virtually impossible.

This approach, which recognises oppression but at the same time refuses to abstract its victims from class society, is one which is continually obscured both by elements within the labour movement and in the women's movement. There will be no easy or spontaneous eradication of divisive ideas and strategies which hold back the liberation of women, but communists have a special role to play in two areas in particular.

Firstly, communist women must work to build a broad-based women's organisation capable of challenging male supremacist ideas and practices and campaigning on the kind of issues raised in this pamphlet. Based round the *Charter for Women*, a regenerated women's movement must have black and white working class women as its leadership and build a mass base among those women who have been overlooked in previous attempts at women's organisation. Because of its overwhelmingly (although not exclusively) working class composition, such a movement would have no difficulty in identifying and linking with the struggles of male workers, both black and white. In addition, by the patient and non-sectarian endeavours of communist women, such a women's movement would be drawn ultimately to link women's oppression with the continued existence of capitalism. This does not mean that the pre-condition for participation in the movement is the acceptance of socialist ideas, but it does mean that communist women, rather than bowing to spontaneity, must attempt to link to all the day-today struggles to the wider class struggle for complete social transformation. Such a project only becomes sectarian when the issues that the movement tackles are not perceived to be important in their own right.

Second, communists have to ensure that the labour movement itself takes up the issues raised by women, not as an optional extra but as in integral aspect of every agenda. This must mean that the fight currently being waged to ensure women's representation at all levels of all labour movement organisations and that trade unions take up and campaign around the demands of the *Charter for Women*, must be pursued vigorously even when the going gets tough and the climate is hostile. The price for women's participation is the exercise of power in proportion to our numbers. Women can no longer be counted on to pay their dues and act as voting fodder. The labour movement not only betrays women, but also weakens itself if it refuses to recognise these issues and continues to be divided by the historical seepage of capitalist values on race and sex lines. However, it would be an equal betrayal if the women's movement retreated into separatism and ignored, for whatever reason, the labour movement. These two projects – the building of a broad-based women's movement and a labour movement which rejects capitalist ideology must go hand in hand. Some men might

welcome women's issues being hived off into a separate movement. This cannot be tolerated. Women's interests are best served both by a separate movement for women and by a labour movement with massive female involvement. Unity is achieved not by denying the differences based on inequality, but by acknowledging them in order to eradicate their causes. By these means we create conditions whereby our long-term goal – socialism – can be achieved.

This does not mean that every participant in the struggle for women's liberation must be a socialist, but it does mean that the most class conscious elements in that struggle will have – from necessity rather than personal choice – continually to link the question of oppression to that of exploitation. This will have to be done not in a sectarian spirit of imposing an alien philosophy from the outside, but rather from the standpoint of reclaiming feminism from those who would take it down sectional blind alleys in the interests of those comparatively few women who stand to gain from constant compromise with capital. To assert that our goal is socialism is not for one moment to belittle the importance of uniting women in common causes to attack injustice and win reforms. Indeed our socialist objective would be unattainable forever without such daily struggle, for it is precisely through such a struggle and the sisterhood and confidence engendered by it, that consciousness is raised not only in relation to women, but about the nature of society in general.

It is not automatic, however, that consciousness raised in struggle leads to conclusions which serve the best interests of the oppressed. This pamphlet has exposed some expressions of false consciousness which have emanated both from the women's movement and from the labour movement and which have, in their turn, led to divisive or diversionary practices. So, although consciousness is raised through struggle, the quality of that consciousness is the product of the battle of ideas. It is in this arena that communists and socialists have a unique contribution to make, a contribution which, no matter how valid, will gain acceptance only if its contributors are fully identified with the day-to-day struggle itself.

We thus outline a perspective for advancing the cause of women's liberation, linking the building of a broad-based women's movement with a progressive, anti-racist and anti-sexist labour movement. Such a project, in which communists will play a leading role, will be fraught with difficulties, but its final accomplishment is not an end in itself, rather a means to an end. It is vitally necessary, in conclusion, to remind ourselves of our long-term goal lest it become obscured by the immediate tactical and strategic tasks that lie ahead. The fundamental and most important principle underlying the Marxist analysis of the 'woman question' outlined in this pamphlet is that the oppression of women is rooted in class exploitation. Hence the eradication of class exploitation is the essential precondition for the liberation of women. Socialism provides the only means by which the most complete form of class exploitation (*i.e,* that represented by the capitalist system), can be ended. Hence ,with unavoidable and irrefutable logic, we must face the fact that our liberation can only be achieved in a socialist system of society. There is no other choice.

It is in this spirit that the Communist Party of Britain offers this analysis of women and the class struggle. We do so, not from the stand-point of self-righteous and lofty observers removed from the women's movement, but rather as class conscious feminists, fully immersed in the battle against women's oppression. We are not the self-appointed leaders of the movement, but through our theory and practice offer a perspective to end oppression forever: that is why we proudly proclaim – our goal is socialism!

A Charter for Women

In society

■ Highlight the feminisation of poverty and campaign to reverse cuts in welfare state and public services.
■ Campaign for decent local authority grant funding for voluntary organisations that campaign for women's equality.
■ Expose the ideologies that are used to perpetuate women's inequality (for example, the notion of 'family values' and the 'family wage').
■ Draw attention to the role of the media and other cultural agencies in shaping gender identities that reinforce the unequal relationships between men and women.
■ Campaign for greater support for lone mothers, carers and women subjected to domestic violence, coercive behaviour and other violence.
■ End the discrimination of Lesbian, Bisexual and Trans women.
■ Improve access and rights to abortion.
■ Campaign for Period Dignity with free period products available in workplaces and public buildings. Period products to be exempt from VAT.
■ Ensure that women and girls are entitled to the full range of free and high quality educational provision (from nursery to university) and subject choice.
■ Campaign for gender sensitive occupational health and safety, personal protective equipment, work stations and environments designed by and for women.
■ End women pensioner poverty by reducing the state pension age to 60 and increasing the state pension in line with average earnings.
■ The principle of women only spaces to be upheld and where necessary extended. Gender neutral spaces to be in addition to women's spaces.
■ Maintain the exemptions in the Equality Act that allow for single sex services and the requirement that women only can apply for specified jobs.
■ Ensure that women have the absolute right to self-organisation as women.
■ Campaign for access to justice for women, with the restoration of legal aid.
■ End modern day slavery, people trafficking and racist immigration laws.
■ Extend sisterhood and solidarity to our sisters internationally in recognition that women across the world face sex-based discrimination.

At work

■ Campaign to end institutional and other forms of racism and ensure that the status and pay of black women workers is a bargaining priority.
■ Campaign to reduce the gender pay gap and highlight its causes.
■ End job segregation by improving access to apprenticeships, training and opportunities for women in non-traditional areas.
■ Campaign to ensure that unions fight more equal value claims through the mechanism of collective bargaining.
■ Campaign to change equal pay law to permit 'class action' (group claims) and remove employer 'get out' clauses. Strengthen the legislation to ensure employers are required to be open and transparent with workers.
■ Campaign to raise the level of national minimum wage to at least half, and rising to at least two-thirds of male median earnings.
■ Demand statutory pay audits in the public and private sector and remedial action taken.
■ Equalise opportunities and improve conditions for women workers.
■ Demand full-time rights for part-time workers.
■ Root out bullying and sexual harassment.
■ End casualisation and especially zero hours contracts.
■ Reduce job segregation by providing training opportunities for women in non-traditional areas.
■ Campaign for a fully funded national child care service with affordable child care including pre-, after-school and holiday provision.
■ Campaign for a shorter working week for all and rights to flexible working.
■ Improve maternity leave and pay, including properly paid paternity leave.
■ Ensure that women do not suffer disproportionately from the impact of robotics and artificial intelligence in the workplace.

In the labour movement

■ Tackle the under-representation of women in the labour and trade union movement structures by proportionality and other measures.
■ Campaign to maintain and extend women's self-organisation in trade unions.
■ Campaign for the right to organise a trade union, statutory rights for union equality reps and the right to take industrial action.
■ Campaign for sectoral collective bargaining, delivered through a Ministry of Labour, with an oversight of ensuring the gender pay gap is closed.
■ Ensure the accountability of women's structures to women.
■ Maintain and extend women's committees, women's courses and other measures to ensure that women's issues/concerns are collectively articulated and actioned.
■ Campaign to raise the profile of the TUC, STUC and Welsh TUC's women's conferences as the 'parliaments of working women'.
■ Campaign for:
- A Ministry for Women's Equality
- A fully funded Equality & Human Rights Commission with powers to take action when the Equality Act is breached
- Restoration of the Women's National Commission

Ensure that by these means women's collective demands are not only heard but acted upon

Women and Class
Mary Davis

The short text has been at the centre of dispute and analysis in the working class, labour and socialist movement for three decades.

Over four editions and constant reprintings it has informed the debates in the trade union movement, animated discussions in academic circles, been fiercely contested and defended in the women's movement and has educated successive waves of young communists, socialists and trade unionists.

Mary Davis brings to these renewed debates a marxist analysis of the role of women in class society, provides a sharply polemical introduction to competing conceptions of feminist theory and dissects the ways in which women's work in class society is experienced as both oppression and exploitation.

In a newly revised section she provides a firm repudiation of new forms of idealist thinkingabout sex, gender and identity that constitute a barrier to practical action and materialist thought

Mary Davis FRSA is visiting professor of Labour History at Royal Holloway University of London. She has written, broadcast and lectured widely on women's history, labour history, imperialism and racism. She is a former member of the University and College Union national executive and the TUC women's committee She is a founder member of the Sylvia Pankhurst Memorial Committee and chairs the Charter for Women. She was awarded the TUC Women's Gold Badge in 2010 for services to trade unionism. She is also a former member of the Communist Party's executive committee and the party's national women's organiser. Her books include *Comrade or Brother? A History of the British Labour Movement 1789-1951* (1993), *Sylvia Pankhurst: A Life in Radical Politics* (1999) and *Fashioning a New World: A History of the Woodcraft Folk* (2000).

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