

# Marxism, Feminism & Women's Liberation

Despite all the international conferences and “universal declarations” in favor of female equality, the lives of most women around the world remain confined by prejudice and social oppression. The means by which male supremacy is enforced vary considerably from one society to another (and between social classes within each society), but everywhere men are taught to regard themselves as superior, and women are taught to accept this. Very few women have access to power and privilege except via their connection to a man. Most women in the paid labor force are subject to the double burden of domestic and wage slavery. According to the United Nations, women perform two-thirds of the world's work, and produce about 45 percent of the world's food—yet they receive merely ten percent of the income, and own only one percent of the property (cited by Marilyn French in *The War Against Women*, 1992).

From its inception, the Marxist movement has championed female equality and women's rights, while regarding women's oppression (like racial, national and other forms of special oppression) as something that cannot be eradicated without overturning the capitalist social system that nurtures and sustains it. Marxists assert that women's liberation is bound up with the struggle against capitalism because, in the final analysis, sexual oppression serves the *material interests* of the ruling class (see box on page 37).

While Marxists and feminists often find themselves on the same side in struggles for women's rights, they hold two fundamentally incompatible worldviews. Feminism is an ideology premised on the idea that the fundamental division in human society is between the sexes, rather than between social classes. Feminist ideologues consequently see the struggle for female equality as separate from the fight for socialism, which many dismiss as merely an alternative form of “patriarchal” rule.

In the past several decades, feminist writers and academics have drawn attention to the variety and extent of male supremacist practices in contemporary society. They have described the mechanisms by which female subordination is inculcated, normalized and reinforced through everything from fairy tales to television advertising. Feminists have taken the lead in exposing many of the pathological manifestations of sexism in private life: from sexual harassment to rape and domestic violence. Prior to the resurgence of the women's movement in the late 1960s, these issues received little attention from either liberal or leftist social critics. Feminists have also been active in international campaigns against female genital mutilation in Africa, female infanticide in Asia, and the imposition of the veil in the Islamic world.

Yet while feminist analysis is often useful in raising awareness of the pervasiveness of sexism in capitalist society, it typically fails to make a connection between male supremacy and the system of class domination which underlies it.

Marxists maintain that class conflict is the motor force of history, and reject the notion that there are irreconcilable differences between the interests of men and women. But we do not deny that men are the agents of women's oppression, or that, within the framework of existing social relations, men “benefit” from it, both in material and psychological terms. Yet the benefits that most men derive from women's inequality are petty, hollow and transitory, and the costs that accompany them are substantial.

Job-trusting and female exclusionism, undervaluation of traditionally “female” work, and sex-based pay differentials, while appearing to benefit the men who are better paid and have more job security, in fact exert downward pressure on wages generally. This phenomenon was explained by Frieda Miller, director of the U.S. Women's Bureau shortly after the Second World War:

“It is an axiom of wage theory that when large numbers of workers can be hired at lower rates of pay than those prevailing at any given time, the competition of such persons for jobs results either in the displacement of the higher paid workers or in the acceptance of lower rates by those workers. Over a period of time this pressure tends to depress all wage levels, and unless this normal course is averted by direct action it results eventually in lower levels of earning for all, with a resulting reduction in purchasing power and in standards of living. Because of their new war-born training and skills, women are, as never before, in a position to be used by unscrupulous employers as wage cutters.”

—U.S. Women's Bureau *Bulletin* No. 224, 1948 (quoted by Nancy Reeves in “Women at Work,” in *American Labor in Mid-Passage*, 1959)

The same applies to wage discrimination against immigrants, youth, racial minorities, or any other sector of the workforce. In addition to lowering wage rates, male chauvinism—like racism, nationalism, homophobia and other backward ideologies—obscures the mechanisms of social control, and divides those at the bottom against each other, thereby providing a bulwark for a hierarchial and intrinsically oppressive social system.

The Marxist strategy of uniting all those exploited and oppressed by capitalism is sharply counterposed to the reactionary utopia of a universal “sisterhood,” uniting women across class lines. While it is true that female oppression is a trans-class phenomenon that affects *all* women, not merely those who are poor or working-class, the degree of oppression and its consequences are

qualitatively different for members of different social classes. The privileges and material benefits enjoyed by ruling-class women give them a powerful interest in preserving the existing social order. Their pampered existence is paid for by the superexploitation of their “sisters” in Third World sweatshops. The only way in which female unity can be built across class lines is by subordinating the interests of poor, black and working-class women to those of their bourgeois “sisters.”

### Origins of ‘Second Wave’ Feminism

Today’s feminists often refer to themselves as belonging to the “Second Wave”—“First Wave” feminists were those who fought for access to higher education, equal property rights and the vote prior to the First World War. “Second Wave” feminism is often dated from the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan’s 1963 bestseller, which contrasted the ideology of “femininity” with the reality of women’s lives. In 1966 Friedan founded the National Organization for Women (NOW), a liberal women’s rights organization, based on professional and career women, committed to “bring[ing] women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now....” NOW remains the largest feminist organization in the U.S., but its appeal is limited by its role as a pressure group and unofficial Democratic Party auxiliary.

Another, more radical, strain of contemporary feminism emerged from the American “Women’s Liberation Movement” of the late 1960s. Many prominent leaders of the New Left women’s movement were veterans of the earlier Civil Rights Movement against racial segregation in the Southern states. They were among the thousands of idealistic youth who had gone South to participate in the “Freedom Summers” of the mid-1960s, and were radicalized through exposure to the brutal realities of American capitalism.

By the late 1960s, many women in the New Left began to complain that their male comrades’ rhetorical advocacy of liberation, equality and solidarity contrasted sharply with their experiences in the “movement.” These feelings were articulated by Marlene Dixon, a young radical sociology professor:

“Young women have increasingly rebelled not only against passivity and dependency in their relationships but also against the notion that they must function as sexual objects, being defined in purely sexual rather than human terms, and being forced to package and sell themselves as commodities on the sex market.”

“The very stereotypes that express the society’s belief in the biological inferiority of women recall the images used to justify the oppression of blacks. The nature of women, like that of slaves, is depicted as dependent, incapable of reasoned thought, childlike in its simplicity and warmth, martyred in the role of mother, and mystical in the role of sexual partner. In its benevolent form, the inferior position of women results in paternalism; in its malevolent form, a domestic tyranny which can be unbelievably brutal.”

—“Why Women’s Liberation?,” *Ramparts*,  
December 1969

### Gloria Steinem: Sisterhood & the CIA

In the early days of the Women’s Liberation Movement, a division emerged between those who saw the fight for female equality as one aspect of a broader struggle against all oppression, and those who emphasized female solidarity and the necessity to remain organizationally and politically “autonomous” from other social forces.

While many early leaders of the “Second Wave” had had their initial political experience in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left, others had less honorable pasts. Gloria Steinem, the original editor of *Ms.*, America’s largest-circulation feminist magazine, had worked with the CIA in the 1950s. She was involved in the operation of a front group “which financed Americans attending world youth festivals largely dominated by the Soviet Union.” According to Sheila Tobias, an unwitting participant on one such trip (who later taught women’s studies at Cornell University), the CIA:

“was interested in spying on the American delegates to find out who in the United States was a Trotskyite or Communist. So we were a front, as it turned out.”

—Marcia Cohen, *The Sisterhood* 1988

When Steinem’s past eventually came to light, she opted to brazen it out:

“When the CIA funding of the agency Gloria had co-founded back in the late fifties was exposed in the press, she admitted that the organization received funds from the CIA, denied being an agent of the CIA, and dismissed those Helsinki youth conferences as ‘the CIA’s finest hour.’”

—*Ibid.*

Only the more militant feminists, like the Boston-based “Redstockings,” (whose leader Roxanne Dunbar was a veteran of the Civil Rights Movement) denounced Steinem for her CIA involvement. For the most part, the issue of her connection to the leading agency of imperialist counterrevolution was ignored, or dismissed as irrelevant, by mainstream feminists. This in itself says a great deal about the politics of “sisterhood.”

### Radical Feminism & Biological Determinism

Another feminist who began her political career in the Civil Rights Movement was Shulamith Firestone. In her 1970 book, *The Dialectic of Sex*, she attempted to provide a theoretical basis for radical feminism by arguing that the subordination of women was biological, not social-historical, in origin. The sexual division of humanity into “two distinct biological classes” was, she said, the origin of all other social divisions. Mimicking Marx, she wrote: “The sexual-reproductive organization of society always furnishes the real basis, starting from which we can alone work out the ultimate explanation of the whole superstructure of economic, juridical and political institutions as well as of the religious, philosophical and other ideas of a given historical period.”

If the root of women’s oppression lay in anatomy, Firestone reasoned, then the solution must lie in technology—increased control over contraception and, ultimately, gestation outside the womb. Firestone maintained that hers was a “materialist” analysis. It was a materialism of sorts, to be sure, but a crudely biological one. While she envisaged a historical resolution to fe-

male oppression, the solutions she offered were utopian and ultimately apolitical. Her book has remained influential—perhaps because she was one of the first to take the radical feminist view that biology is destiny to a logical conclusion.

While not endorsing Firestone's solutions, the 1970 "Redstockings Manifesto" agreed with the assertion that women are a class:

"Women are an oppressed class....We identify the agents of our oppression as men. Male supremacy is the oldest, most basic form of domination. All other forms of exploitation and oppression (racism, capitalism, imperialism, etc.) are extensions of male supremacy: men dominate women, a few men dominate the rest. All power structures throughout history have been male-dominated and male-oriented. Men have controlled all political, economic and cultural institutions and backed up this control with physical force. They have used their power to keep women in an inferior position. *All men* receive economic, sexual, and psychological benefits from male supremacy. *All men* have oppressed women....We will not ask what is 'revolutionary' or 'reformist,' only what is good for women."

—"Redstockings Manifesto," in *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, 1970

Radical feminist arguments parallel those of the most reactionary socio-biologists, who claim that social inequality is "in our genes," and, therefore, attempts to fight it are futile. Radical feminists frequently argue for separatism, and some go so far as to suggest that women who continue to sleep with the "enemy" must be regarded with suspicion. In *Lesbian Nation: the Feminist Solution* (1973), Jill Johnson asserted that:

"The sexual satisfaction of the woman independently of the man is the *sine qua non* of the feminist revolution....  
"Until all women are lesbians there will be no true political revolution."

## Socialism & Sexism

In a 1970 essay entitled "The Main Enemy," Christine Delphy presented a version of "radical feminism based on Marxist principles" in which men (not capitalism) were identified as the main enemy (reprinted in *Close to Home*, 1984). Delphy asserted that, without an independent women's revolution, even in a post-capitalist workers' state, men would still have a material interest in seeing women perform the bulk of domestic chores.

The notion that women's oppression would continue to be a feature of life under socialism seemed obvious to those New Left radicals who viewed the economically backward, nationally isolated, deformed workers' states of Cuba, China, North Vietnam, North Korea and Albania as functioning socialist societies. While women made very important gains everywhere capitalist rule had been overthrown (a fact dramatically underlined by the devastating effects on women of capitalist counterrevolution in the former Soviet bloc), the parasitic (and overwhelmingly male) ruling bureaucracy in these Stalinist police states promoted women's "natural" role as breeder, mother and homemaker. Leon Trotsky pointed out in *The Revolution Betrayed* that the Stalinist apparatus was an *obstacle* to the development of socialism, and criticized "the social interest of the ruling stratum in the

deepening of bourgeois law" in connection with its attempts to prop up the "socialist" family.

Feminist pessimism regarding the prospects for women under socialism (as opposed to under Stalinism) reflects an inability to comprehend the *historical* origins of women's oppression. It also reveals a failure to appreciate the immense possibilities for reordering social priorities, and transforming every aspect of human relations, that socialism would open up through the elimination of material scarcity. The revolutionary expropriation of the productive forces, and the establishment of a global planned economy, would ensure that the most basic conditions for existence (food, shelter, employment, basic healthcare and education) could be guaranteed for every person on the planet.

Within a few generations, the socialization of production could afford all citizens a quality of life and a degree of economic independence enjoyed today only by the elite. Access to holiday resorts, summer camps, sporting, cultural and educational facilities, and other institutions currently beyond the means of most people, would immensely enrich the lives of the majority of the population. As society escapes the tyranny of the market, which only promotes activities that produce private profit, people will have an increasingly broad range of choices about how to arrange their lives. Domestic labor could be reduced substantially by the social provision of high-quality childcare, restaurants and laundries. Eventually, as the competitiveness, anxiety and insecurity of life under capitalism recedes into the distant past, social behavior will be transformed.

The provision of the material conditions for a fulfilling personal life for all, impossible under the dictates of profit maximization, would simply be a rational choice for a planned economy. Just as investing in publicly subsidized immunization programs and sewage systems benefit all members of society, the assurance of a safe, secure and productive existence for each individual will improve the quality of life for all, by eliminating many of the causes of anti-social behavior, mental illness and disease.

It might be objected that even among the existing elite, who already enjoy material abundance, men oppress women. Marxists recognize that even though it ultimately reflects the material interests of particular social classes, ideology also has a certain relative autonomy. The general condition of women as unpaid child-minders and domestic workers can only be justified within the framework of a sexist worldview that negatively affects all women, including those of the capitalist class.

The effects of these ideas and social practices will not immediately or automatically disappear when the conditions which gave rise to them are overturned. There will have to be an ideological and cultural struggle against the legacy of backwardness and ignorance bequeathed by the past. But where class society reinforces and promotes male supremacy, racism, etc., at every turn, in an egalitarian world, where everyone is assured of a comfortable and secure existence, the eradication of

prejudice will finally be a realizable project.

### Socialist Feminism: Ephemeral Half-Way House

The radical feminism of Firestone, the Redstockings and Delphy represented one wing of the Women's Liberation Movement of the early 1970s. At the other end of the spectrum, hundreds of the best militants joined various ostensibly Marxist-Leninist organizations. Those who fell somewhere in between often identified themselves as "socialist feminists." This current, which ultimately proved to be an ephemeral half-way house, was influential throughout the 1970s, particularly in Britain. Rejecting the biological determinism of radical feminism, the socialist feminists ruminated about developing a "dual systems" model, which would treat capitalism and "patriarchy" as separate but equal foes. The desirability of a "dual systems" analysis was widely accepted by socialist feminists, but difficulties arose in coming up with a plausible explanation of exactly how these two supposedly discrete but parallel systems of oppression interacted. Another tricky problem was how an analysis of racism, "ageism" and the various other forms of social oppression could be integrated into the "dual" capitalism/patriarchy model.

Nor could socialist feminists agree as to how exactly the system of "patriarchy" should be defined, or what caused it: male brutishness? jealousy? womb-envy and a consequent male obsession with maintaining strict control over women's reproductive functions? language? psycho-sexual structures? material privileges? The list is extensive, and different theorists of patriarchy highlighted or combined all of the foregoing and more.

The political activity of the socialist feminists, to the extent that there was any, generally had a more pro-working class tilt than that of the radical feminists, but was otherwise broadly similar. Marxists have traditionally favored the creation of socialist women's organizations, linked to the working class and other movements of the oppressed through the agency of a revolutionary party comprised of the most dedicated and conscious militants from every sector. Such a woman's movement would be "autonomous" from the reformists, the capitalists and the trade-union misleaders, but it would be organizationally and politically linked to the communist vanguard. Socialist feminists, by contrast, share the radical feminists' insistence that only an *autonomous* women's movement (i.e., one that is entirely separate from organizations that include men) could wage a serious struggle for female liberation.

But this too presented problems when applied to the real world. It is impossible to conceive of any movement attempting to launch a serious challenge to capitalist rule without attempting to mobilize the support of every possible element among the exploited and oppressed. To exclude half of the population from the outset, simply on the basis of sex, would guarantee defeat. Moreover, if one seeks to distinguish between friends and enemies primarily on the basis of their sex, then what attitude should be adopted toward women who join right-wing movements, or who sign up to be scabs or cops? And

what of the female members of the ruling class itself? They would hardly seem to be natural allies in the struggle for feminist socialism.

Some radical feminists attempted to "solve" such problems by simply declaring that women who act like men (i.e., behave in a piggish fashion) are not *really* women at all. But this was not an option for socialist feminists, who aspired to develop a more scientific worldview. A decade after the collapse of the socialist-feminist movement, Lise Vogel, one of its more thoughtful exponents, republished an essay that had first appeared in 1981 entitled "Marxism and Feminism: Unhappy Marriage, Trial Separation or Something Else?" In the original version, Vogel had danced around the thorny question of how to treat female class enemies, but in the 1995 version she bit the bullet:

"Socialist feminists maintain, against some opinions on the left, that women can be successfully organized, and they emphasize the need for organizations that include women from all sectors of society....It is precisely the specific character of women's situation that requires their separate organization. Here socialist feminists frequently find themselves in opposition to much of the tradition of socialist theory and practice. Socialist-feminist theory takes on the essential task of developing a framework that can guide the process of organizing women from different classes and sectors into an autonomous women's movement."

—Lise Vogel, *Women Questions: Essays for a Materialist Feminism*, 1995

With this, Vogel (a red-diaper baby who 30 years earlier had gone down South as a Civil Rights worker) as much as admitted that it is impossible to reconcile "feminism" and "socialism"—two fundamentally counterposed ideologies—with a hyphen.

While Marxists derided the class-collaborationist implications of the socialist-feminist call for women to "unite," the radical feminists attacked them from the other direction as "male-identified politicians." Catharine MacKinnon, a prominent American radical-feminist theorist, and Andrea Dworkin's collaborator, put her finger on the fundamental political contradiction of socialist feminism:

"Attempts to create a synthesis between marxism and feminism, termed socialist-feminism, have recognized neither the separate integrity of each theory nor the depth of the antagonism between them."

—*Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 1989

Socialist feminism decomposed as a political movement because the incoherence of its postulates prevented its adherents from developing either a program, or an organization, capable of engaging in serious social struggle. In the real world, there is simply no political space between the program of female solidarity across class lines and that of proletarian solidarity across sex lines. For example, socialist feminists would agree that working women shoulder the principal burden of cuts to social programs. Pro-capitalist governments of every political stripe claim that the state can no longer afford to bear the costs of looking after children, the elderly or the sick; instead, these are to be the responsibility of the "family," i.e., primarily women. So who would be the natural constituency to fight against these cuts? Bourgeois women generally support government austerity

and the resulting redistribution of wealth. Their primary concern is not to overburden the private accumulation of capital with the public funding of social need. On the other hand, working-class men are natural allies in the fight against cuts to daycare subsidies, old-age pensions, medicare, and so on, because these are programs that benefit them.

Today, among trendy left academics, analyzing male supremacy within the framework of a materialist perspective is passé; Marxism is frequently dismissed as irrelevant, its place taken by the “post-modernism” of Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard. While sometimes identified broadly with the political left, the post-modernists in fact represent a return to the reactionary historical pessimism of Friedrich Nietzsche, whom Jurgen Habermas aptly characterized as the “dialectician of the Counter-Enlightenment.” Post-modernism has provided the pseudo-theoretical backdrop for a new brand of apolitical leftist conservatism that rejects the idea, central to both the Enlightenment and Marxism, that society can be remade on the basis of human reason: a bankrupt “humanist” notion according to the post-structuralists and post-modernists! Michèle Barrett, once an influential British exponent of “socialist feminism,” is an example of this “descent into discourse.” In the introduction to the 1988 reissue of her 1980 book, *Women's Oppression Today*, she wrote that:

“the discourse of post-modernism is premised on an explicit and argued denial of the kind of grand political projects that both ‘socialism’ and ‘feminism’ by definition are....The arguments of post-modernism already represent, I think, a key position around which feminist theoretical work in the future is likely to revolve. Undoubtedly, this is where the book would begin, were I writing it today.”

### ‘Cultural Feminism’ & the Rejection of Politics

Many feminists in the imperialist countries have retreated into an attempt to escape the sexism of mainstream society through the creation of a female counter-culture involving theater, music, “herstory” and literature. The growth of “cultural feminism” in the late 1970s was reflected in the growing popularity of writers who contrasted supposedly female values of caring, sharing and emotional warmth with the “male” characteristics of greed, aggression, ego and lust. Unlike the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1960s—which brought many aspects of women’s oppression from the private into the public realm for the first time—the cultural-feminist high priestesses of the 1990s invoke “The Goddess” in order to repackaged traditional notions of feminine essence, which they peddle with talk of “empowerment.”

The “herstory” industry provides an example of this political regression. In 1970, when a leading journal of the American women’s movement published a special issue on “Women in History,” its cover proclaimed:

“Our history has been stolen from us. Our heroes died in childbirth, from peritonitis[,] overwork[,] oppression[,] from bottled-up rage. Our geniuses were never taught to read or write.”

—*Women: A Journal of Liberation*, Spring 1970.

Contemporary “herstorians,” like Dale Spender, reject this, and assert instead that male historians have written important women artists, writers, scientists and philosophers out of history:

“when we assert that the reason for women’s absence [from the historical record] is not women, but men, that it is not that women have not contributed, but that men have ‘doctored the records’, reality undergoes a remarkable change”

—*Women of Ideas and What Men Have Done to Them*, 1982

While the study of contributions by women in the past can certainly inspire those engaged in struggle today, the attempt to prettify the ugly truth can only undercut the urgency of bringing down the social order responsible for the perpetuation of female oppression. The relegation of women to the “private” sphere of domestic labor meant their exclusion, in all but a few cases, from the opportunity to be major participants in the historic developments of their time. The emphasis on women’s exclusion from the history books only serves to trivialize the extent of the injury.

The cultural feminists preach abstinence from, rather than engagement in, political activity, on the grounds that it must inevitably involve entering the male domain:

“tokenism—which is commonly guised as Equal Rights, and which yields token victories—deflects and shortcircuits gynergy, so that female power, galvanized under deceptive slogans of sisterhood, is swallowed by The Fraternity. This method of vampirizing the Female Self saps women by giving illusions of partial success....

“Thus tokenism is insidiously destructive of sisterhood, for it distorts the warrior aspect of Amazon bonding both by magnifying it and by minimizing it. It magnifies the importance of ‘fighting back’ to the extent of making it devour the transcendent be-ing of sisterhood, reducing it to a copy of comradeship. At the same time, it minimizes the Amazon warrior aspect by containing it, misdirecting and shortcircuiting the struggle.”

—Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, 1978

The very concept of oppression, as well as the need to struggle against it, are derided as “male” notions to be transcended:

“The point is not to save society or to focus on escape (which is backward-looking) but to release the Spring of be-ing....Left undisturbed, we are free to find our own concordance, to hear our own harmony, the harmony of the spheres.”

—*Ibid.*

This reactionary drivel is a feminist restatement of the political demoralization that propelled thousands of petty-bourgeois baby boomers from the New Left to the New Age.

As the material progress of women has stalled, the feminist celebrants of passivity and political abstention promise salvation in some world other than the one in which real suffering occurs. There is a certain logic to this, for if women’s oppression derives from an eternal and unchanging disparity between the nature of the sexes, there is little reason to expect to see any significant change whatever you do. So instead of participating in the struggle to transform the institutions and social re-

relationships that determine consciousness, New-Age feminists exhort women to embark on a personal spiritual journey to an inner space. Mary Daly advises that the road to psychic fulfilment can be found through discussions with other women in which language is “co-opted” and male “meanings” subverted:

“Breaking the bonds/bars of phallocracy requires breaking through to radiant powers of words, so that by releasing words, we can release our Selves.”

—*Pure Lust*, 1984

While imagining themselves embarked on a daring feminist rethink of the entire course of human existence, the cultural feminists, in reality, merely reflect the conservative trends currently popular with the bourgeois intelligentsia. The new feminism embraces many of the key features of “post-modernism,” including an idealist focus on language and “discourse,” and a belittling of the significance of political and economic activity.

### ‘Women’s Work’

Even those feminists who have not entirely given up on political activity have abandoned the anti-capitalist rhetoric of the early 1970s. Many are engaged in operating abortion clinics, rape crisis centers and women’s shelters. Such services are certainly beneficial to those women who have access to them, and afford those providing them with the satisfaction of doing something “practical.” However, they only address the effects, not the roots, of women’s oppression.

Some feminists are also involved in campaigns to increase female representation in non-traditional jobs in skilled trades, the professions and corporate management. While this has created opportunities for a few, and helped break down some stereotypes, it has had little effect on the conditions faced by the majority of women, who remain stuck in traditionally “female” employment.

Much has been made of the narrowing of the male/female wage gap in the U.S. in recent years: between 1955 and 1991 wages for women working full-time rose from 64 percent to 70 percent of those of men. But this is largely a result of the decline in male wages due to the shrinkage of unionized blue-collar jobs. Marxists support women’s struggles for equal pay and equal access to all job categories, while recognizing that the resilience of sexual bias in the capitalist labor process will prevent women from achieving true equality.

In most cases there is no objective basis for designating jobs as “male” or “female.” The only important distinction between the sexes in terms of their capacity for work is that men are, on average, physically stronger than women. Yet among men, jobs requiring physical strength are not particularly highly rewarded—skill, dexterity, mental and organizational ability count for much more. The reason that business executives, doctors and airline pilots are predominantly male, while secretaries, nurses and flight attendants are usually female, has a great deal to do with prevailing sexist social attitudes, and nothing to do with any disparity in ability. In her 1959 essay, Nancy Reeves provided a striking example of the arbitrary character of “male” and “female”

work:

“in the [American] Midwest, cornhuskers are traditionally women, while trimmers are almost always men. In the Far West, the reverse is true.”

The male-supremacist tilt in capitalist society is so pervasive, and so flexible, that even when women gain entry to previously all-male occupations, new barriers, both overt and covert, soon appear:

“In 1973 only 8 percent of law degrees [in the U.S.] were awarded to women. By 1990 the percentage had risen to 42 percent. This is a sizeable feminization of a prestigious profession. Women, however, are overrepresented among the less-well-paying jobs in law, such as jobs in legal clinics, and appear not to rise to the top even in the most lucrative area of large law firms.”

—Joyce P. Jacobsen, *The Economics of Gender*, 1994

The same phenomenon is observable in business:

“Studies by Columbia and Stanford Universities of women MBAs [Master of Business Administration] show that starting salaries are similar between the sexes, but that seven years out the door, the women are 40 percent behind the men.”

—*Ibid.*

Even among librarians, one of the very few “female” professions, a disproportionate percentage of the top jobs (senior administrative positions in major research libraries) are held by men. Jacobsen notes that it is:

“difficult to find an example of a truly integrated occupation, where the proportion of women closely matches their representation in the workforce, where the rate of change in the sex ratio is small, and where women are not ghettoized.”

Occupations that have changed over time from the domain of one sex to that of the other provide another indication of the systemic nature of the problem. One of the few jobs that has shifted from “female” to “male” is delivering babies. In 1910 midwives delivered half of all babies in the U.S., but by 1970, this figure had dropped to less than one percent. When childbirth became something that took place in hospitals under the supervision of (predominantly male) doctors, the status and remuneration for this work rose dramatically.

Conversely, when jobs shift from males to females, the result is a decline in both status and money:

“Although there were almost no women bank tellers before World War II, over 90 percent of tellers were female in 1980. Meanwhile, salaries and career-advancement possibilities dropped precipitously. Clerical professions, in general, were predominantly male when they first came into existence in large numbers as the industrial revolution generated more need for paper processors: all these occupations are now female-dominated and generally considered to be the female ghetto of jobs.”

—*Ibid.*

One of the most spectacular examples of a woman breaking into a traditionally male job category was Margaret Thatcher’s ascension to the office of Britain’s prime minister. There is no question that the “Iron Lady” made her way to the top by besting her male competitors, yet it is also well known that under her rule British working people and the poor (who are, of course, disproportionately female) faced attacks of unprecedented viciousness. Thatcher’s success may have undercut various

male supremacist assumptions, and inspired a handful of ambitious British girls to reach for the top, but the real lesson her career holds is that the basis of social oppression lies in the inner logic of the capitalist system, not in the sex of those who operate its levers.

### Anti-Porn Feminists

Among the most directly political (and most reactionary) initiatives undertaken by radical feminists in recent years is the campaign to ban sexually explicit material (see “Pornography, Capitalism & Censorship,” 1917 No. 13). Despite occasional disclaimers that they do not share the prudishness of the right-wing family-values crowd, anti-porn feminists have willingly joined forces with the bigots who want to criminalize abortion, persecute homosexuals, and prohibit the teaching of evolution and sex education in schools. In many jurisdictions where law enforcement authorities have played up the “pro-woman” angle in defense of state censorship, the main targets of anti-pornography sweeps have been the gay and lesbian population.

Feminists who advocate censorship argue that women’s oppression is the product of an unchanging male identity centered on an inherently brutal sexuality. Andrea Dworkin, the queen of America’s pro-censorship feminists, claims that “sex and murder are fused in the male consciousness, so that one without the immanent possibility of the other is unthinkable and impossible” (“Taking Action,” in *Take Back the Night*, 1980). Pornography should be banned, therefore, as a manifestation of this “male consciousness.”

Besides pro-censorship feminists, there are also “pro-motherhood” feminists, who are distinguished by their obsession with the development of new reproductive technologies. The “Feminist International Network of Resistance to Reproductive and Genetic Engineering,” launched in 1984, holds that the central issue for women is the campaign against developments in artificial insemination and *in vitro* fertilization. Where Shulamith Firestone imagined that advances in reproductive technology would pave the way to female liberation, these paranoids see it as the potential site of a new kind of enslavement:

“Much as we turn from consideration of a nuclear aftermath, we turn from seeing a future where children are neither borne nor born or where women are forced to bear only sons and to slaughter their foetal daughters. Chinese and Indian women are already trudging this path. The future of women as a group is at stake and we need to ensure that we have thoroughly considered all possibilities before endorsing technology which could mean the death of the female.”

—Robyn Rowland, in *Man-Made Women*, 1987

Like their “anti-porn” sisters, Rowland and other “pro-motherhood” advocates have not been coy about climbing into bed with the traditional right: “feminists may have to consider alignments with strange pillow-friends: right-wing women perhaps” (*Ibid.*). Rowland’s “pillow-friends” include the avowed racist Enoch Powell. In 1985, when Powell introduced his (unsuccessful) “Unborn Children Protection Bill,” to ban embryo re-

search and severely restrict *in vitro* fertilization, Rowland spoke at a press conference in his support (see Marge Berer’s “Breeding Conspiracies and the New Reproductive Technologies,” in *Trouble and Strife*, Summer 1986).

### Susan Faludi’s ‘Backlash’

The center of gravity of the feminist milieu has moved rightward since the 1970s, but many feminists still identify themselves with the left, and many have sharply opposed the anti-porn crusade and the various other adaptations to the right. One of the most influential feminist books of the 1990s, Susan Faludi’s *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (1991), documents a decade of “pro-family” reaction and asks:

“If women are now so equal, why are they much more likely to be poor, especially in retirement? ... Why does the average working woman, in both the UK and the US, still earn only just over two-thirds what men do for the same work?

“If women are so ‘free’, why are their reproductive freedoms in greater jeopardy today than a decade earlier? Why do women who want to postpone childbearing now have fewer options than 10 years ago?”

These are not the sort of questions that the capitalist media addresses, as Faludi points out. Her book provides a wealth of examples of how “public opinion” is manufactured and manipulated, in order to isolate women who dare aspire to social equality.

Faludi is critical of feminists who reject political activity in pursuit of “personal growth,” and clearly endorses a perspective of collective action. Yet she is unable either to explain the origins of the reactionary developments she decries, or to propose a program to resist them. Instead, she presents the backlash as a regrettable, but perhaps inevitable, part of some great cycle of existence:

“A backlash against women’s rights is nothing new. Indeed, it is a recurring phenomenon: it returns every time women begin to make some headway towards equality, a seemingly inevitable early frost to the brief flowerings of feminism. ‘The progress of women’s rights in our culture, unlike other forms of “progress,” has always been strangely reversible,’ American literature scholar Ann Douglas has observed.”

The gains won by women in the 1960s and 1970s were a direct product of political struggle. But concessions granted under the pressure of mass political mobilizations are subject to reversal when a different configuration of social forces arises. The struggle for female equality, like the battle against racism and other forms of social oppression, can never be finally victorious within the framework of capitalist society, because the maintenance of privilege and inequality is an inevitable corollary to the predominance of private ownership of the means of production.

The most glaring shortcoming of Faludi’s book is her tendency to treat the backlash against women’s rights in isolation. The campaign against women’s rights in America is only one front in an all-sided reactionary assault. The propaganda techniques which Faludi describes so well have also been routinely employed against others targeted by the ruling class—from welfare

recipients, to unionists, to Saddam Hussein.

In a footnote to her description of international resistance to the anti-abortion “Operation Rescue” fanatics, Faludi notes: “New Zealand saw clashes in 1989 outside a Wellington clinic when a Rescue squad arrived to find 30 women already there and intent on allowing women in.” Contrary to Faludi’s information, the clinic’s defenders on that day included both men and women (including some of our New Zealand comrades). Our supporters played a major role in organizing the ongoing defense of the Parkview clinic through “Choice”—a militant, non-exclusionist “rapid response” network, open to everyone prepared to defend abortion rights. One of the lessons of this work was the importance of drawing the line *politically*, rather than on the basis of sex, in the fight for women’s rights.

### **Women’s Liberation Through Socialist Revolution!**

The relegation of women to the household has historically permitted many issues of women’s rights to be dismissed as merely “personal” concerns. The Women’s Liberation Movement of the late 1960s saw a proliferation of “consciousness-raising groups,” which explored the varied ways that women had internalized their oppression as personal concerns and the extent to which society treats the subordination of women as a “natural” condition of existence.

Legal and institutional restrictions on access to abortion, birth control, healthcare, childcare and employment are all clearly overtly “political” questions. But women’s oppression also encompasses the deeply rooted psychological and social attitudes and presumptions resulting from thousands of years of male domination. Girls learn early in life that they cannot aspire to everything that boys can. Misogynist assumptions are so deeply embedded in our culture that many aspects of women’s oppression are virtually invisible, even to people committed to the struggle for women’s liberation. For example, when feminists proposed the introduction

of gender-neutral language (e.g., the use of “chairperson” instead of “chairman,” or “Ms.” instead of “Miss” and “Mrs.,”) some left-wing Marxist publications proved more resistant than the mainstream bourgeois press.

Many women’s lives are stunted and deformed by sexual harassment, rape and domestic violence at the hands of men. While it takes place between individuals, such pathological behavior, like other manifestations of female oppression, are *social* problems. They cannot be eliminated until the social system which produces and, at a certain level, encourages them, is replaced by one that creates the material conditions for the emergence of a culture imbued with fundamentally different values.

Women’s liberation cannot be achieved within the arena of one’s own personal life. It is not enough to share domestic labor more equitably within the family—what is necessary is that childcare, housecleaning, meal preparation, etc., be transformed from *individual* to *social* responsibilities. But this is not possible short of the total reconstruction of society—the replacement of capitalist anarchy with a socialist planned economy administered by the producers themselves.

Just as the liberation of women is inextricably linked to the outcome of the class struggle, so too the fate of any social revolution depends on the participation and support of poor and working-class women. As Karl Marx remarked in a 12 December 1868 letter to Ludwig Kugelmann: “Everyone who knows anything of history also knows that great social revolutions are impossible without the feminine ferment.” Revolutionaries must actively participate in social struggles to defend and advance female equality. It is also necessary to promote the development of female leaders within the socialist movement. For it is only through participation in a struggle to turn the world upside down that women can open the road to their own emancipation and create the material circumstances for eradicating hunger, exploitation, poverty and the effects of thousands of years of male supremacy. This is a goal worth struggling for. ■



## Women's Oppression—Not in Our Genes

Female oppression, the most universal and deeply rooted form of social oppression, is characteristic of capitalist society, yet unlike racial oppression, predates capitalism. In his groundbreaking 1884 study, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Frederick Engels observed that in societies based chiefly on hunting and gathering, where all members of the tribe worked, and all property was owned communally, women did not have second-class status. He noted further that the subordination of women arose alongside the development of distinct social classes based on private property. The conclusion that Engels drew from this is that male supremacy, which in varying forms has characterized all known civilizations, is not the product of hard-wired biological distinctions between the sexes, but rather a historically-determined phenomenon.

Women's unique capacity for childbearing and nursing gave rise to a natural division of labor along sex lines in primitive society, but this distinction did not automatically translate into lesser status. Only with the advent of class society were women gradually excluded from full participation in larger political/economic activity and relegated to the household. While the form, extent and intensity of women's oppression has varied among different societies, and in different historical periods, it has always been closely linked to women's role in the reproduction of the next generation. This, in turn, is ultimately shaped by the requirements of the prevailing mode of production and its accompanying social structure.

The subjugation of women under the capitalist "free market" is rooted in their central role in the family as unpaid providers of the domestic services necessary for the maintenance of society. These functions include primary responsibility for food, clothing and cleaning; for the care of the very young, the aged and the sick; and for meeting the varied emotional and psychological needs of all the members of the household. The family provides these services more cheaply for the ruling class (both in economic and political terms) than any alternative. The need to maintain the family as the basic unit of class-divided societies thus constitutes the *material basis* for the subordination of women.

When Engels was writing, the investigation of primitive human societies was in its infancy, and the empiri-

cal material upon which his account is based was limited and, in some important respects, mistaken. But this does not detract from the importance of his observation that women's oppression is a social creation. Until relatively recently, most bourgeois social scientists viewed male dominance as a universal norm, and generally presumed it to have a biological basis. Yet over the past several decades, many anthropologists have begun to accept the idea that for tens of thousands of years, hunter-gatherer societies existed that were essentially sex-egalitarian.

This clearly has far-reaching political implications, but only rarely makes its way into the mass media. One exception was the 29 March 1994 *New York Times*, which ran a short piece entitled "Sexes Equal on South Sea Isle," discussing the work of Dr. Maria Lepowsky, an anthropology professor at the University of Wisconsin. In her 1993 book, *Fruit of the Motherland*, Lepowsky described Vanatinai, an isolated island southeast of New Guinea, where there is "no ideology of male superiority and no male coercive power or formal authority over women." On Vanatinai:

"There is a large amount of overlap between the roles and activities of women and men, with women occupying public, prestige-generating roles. Women share control of the production and the distribution of valued goods, and they inherit property. Women as well as men participate in the exchange of valuables, they organize feasts, they officiate at important rituals such as those for yam planting or healing, they counsel their kinfolk, they speak out and are listened to in public meetings, they possess valuable magical knowledge, and they work side by side in most subsistence activities."

The prominent role played by women on the island is said to be "*taubwaragha*," which translates as "the way of the ancestors." On Vanatinai, males are expected to help with childcare, and even the language is gender-neutral—there are no pronouns like "he" or "she." In the conclusion to her book, Lepowsky comments:

"The Vanatinai example suggests that sexual equality is facilitated by an overall ethic of respect for and equal treatment of all categories of individuals, the decentralization of political power, and inclusion of all categories of persons (for example, women, and ethnic minorities) in public positions of authority....The example of Vanatinai shows that the subjugation of women by men is not a human universal, and it is not inevitable."