

Marxism and feminism today

By Judith Orr

International Socialism Issue: 127 -June 2010

According to Sir Stuart Rose, the outgoing executive chairman of Marks and Spencer, women (or “girls” as he puts it) “have never had it so good”:

Apart from the fact that you’ve got more equality than you can ever deal with, the fact of the matter is you’ve got real democracy and there are really no glass ceilings, despite the fact you moan about it all the time...you have women astronauts, women dentists, women doctors, women managing directors. What is it you haven’t got?¹

Well, Stuart, equal pay, genuine political representation, justice for rape victims, an end to sexist stereotypes...the list is long.

It is true women have won many battles since 1970, when the first women’s liberation conference was held in Britain at Ruskin College, Oxford. Jobs that had been barred by law or tradition in the past are now open to women. Today the majority of adult women in Britain (71 percent) work outside the home, and even after they have children 68 percent work—the percentage rises as children get older.² Women are almost 50 percent of the workforce in Britain. In the United States the percentage of women in the workforce is about to break through 50 percent. To mark the event the *Economist* magazine ran a front page in December 2009 declaring, “We did it!” alongside a picture of the iconic Rosie the Riveter.

There have also been many changes in women’s personal lives thanks to gains including the contraceptive pill, abortion rights, access to divorce and changes in attitudes towards sex and pregnancy outside marriage. “The provisional number of marriages registered in England and Wales in 2008 was 232,990. This currently represents the lowest numbers of marriages in England and Wales since 1895 (228,204)”.³ Weddings have declined by a quarter since early 1990s. But systematic discrimination against women is still a fundamental feature of modern capitalism. Women may be 50 percent of workers but they are not spread evenly across the workforce. “Only 2 percent of the bosses of Fortune 500 companies and five of those in the FTSE 100 stock market index are women. Women make up less than 13 percent of board members in America”.⁴

Previously the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) calculated that at the current rate of progress it would take 73 years for women in Britain to gain equal representation on the boards of the FTSE 100.⁵

Political representation is greater than it ever has been, but women MPs are still only a minority in parliament. May’s general election result increased the number of women in parliament from 126 to 142, a rise from 18 percent to 22 percent of MPs. More media attention was focused on the sartorial choices of male politicians’ wives than women candidates in the general election. The EHRC calculated that, at the current rate, “a snail could crawl the entire length of the Great Wall of China in 212 years, just slightly longer than the 200 years it will take for women to be equally represented in parliament”.⁶

The vast majority of women are nowhere near touching the glass ceiling however; it's the "sticky floor" that is their main concern. Two thirds of those trying to survive on the minimum wage are women and the average gender pay gap across society is 18 percent of full-time work and an astonishing 36.6 percent for part-time jobs, the majority of which are done by women.

There have been advances in relation to violence against women and rape, not least that rape in marriage was finally recognised as a crime in 1991 (the law was only formally changed in 1994). But as reported rapes have risen the conviction rate has fallen to 6.1 percent. Last year the BBC discovered, after a freedom of information request, that British police forces were failing even to record more than 40 percent of cases of reported rape. The scale of the crime is impossible to quantify.

So much has been gained, yet much remains to be fought for. But the purpose of this article is not to assess the general position of women in society today but instead to focus on one particular aspect—the rise of what has been coined "the new sexism" and the political responses to it. It is not that new. I wrote in July 2003 bemoaning the fact that "the new sexism is deemed 'ironic' and witty, not degrading and insulting, because women are seen as having won equality".⁷

The issues—sexist images, the impact of porn, the commodification of women's bodies—are not new. Many women who have fought for women's rights for decades will be aghast that it now appears that many of the gains that we made in the past are crumbling in the face of a shifting popular culture in which the objectification of women's bodies breaks new boundaries.

The experience of the new sexism is uneven but its impact on young women in particular is striking. Although the problem may appear familiar, it takes place in a different context to the debates of the 1970s and 1980s and so needs a different political response.

Journalist Natasha Walter writes that she was driven to write her new book, *Living Dolls*, because the situation for women today made her acknowledge she had got it wrong when she wrote in 1998 that women now had the freedom to live, dress and behave as they wanted: "[The US] often looks as if it is mired in an old fashioned sexist culture *that is dying out in Britain*".⁸

She could not have been more wrong. Not only is "old fashioned" sexism alive and kicking but in some cases it has changed into a much more crude and explicit sexism that has been labelled "raunch culture", "hypersexualisation" or "pornification" of culture.

The rise of this new sexism has not gone unchallenged and has led to a resurgence of interest in ideas around women's liberation. Debates about patriarchy, violence against women, sexuality, the relationship between exploitation and oppression, and the ideas of feminism are taking place on college campuses across the country.

In London we have also seen two conferences of the London Feminist Network—last year's filled Conway Hall in London with over 200 women. Reclaim the Night demonstrations now take place annually again, with over a thousand women marching, many of them young. New women's and feminist groups are sprouting up and organising debates and activities around the country. For example, I spoke at the launch meeting for Bristol University Feminist Society. The meeting attracted over 100 students, women and men, packed into a lecture theatre and the discussion covered why more women don't do engineering, the role of men, commodification and if you need socialism to get rid of women's oppression.

Socialist Worker Student Societies have led campaigns against sexual harassment and co-hosted meetings and forums with women's groups and feminist societies. Socialists have been at the centre of debates about how to challenge sexism.

In March this year BBC Four ran a series of three documentaries called *Women*. They looked at some of the leading women writers and organisers from the 1960s and pointed to the fact that debate about fighting for women's rights was on the rise again in Britain.

Are we seeing a new wave of feminism? What are the ideas that underpin feminism today and how do they relate to the women's movements of past generations? Historians have referred to past women's movements as the first and second waves, which implies there is no connection between the different periods. This is an oversimplification, but nevertheless it is a useful framework.

The suffragettes and the Russian Revolution

At the turn of the 20th century women were denied basic rights including the right to vote, which was restricted in Britain to a minority of wealthy men. The first wave of feminist struggle is identified with the fight for women's suffrage in the period leading up to the First World War. The Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), which became known as the Suffragettes, became the leading organisation of the suffrage movement. It involved both working class women, who worked in industries like the cotton mills, and wealthy upper class women. These included most famously Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst.

Founded out of the Independent Labour Party, the WSPU grew into a militant and active force across the country. Women organised meetings and mass marches and disrupted political rallies to get their voice heard. One demonstration in Hyde Park in London saw between a quarter and half a million people take to the streets. When the government showed no sign of shifting, some women took to arson and smashing the windows of politicians who spoke out against women getting the vote. The state responded with arrests and many women took part in courageous hunger strikes in prison in protest. This led to them enduring even more vicious treatment as prison warders physically forced tubes down their throats to feed them.

When Emmeline and Christabel led the WSPU to split from its Labour roots the youngest Pankhurst daughter, Sylvia, who became more politically radical in the course of the struggle, went on to work with poor and working class women in her East London Federation. For many working class women the fight for the vote was only one part of a struggle against poverty and slum housing. Many of them argued for universal suffrage—saying that to win women's suffrage on the same basis as men would still leave many men and women disenfranchised. Sylvia eventually transformed the paper she edited in East London from the *Women's Dreadnought* into the *Workers' Dreadnought*. Inspired by the Russian Revolution of 1917 and all it achieved, she was for a time a member of the newly formed Communist Party. A minority of women—those over 30 years of age or property owners—won the right to vote when the war ended in 1918. But full suffrage for all women and men over 21 was only achieved in 1928.

Sheila Rowbotham gives a fascinating account and new insight into some of the debates, organisations and publications that flourished in Britain and the US during this period in her new book, *Dreamers of a New Day*. However, most accounts of first wave feminism do not refer to the debates that revolutionary socialists like Clara Zetkin and Alexandra Kollontai had with feminists and other

socialists across Europe about how to fight women's oppression for many years before the Russian Revolution.⁹

The revolution itself was the answer to the question about how best to fight for women's liberation. It had a profound effect on the lives of millions of women living in some of the most brutal conditions, as Lenin proudly stated:

In the course of two years soviet power in one of the most backward countries of Europe did more to emancipate women and to make their status equal to that of the "strong" sex than all the advanced, enlightened, "democratic" republics of the world did in the course of 130 years.

Enlightenment, culture, civilisation, liberty—in all capitalist, bourgeois republics of the world all these fine words are combined with extremely infamous, disgustingly filthy and brutally coarse laws in which woman is treated as an inferior being, laws dealing with marriage rights and divorce, with the inferior status of a child born out of wedlock as compared with that of a "legitimate" child, laws granting privileges to men, laws that are humiliating and insulting to women.¹⁰

Women had played an important part in the revolution. The march on International Women's Day had been the trigger for the Revolution of February 1917. But the Bolsheviks understood the legacy of oppression for millions of women living in the most backward and impoverished conditions across this vast country. Women had to overcome not just poverty and illiteracy, but also the terrible burden of work in the home. The Bolsheviks knew that for the revolution to be successful they would have to reach these women and enable them to take part in the building of the socialist society and so they set up a department specifically to agitate among women—the Zhenotdel:

Zhenotdel volunteers travelled thousands of miles from their homes to factories and villages to campaign for the revolution. They used agit-trains or agit-ships, like the *Red Star* that travelled up and down the River Volga to reach remote areas. They travelled with poster art and song and dance groups; they held meetings, showed films and plays, and set up "reading cabins" with blackboards to teach literacy. Over 125,000 literacy schools were set up. The Zhenotdel produced publications on everything from socialised childcare to Soviet architects' designs for new homes to take into account plans for communal facilities.¹¹

The aspirations of the Russian Revolution were crushed by the revolution's defeat under Stalinism, which saw women's rights pushed back in every area of life. Leon Trotsky wrote that part of his measure of the defeat that Stalin inflicted on the revolution was seeing what happened to women. As collectivised provision broke down or failed to provide an alternative, women were pushed back into the home: "the so-called family

hearth—that archaic, stuffy, and stagnant institution in which women of the toiling classes perform galley labour from childhood till death".¹²

This defeat meant that when the women's movements of the second wave in the 1960s exploded the achievements of the revolution were erased from popular memory.

Second wave feminism

When people today talk about feminism they are usually referring to the ideas that came out of the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) that arose first in the US and then in Britain, in the 1960s and 1970s.

The post-war boom led to greater and greater numbers of women being sucked into expanding further education and the growing job market. This very quickly had an effect on women's lives. In the 1950s many women would leave the family home only to marry and then very quickly have a family of their own. Women could not buy something on hire purchase (an early form of credit) without her husband's signature and many jobs were closed to married women.

The birthrate had already been falling in the 1950s but the advent of the contraceptive pill revolutionised the ability of women to safely control when they became pregnant. The legalisation of abortion in Britain in 1967, and in the US after the Roe versus Wade court case in 1973, then opened the possibility for the first time for women legally and safely to terminate an unwanted pregnancy.

The speed of change was dramatic. Between 1960 and 1965 there was a 57 percent increase in women gaining degrees (the equivalent rise for men was 25 percent). The proportion of women living alone rose by 50 percent during the 1960s, for those between 20 and 34 years old the increase was 109 percent.

These material changes had a profound effect on the aspirations and expectations of women, which in turn shaped the struggles and demands they made. The achievement of material improvements for women only served to open up even greater demands and expectations. Anyone who has watched the television series *Mad Men* will have seen the signs of this period of change powerfully portrayed. Some women were beginning to assert themselves as more than dutiful housewives or obedient secretaries.

The WLM grew out of the movements of the 1960s which saw a generation politicised by momentous anti-imperialist and national liberation struggles across the globe. In the US the mass movement against the Vietnam War and the struggle for black civil rights shook society to its core.

The US anti-war movement was born in the burgeoning student population. The "new left", as it was named, did not see itself as following in the footsteps of the US Communist Party or a socialist tradition which had long understood the need for women's liberation, despite the distortions of the Soviet Union. This meant that when the civil rights and anti Vietnam War struggles broke out in the US in the 1960s there was no sense of women's oppression as an issue that needed to be addressed.

Although many courageous and articulate women activists led in the struggles of the early 1960s many found their experience of being discriminated against and trivialised in wider society mirrored in the movement. In 1964 at a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Mississippi, some women put forward a position paper pointing out that women were being treated in a wholly sexist way in the movement. Stokely Carmichael, one of the leading members in the Black Power Movement, responded by saying: "The only position of women in SNCC is prone".¹³

In 1965 women speaking at the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) convention were laughed off the floor. One speaker was told she "just needs a good screw" and at the following year's meeting women had tomatoes thrown at them. One early movement pamphlet described women's skills in the movement as "workers and wives"—they serviced organisers with both typing and clerical skills and with their homemaking and sexual skills.

A growing disaffection among a section of women activists led to a group deciding to organise their own liberation struggle, on the model of a national liberation movement. But in reality the thread to early socialist ideas had not been completely severed. Sara Evans points out in her powerful account of the origins of the women's liberation movement in the US, *Personal Politics*, that many of these key women who became founders of the WLM were in fact children of socialists, trade union organisers and Communists—red diaper women:

It is important to note that in my research I did not seek out “red diaper babies”. Rather, I pursued women and men who had participated in specific new left activities and in particular the women who provided the links between the new left and the early leadership of the women's liberation movement. Again and again I was surprised to discover a radical family background.¹⁴

From this handful of women grew a movement which reached across the US and inspired similar movements in Europe. There were WLM “consciousness raising” groups, protests and an explosion of books, pamphlets and discussion papers debating the nature of women's oppression and what sort of political ideas and action were needed to challenge it. The theory of patriarchy gained hegemony.

Patriarchy meant different things to different writers but essentially it was seen as a system of control and dominance that pre-dated and acted alongside and separate to capitalism, by which all men colluded to oppress all women.

However, feminism was never defined as one specific ideology. Instead it always encompassed multiple and fluid meanings, often hotly contested. It challenged gender roles in the family, fought for women's rights to control their fertility and demanded equal pay with men. The first four demands of the WLM were: equal pay; equal educational and job opportunities; free contraception and abortion on demand; and free 24-hour nurseries.

In the US the movement reflected the class base of its mainly middle class founders who had been to college and did not want their newly acquired opportunities to be thwarted by discrimination and bigotry. In Britain the context for the much smaller and shorter-lived WLM was different. Here the movement was shaped by the impact of a stronger left and a better rooted and organised labour and trade union movement, which affected the debates about the role of class and separatism. Its ideas reflected the demands and needs of working class women and many feminists took part in solidarity with working class women's struggles of the period.

Ultimately second wave feminism crashed on the rocks of multiple identities of race, sexuality and political beliefs that fragmented and tore the movement apart. Separatist feminists accused heterosexual women of “sleeping with the enemy” and some women even declared themselves “political” lesbians, spurning men on principle. Feminists who supported Israel broke with women who sided with the struggle of the Palestinians and black and Asian women argued that the movement was dominated by white women who did not appreciate the experience of racism. This process of fragmentation cannot be separated from the more general decline of the 1960s insurgency during the second half of the 1970s.

It is easy to disparage and mock some of the extreme positions taken by the radical and separatist wing of the women's movement, but it is important to understand that these arose from the specific circumstances of a deeply misogynist and sexist culture that led women, albeit a minority, to believe

that they had to organise independently from men. Once you assert that all men are to blame for women's oppression, there is a logic to the argument that leads to extreme separation.

The achievements that the women's movement made during this period of struggle were considerable. They included equal pay legislation, abortion rights, greater rights to divorce, expanding of employment and education opportunities, and the right to political representation. The challenge to the stifling morality of the 1950s was exhilarating, although the changes took many years to filter through to the whole of society.

There was a layer of mainly middle class, well educated women who went on towards and beyond the glass ceiling to become lawyers, surgeons, politicians and bankers. Figures show that today almost 60 percent of degrees awarded in the US and Europe go to women, as do 59 percent of master's degrees and 50 percent of doctorates in the US.

Some of these women have benefits sufficient to glue them to the system, which the US feminist academic Hester Eisenstein examines in some detail in her book *Feminism Seduced*. She writes of how the system could absorb at least some of the ideas of feminism in order to function more efficiently: "Unhappily in recent years I have come to fear that...feminism in its organised forms has become all too compatible with an increasingly unjust and dangerous corporate capitalist system".¹⁵

One New Labour study on equal pay for women in Britain tried to convince bosses to comply with equal pay for women by assuring them that "gender equality is good for business". Eisenstein quotes a US report which suggests this is a valid assertion: "Catalyst, the research organisation that tracks women at work, reported in 2004 that the *Fortune* 500 corporations with the most women in top positions yielded, on average, a 35 percent higher return on equity than those with the fewest female corporate officers".¹⁶

In Britain many such women went to sit on women's committees in local government and fill women-only short lists to become parliamentary candidates. Some of these women have been in the New Labour government over the last 13 years and have sat round the cabinet table, still claiming to speak and act in the name of feminism.

Third wave feminism

The term third wave feminism was coined in the 1990s. It is sometimes used merely to refer to younger feminists—children of the 1960s generation. But the term is often used to explicitly differentiate it from post-feminism and second wave feminism. The ideas of post feminism reflected the assumption that developed in the 1980s that women had won equality, that the battles were over and women no longer needed to be treated as a "special case". Women who identify themselves as "third wave" feminists (as there is no mass movement, it is not a "wave" in the same sense as the first and second waves) challenge the notion that equality has been achieved.

They see themselves as continuing the struggle but are critical of the feminism that came out of the 1960s and 1970s as being associated primarily with the interests of middle class, Western white women. Third wave feminism is pluralistic, doesn't claim to have a unitary project, and proclaims itself to be less prescriptive than second wave feminism which is, according to Walter, "associated with man hating and with a rather sullen kind of political correctness or Puritanism...the movement is seen as intolerant".¹⁷

There are many ways women are rebelling against the stereotypes with which they are meant to conform today. In Atlanta and New Orleans, for example, there is a large cultural scene of young, mainly black, lesbians who wear the most fashionable male hip hop clothing styles—the baggy jeans, trainers and jewellery. Others, like the “riot grrls” [sic]—an underground feminist punk movement—use culture, art and music to express their rejection of what they see as new restrictions on how women are supposed to dress and behave.

Jessica Valenti, author of *Full Frontal Feminism* and founder of the US website *feministing.com*, says, “What I love about the third wave is that we’ve learned how to find feminism in everything—and make it our own.” The new feminism is sold as fun and sexy, apparently to distance it from the dungaree wearing unshaven women of the 1970s. “Is there anything wrong with being ugly, fat or hairy? Of course not. But let’s be honest. No one wants to be associated with something that is seen as uncool and unattractive”.¹⁸

This anything-goes feminism means you might be a feminist who makes porn films or one who protests against them. You might accept that biology determines our gender attributes or believe socialisation plays the dominant role. Most controversially, feminist ideals have been used to justify the war in Afghanistan and the prosecution of women who choose to wear the hijab or the niqab. Nina Power, author of *One Dimensional Woman*, comments that “one of the most profound and disturbing recent shifts in geopolitical discourse is the co-opting of the language of feminism by figures who ten or 15 years ago would have spoken out most vociferously against what feminism stands for”.¹⁹ Eisenstein calls this “Madeleine Albright feminism” and points out the distance travelled by a feminism that originally came out of a militant movement *against* US imperialism.²⁰

But for many women, in particular young women, their growing interest in women’s liberation and feminism is not a product of the many historical debates, but a gut reaction to the shocking level of sometimes gross sexism that has become commonplace today.

What is the new sexism?

The first book to really examine the scale of the problem was *Female Chauvinist Pigs* by Ariel Levy, published in 2005. Levy identified the development of what she labelled raunch culture:

Only 30 years (my lifetime) ago, our mothers were “burning their bras” and picketing *Playboy*, and suddenly we were getting implants and wearing the bunny logo as supposed symbols of our liberation. How had the culture shifted so drastically in such a short period of time? ²¹

She looked at young women and men and how their view of themselves and their relationships was shaped by the dominance of images and clichés of porn. But there was a new twist: raunch culture sold itself as “empowering”, a word which has become so detached from its original definition as to be meaningless.

This is what marks the new sexism from the old. It reflects and has absorbed the history and language of women’s struggles to have the right to assert their sexual needs and desires, to be more than mere objects for the enjoyment of others, all the better to continue that very process. Raunch culture is sold to us as a liberated way to express our sexuality and so, paradoxically, it has persuaded us to accept being objectified in ever more crude and shocking ways. This has led to a relentless seepage of values, images, behaviour and dress from the world of selling sex for money into mainstream culture and society.

Lap dancing clubs began opening in Britain in the late 1990s. But the opening of the first British branch of the international lap dancing club chain Spearmint Rhino in 2000 signalled that stripping had officially moved from the back street to the high street. The clubs were sold as an upmarket experience, a place to entertain business clients. Their garish posters and blacked out windows became ubiquitous in towns and cities across the country. The overt sale of women's bodies became a multimillion pound corporate big business. While the women dancers have to pay from £80 per night for the "privilege" of dancing in the clubs, on top of handing over a percentage of any money earned, managing director John Gray raked in the profits.

City workers flocked to clubs. One finance boss was discovered to have spent £104,000 on a company credit card in the chain. In fact 86 percent of lap dancing clubs in London provide "discreet receipts" which don't feature the name of the lap dancing club. This enables employees who use the clubs in a work context to claim back expenses from their employers without it being evident that the money was spent in a lap dancing club.²²

In reality the culture shift has meant such coyness is rarely needed. The success of this quest for acceptability was proven by the fact that in September 2008 delegates to the Conservative Party conference were given vouchers offering £10 off entry to the Rocket Club, a lap dancing venue in Birmingham, with their official conference literature. Spearmint Rhino even got the royal seal of approval when Prince Harry visited one to celebrate the end of his army training.

Perhaps it might not be so surprising that Tories and bankers have been enthusiastic consumers of lap dancing and the new sexism. But its absorption into popular culture, particularly on university campuses, is.

Campus culture

The transformation of culture in universities in recent years has been dramatic. From the days when sexist posters would have been deemed unacceptable or been ripped down, the images and language used by many campus clubs, bars and societies on posters and advertising are rabidly sexist. "Pimp and ho" club nights abound. There is a celebration of some of the most backward ideas. In Essex University "slave auctions" have been held where women dressed as bunny girls get auctioned to do housework for blokes, all in the name of fundraising.

There has also been the growing promotion of pole dancing masquerading as a great way for women to exercise. Now many colleges and student unions have their own pole exercise societies. One college, South Devon College in Paignton, invited a burlesque and pole dancing company to give a pole dancing exhibition to an audience of 1,000 14 to 19 year olds as part of a Be Healthy Week. One of the company's selling slogans is "Specialists in female empowerment".

Beauty pageants have become a part of student life. The organiser of Miss University, Christian Emile, claims it's not sexist because the women do not wear swimwear and are judged on personality as well as appearance, something Miss World has been claiming to do for years: "The girls wear evening dresses of their own choosing and there are a series of questions to demonstrate their personality and charisma... I don't think it objectifies women. If you talk to any of the contestants, they will tell you it is actually empowering. They get their moment in the spotlight, it's a bit of fun".²³

At Sussex University a woman student returning from the library one evening was surrounded and groped by a group of drunk and naked rugby club members. When a campaign was launched to demand the students' union penalise the club for the behaviour of its members, the union refused citing the importance of forthcoming sporting fixtures to the team.

In Manchester student Freshers Fayres have been targeted by local lap dancing clubs giving away freebies and cut price tickets for students. In Bristol a local popular culture magazine marketed at students runs ads to entice female students into lap dancing to help pay off student loans.

When a woman student took a motion to a students' union meeting at the London School of Economics to challenge the sale of lads mags in the university shop she faced a rampant mob of male students, mainly from the athletics club. Brandishing page three of the *Sun* newspaper they drowned her out with wolf whistles, shouts of "Lesbian" and other "insults". One was asked to leave after he threw a missile at her.

Another example of just how far the boundaries of what is acceptable have shifted in this culture on college campuses was shown by a piece written by one vice-chancellor on lust:

Normal girls—more interested in abs than in labs, more interested in pecs than specs, more interested in triceps than tripos—will abjure their lecturers for the company of their peers, but nonetheless, most male lecturers know that, most years, there will be a girl in class who flashes her admiration and who asks for advice on her essays. What to do?

Enjoy her! She's a perk. She doesn't yet know that you are only Casaubon to her Dorothea, Howard Kirk to her Felicity Phee, and she will flaunt you her curves. Which you should admire daily to spice up your sex, nightly, with the wife. Yup, I'm afraid so. As in *Stringfellows*, you should look but not touch.²⁴ Terence Kealey is boss of the University of Buckingham, Britain's only private university, and his comments appear to come straight out of a world untouched by the idea of women's liberation.

Cosmetic changes

Another symptom of seepage from the sex for sale industry into the mainstream has been well documented—the soaring rates for cosmetic surgery. Breast enhancement may be the most popular surgery but toe shortening and heel implants (for those skyscraper heels) are now being offered. There is also a frightening growth of vaginal cosmetic surgery. One US website promoting the procedure talks about enhancing women's sexuality and self-esteem and is open about where the trajectory of demand for such surgery is coming from:

Not long ago, labiaplasty was usually only performed within a select group of entertainers and performers—women such as swimsuit models, and centerfold models. But today, with the advent of more sexually permissive magazines/videos, apparel and behaviour, the importance of female genitalia is much more prevalent. Most often, labiaplasty is being done for two reasons...medical...and aesthetic.²⁵ Self-esteem issues for women are now to be solved by invasive surgery to carve us into the porn stars we are encouraged to emulate.

Feminist responses

No wonder there is an interest in feminism. It in some ways represents a commonsense political response for women, although women today come to it through quite a different set of experiences from their predecessors in the WLM.

But there is also ambivalence. Some young women say they don't need feminism or don't want to identify as a feminist, that it's old fashioned, they are equal to anyone and feminism is something only for people who see themselves as victims. Also the enduring caricature of feminists as dour man haters who are critical of lifestyles still has a resonance.²⁶ But the rise in interest in women's groups and feminist societies shows that people are looking for a way to resist and challenge the situation. Nevertheless, beyond the general identification of feminism as a political response to sexism, there has been a woeful lack of political theory underpinning the ideas. The recent publication of a number of books on women and the politics of women's liberation is both a symptom and a recognition of the resurgence of interest in the politics of feminism and women's oppression. *Living Dolls*, by journalist Natasha Walter, records the rise of raunch culture and its corrosive effect through interviews with women, from school students to pole dancers. She also examines the resurgence in ideas of biological determinism that see gender attributes as unchanging and unchangeable elements of our genetic makeup.

Nina Power's *One Dimensional Women* looks at how the idea of feminism today, particularly in the US, has become defined by superficial notions of self-gratification, consumerism, and an overwhelming desire to prove that feminism is sexy and fun. In a series of short polemical essays, with titles like "From Sexleftism to Deflationary Acceptance" or "The Money Shot: Pornography and Capitalism", she exposes the impact of raunch culture. Power argues that we are seeing the "feminisation of labour", where all work is based on communication skills and flexibility. She also makes a case that vintage porn, in contrast to what is available today, was harmless fun. *The Equality Illusion* by Kat Banyard (who was until recently a campaigns officer for the Fawcett Society) sets itself out to be an assessment of where women stand today, both in Britain and across the world, a tall order in 240 pages. Based on 100 interviews with women, Banyard looks at the experience of women's inequality today in chapters that each begin with one particular women's story. She looks at violence against women, the sex industry and girls' experiences of discrimination at school, and ends with a chapter on activism and the various groups and campaigns women can join. *Reclaiming the F Word* by Catherine Redfern (who founded the popular F-Word website) and Kristin Aune sets out to be a comprehensive overview of the "new feminist movement". It is also based on interviews and a survey of over a thousand women who have been involved in some way with feminist politics in the last ten years. This is not a polemic pursuing a specific analysis. Instead feminists who want to see a world without prostitution are represented, as are those who see it as just another job that merely needs to be better organised.

Academic titles on aspects of feminist theory are published every year, but what marks these latest books out is that they are aimed at a wider popular market. They represent attempts to theorise the new situation and the nature of feminism today. One other book I refer to is *Feminism Seduced*, by Hester Eisenstein, who describes herself as a Marxist Feminist and argues for a new marriage of Marxism and feminism. This is from a different mould from the books listed above. It is solely concerned with feminism in the US and is aimed at a more academic audience. Most importantly, it has a different, much more sophisticated and nuanced, polemic about the nature of 21st century feminism and its political trajectory since the high point of the WLM in the 1960s. She challenges the "equation of capitalist modernity with the emancipation of women", in particular when this is to enlist feminist support for the war on terror.²⁷

It is fascinating that this tranche of publications have come out at the same time. There is much to commend them, not least the evidence amassed of the reality of the impact of the new sexism.

However, they rarely do more than describe the problem and offer very little to further an understanding of women's oppression, its roots or how to fight it: "At some point in human history the concept of female inferiority was woven into the very fabric of how we see ourselves, how we treat each other, and how we organise society".²⁸

It is worth noting in passing the ghastly irony that two recent books on new feminism (*Full Frontal Feminism* and *The New Sexism*) have naked women's torsos on their front covers. The authors may have had little or no control over the cover design but it shows that even when publishing a critique of the commodification of women's bodies somebody somewhere deems it necessary to do precisely that in order to sell the books.

Some familiar arguments are repeated by the authors, for example the emphasis on the personal experiences of individual women and the elision of the full spectrum of behaviours from sexual harassment to rape as representing "male violence". Banyard exposes the way men are sold the idea that they have to fulfill an image of masculinity, but makes a dangerous leap in logic. Referring to adverts for the Lynx deodorant for men—Lynx Bullet—that describe it as "pocket pulling power", she writes:

In the Lynx Bullet, Unilever are offering men ammunition in their hunt for a sexual conquest. It is sexually callous, and it will undoubtedly sell by the bucket load. It really doesn't require a great stretch of the imagination to see how a culture of hypermasculinity lays fertile ground for violence against women.²⁹

I actually think it does require a quite considerable leap of imagination to assert that Lynx leads to hypermasculinity and male violence. In fact it would be investing in behaviour-changing attributes to the deodorant that even the manufacturers would blush at. But she carries on in a similar vein on the next page:

A man who decides to wolf whistle, holler or beep his car horn at a woman walking past is not realistically going to get a date with her—and he knows that. She is likely to feel intimidated from the very public proclamation that she is a sex object, and he will have proved his masculinity to his friends and co-workers looking on. Within a society of unequal gender relations and cultures of hypermasculinity, violence against women makes a disturbing amount of sense.³⁰

Domestic and sexual violence are very real problems and it is insulting to women who have suffered attacks to equate them on some continuum with being whistled at in the street. But such generalisations abound. For example, "the truth is, nearly all of us are implicated in some way in the ubiquity of the sex industry: either as those who have used pornography, attended a pole dancing lesson, visited a lap dancing club, or simply remained quiet as the sex industry became louder and ever more dominant".³¹

So men who buy Lynx (because the advertisers have spotted that they can exploit young men's lack of confidence in attracting women) are the dangerous enemy and in fact we are all culpable in some way. Women are seen as weak victims throughout. The descriptions that start each chapter supposedly give an insight to one particular woman's life and her suffering of oppression. They read instead like the headlines of the misery lit seen on magazine stands: "Only four stone but she still feels fat", "Trapped with a man who beats her". This is not seriously analysing the situation women find themselves in today and doesn't advance the debate about how we go forward.

Sidelining class

Another familiar theme is the concentration on women without reference to class. Inequality and poverty are always acknowledged in these debates, but are usually seen as yet another variant of discrimination and simply a greater burden to be borne by the unfortunate victim. “Sexism doesn’t operate in a vacuum, but instead interacts with the multitude of other forces shaping our lives, such as race, class, age, disability, and sexuality”.³²

But class is not just one of a list of discriminations, nor can it be reduced to poverty. It is the fundamental divide that shapes the rest of society. A Marxist view of class does not rely on what people think about their position. It is not defined by their income or even what specific tasks they do in their job. Socialists understand class as an objective and dynamic social relationship. Under capitalism a minority class owns and controls the means of producing and accumulating wealth. The working class only exists inasmuch as it is exploited by this class. The capitalists themselves depend on workers selling their labour power to them and creating a surplus off which they can live, invest in future production, etc. The exploiting class have an interest in the most efficient exploitation of their workforce, whatever their respective genders. The superficial trappings of class, for example what sort of homes we live in, what we wear, the holidays we take, all flow from this fundamental relationship, and these change over time.

Marx described how capitalism, by pulling the working class together in ever larger numbers to collectively produce wealth, had created its own gravedigger. It is a social force with immense potential economic power which when mobilised can challenge the very functioning of the system.

However, capitalism also divides us. It generates divisions of race, gender, sexuality and religion, all of which can weaken the ability of workers to successfully take on their bosses. So there is a contradiction: capitalism unites us into the one social force that has the potential to challenge the system, but it also divides workers, encouraging us to blame migrant workers, Muslims or women for the problems in society. But even the pursuit of day to day demands leads to workers cooperating and organising together, whatever the ideas in their heads. In the words of the old trade union slogan, “United we stand, divided we fall”.

There is a crude critique in the new feminist texts of the assertion that class is paramount. This claims that socialists deny the great impact the experience of oppression has on people and their lives and ignores the fact that people across the classes can suffer oppression. But the reality is that you cannot understand the full impact of oppression if you try and look at it in isolation from class.

Of course, oppression cannot be reduced to class. Women in all classes can suffer discrimination merely because they are women. Recent examples of this include the way women ministers in the Labour government were often treated in the media. Here is Rod Liddle in the *Spectator*:

So—Harriet Harman, then. Would you? I mean after a few beers obviously, not while you were sober... Would you? I think you wouldn’t. I think you have more self-respect, a greater sense of self-worth, no matter how much you’ve had to drink. I think you’d make your excuses and leave... I think you’d do the same with most of the babes who were once, or are now, on the government front bench.

That’s the problem with Caroline Flint’s statement that Labour’s most senior women were used by the prime minister as “window dressing”. I mean, would you dress your window with Jacqui Smith, or Ruth

Kelly, or Harriet? If you had a window? You might dress the window with Caroline Flint, who, we should all agree, is as fit as a butcher's dog.³³

Or there was the media reaction to Jacqui Smith making an early speech as home secretary, the first woman to hold the post, which concentrated on the fact that her cleavage was showing.

The *Sun* newspaper used the opportunity to “mark a series of female MPs out of ten for the size of their breasts entitled, ‘the best of breastminster’.”³⁴

This misogyny in the world of politics is echoed in the boardroom. Last year Cynthia Carroll, the chief executive of Anglo American in the UK, was subject to a sexist tirade from former Anglo deputy chairman Graham Boustred, 84, who told South Africa's *Business Day* that women bosses were hard to find, “because most women are sexually frustrated. Men are not because they can fall back on call girls. If you have a CEO who is sexually frustrated, she can't act properly.”³⁵

There is no denying that such treatment is sexist, or that the gender pay gap between the highest paid bankers in the city is a phenomenal 44 percent, or that upper class women are trivialised as trophy wives, or breeding stock for an “heir and spare”. All of this is evidence that oppression can cut across class. But class shapes the very real material differences between the experience of oppression suffered by someone like Cynthia Carroll and millions of working class women. This is not just about economic disparity in society, although there will generally be a correlation.

Most importantly, the contradiction missed by much feminist thinking is that women workers suffer oppression and exploitation, but are also part of the social force that gives them potential power to challenge their position.

Feminists can miss this element because they accept two false assumptions: that working class people have no organised power, even if they perhaps did in the past; and women are excluded from the core sections of the working class in any case and so are denied the ability to organise effectively.

Myths

Women's work is dismissed by the new feminist authors as marginal, peripheral or just providing the top up to male wages. In one instance the rise of women working outside the home is said to be “due partly to property prices necessitating two incomes”.³⁶ This is a stunning and mistaken generalisation since the dramatic rise in women working outside the home began in the late 1960s. It also ignores the fact that women have dominated some occupations for generations. In the British textile industry of the 19th century, for example, women made up a significant proportion of the workforce, in some cases over 50 percent.

Walter wrote in 1998, “Yes, women are working more. But they often work on the fringes of the economy—in atypical jobs. Atypical work means part-time, temporary, seasonal employment; assisting relatives; homeworking; and illegal employment”.³⁷ Can almost half the workforce be deemed “atypical”?

When Power argues that work has become feminised, that the supposed precariousness that women have faced in the world of work now affects all workers, she appears to be accepting that women's role in the world of work has always been fragile and temporary. Redfern and Aune assert a similar argument about the neutering of class power when they claim that “affluent nations have become

post-industrial, outsourcing industrial and agricultural production to poorer countries”.³⁸ Of course, the impact of the economic crisis does mean that everyone feels more insecure about their jobs and future but it is a dangerous leap of logic to then claim the working class no longer has any power. What is the reality behind the myths? Women are not on the margins of the workforce. The evidence shows that trends for the overall employment rate of women and men have been converging since 1971. The employment rate of working age men fell from 92 percent in 1971 to 79 percent in 2008, while the rate for working age women rose from 56 percent to 70 percent over the same period.³⁹ Nor are women’s wages just a top up. Lone parents make up a quarter of all families and 90 percent of lone parents are women. Even in families with two parents working, women’s income is significant. Women’s income represents over half the family income in 21 percent of all working couples.⁴⁰ Even when women have children they are not automatically thrown into a vortex of instability and marginal work. A recent *Labour Force Survey* shows that for women with children under one, the mean length of time they have been with their current employer is over six years.

Also a recent survey by the Department of Work and Pensions shows that since 2002 there has been a dramatic rise in women returning to the same employer after maternity leave. In 2002, 41 percent moved to a new employer, whereas in 2007 only 14 percent did. Staying with the same employer can mean retaining precious pay and skill levels that many women are forced to forego after having children.⁴¹ It’s true that the majority of part-time workers are women, but it doesn’t automatically follow that these part-time jobs are precarious.

We can and should complain about some of the sexist airline ads which virtually imply that the female cabin crew will be a businessman’s sex slave for the duration of his flight. But isn’t it significant that, whatever the advertising clichés, the reality is these very same women have the power to bring an airline company like British Airways to a halt when they decide to strike along side their male colleagues? These are women for whom mimicking a sexist stereotype unchanged since the 1950s and wearing makeup and high heels is part of their job description.

Disputes like BA and the recent PCS strikes by civil service and other public sector workers show women are and can be organised and are playing a leading role: Females had higher union densities in 2009 than males in all occupations except administrative and secretarial, skilled trades, operatives and elementary occupations... For UK employees, male membership in 2009 fell by 157,000 compared with 2008 but only by 6,000 for females over the same period.⁴² Eisenstein shows similar trends in the US, albeit within the much smaller proportion of trade union members there: “Even as the nation’s unionisation rate has declined, the female share of union membership has expanded rapidly. In 2004, 43 percent of all the nation’s union members were women—a record high.” One writer suggests such figures meant that “with close to 7 million women covered by union contracts, organised labour arguably is the largest working women’s movement in the country”.⁴³

Marxism and feminism

Every successive upsurge in the struggle against women’s oppression has seen debates arise between Marxism and feminism. Questions of the relationship between exploitation and oppression, of class and gender, and how best to organise to fight for women’s liberation recur from the 19th century through to today.

The German revolutionary socialist Clara Zetkin was involved in many sharp debates with middle class feminists in the late 19th century and beyond who fought for their rights in the name of women's equality. Time and time again Zetkin made it clear that there was a distinction between the equality that middle class women sought and the more fundamental change that working women would need to win to achieve liberation.

Zetkin's rejection of organising women separately across the class divide did not mean she underestimated the impact of oppression on women's ability to fight. She proposed the annual celebration of International Women's Day precisely to raise the confidence and combativity of women workers, to organise women and fly the flag of socialism and liberation. The power of her writings and speeches rings through the years. In one speech in 1896 Zetkin said:

The liberation struggle of the proletarian woman cannot be similar to the struggle that the bourgeois woman wages against the male of her class. On the contrary, it must be a joint struggle with the male of her class against the entire class of capitalists. She does not need to fight against the men of her class in order to tear down the barriers which have been raised against her participation in the free competition of the market place... Her final aim is not the free competition with the man, but the achievement of the political rule of the proletariat. The proletarian woman fights hand in hand with the man of her class against capitalist society.⁴⁴

Alexandra Kollontai took up the theme in the years of political ferment leading up to the 1917 Russian Revolution when she wrote in 1913 about the bourgeois feminists who appeared to be striving merely for equality with the men of their class:

Their aim is to achieve the same advantages, the same power, the same rights within capitalist society as those possessed now by their husbands, fathers and brothers. What is the aim of the women workers? Their aim is to abolish all privileges deriving from birth or wealth. For the woman worker it is a matter of indifference who is the "master", a man or a woman. Together with the whole of her class, she can ease her position as a worker.⁴⁵

These were not abstract debates. They took place in a period when revolution became a concrete question across Europe and millions of women and men took part in momentous struggles against war, exploitation and oppression.

The debates were revisited after the huge movements and struggles of the 1960s. The dire position of women in the Soviet Union, a state which claimed to be socialist, led some feminists to conclude that socialism did not guarantee women's liberation. They proposed two parallel struggles, one against exploitation and another against oppression and patriarchy.

In response Marxists drew on the rich tradition laid down by past generations of revolutionaries. For example, the pages of this journal were filled with fervent debate on the ideas of Zetkin and Kollontai, the experience of the Russian Revolution and Engels' theory of the roots of women's oppression. The theory of patriarchy was challenged and a new generation of activists were schooled in the ideas of historical materialism and working class revolution ⁴⁶

The ideas of patriarchy had a hold because they appeared to fit reality. The everyday experience of oppression is not abstractly imposed by "the system". It is articulated through real human relationships between individuals. Some feminists, influenced by Marxism, sought to fuse a materialist approach with a defence of the idea of patriarchy. They cited the exclusion by law of

women from certain sectors of production during the industrial revolution as proof that ruling class and working class men had colluded, having a common interest in keeping women out of the workforce.

This interpretation ignored the fact that many women welcomed escaping the factory floor where they had often been forced to work until childbirth before returning within days with their babies at their breast. Levels of infant and maternal mortality were high and for some the changes meant a reprieve from the double burden of wage and domestic labour. As for men, indeed, some trade unions did support the moves because women's lower wages were seen to undermine male wages. But the reality was that many women remained in work and most men did not receive a wage rise equivalent to what the full family had hitherto earned or what the family needed.

Women's low pay and denial of affordable nursery provision save costs for the employers and make the whole working class poorer. Men do not benefit from women's wages being used to undercut them or by less income coming into a household.

For some the logic of patriarchy was to organise separately from men. If men were the problem they could not be part of the solution. Socialists start from the position that we defend the right of the oppressed to organise and to fight however they choose. But we don't believe that women's liberation will be won by women fighting alone. Separating issues of women's oppression from the wider struggle to challenge the system weakens our ability to win.

Numerous women-only vigils and marches were organised in the late 1970s to fend off attacks on abortion rights. But the biggest and most decisive was when the organised working class, women and men, took to the streets in a 150,000 strong demo organised by the TUC. Abortion rights were not seen as a "woman's issue" that only women could be mobilised around. They were rightly seen as a class issue, and on that basis we pushed back the anti-abortion bigots for almost three decades.

To see the working class as having the power to challenge capitalism is not to believe some other force is going to come along and liberate women. Women are at the heart of the working class. The very essence of genuine working class revolution is its ability to lead to the self-emancipation of the mass of humanity. As Marx and Engels put it in the *Communist Manifesto*:

All previous historical movements were movements of minorities, or in the interest of minorities. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority. The proletariat, the lowest stratum of our present society, cannot stir, cannot raise itself up, without the whole superincumbent strata of official society being sprung into the air.⁴⁷

In contrast, the experience of oppression does not automatically lead to resistance, or even unity with other oppressed groups. It can lead to isolation and submission.

Idealism, materialism and Engels

A Marxist explanation of the roots of women's oppression is based on an understanding that it is the material world that shapes the ideas in our heads, not the other way round. The slave trade did not develop because white people were racist: racism developed as justification for slavery, to depict black people as less than human.

Only Marxism has a concrete explanation for the roots of women's oppression that doesn't rest on biological gender determinism or idealism. Walter has put together an excellent exposé of the myth that women's and men's behaviour and abilities are limited and defined by their genetic makeup. Such gender determinism—which claims, for example, that women like pink because they used to have to look for ripe berries in hunter gather societies—has long been a stalwart argument of the tabloids and the right, and is easily disproved.⁴⁸ But some feminists also resort to a form of biological determinism that claims that women are by definition more caring and men are aggressive. For example, there was the common argument put when the financial markets collapsed that claimed male hormones were to blame for increasingly risky betting in the stock markets and that, if women ran things, such crises would not happen;

The *Observer's* business editor, Ruth Sunderland, has referred to "the macho, tooth and claw brand of capitalism that caused the crunch in the first place". The implication is of course that there is an alternative, gentle, feminine capitalism that would bring harmony and wealth all round. This would be laughable if it wasn't being taken so seriously. In Iceland two collapsed banks and the new government headed by women are being heralded as "the end of the age of testosterone"... Dr Ros Altmann said one cause of the crisis was "excess of machismo...there was not the cooperative thinking there would be in a female environment...there would have been a natural tendency for a woman to say, 'Let's take the longer-term view'"... Women have a "caring mindset, a nurturing mindset, a mindset that says let's worry about the future".⁴⁹

Even when biological determinism is rejected there is very little of substance to replace it in recent feminist writing. Instead there is a circular argument: the ideas and expectations about women's and men's roles and behaviour shape our ideas and expectations and behaviour. This is why girls like pink and boys play with trucks, etc. Of course, ideas and expectations have a very profound impact on our behaviour and we have to challenge ideas that serve to justify and maintain inequality and oppression. But we always have to come back to answering the question, where do the ideas come from in the first place?

The pioneering work by Fredrich Engels on women's oppression and the family addressed this question and laid the groundwork for an understanding that still holds today. This analysis points to a materialist explanation for sexist ideas. They are not imbibed with our mother's milk. Instead they flow from a process of socialisation shaped by the way society is structured, in particular in the role the family plays. While Power nods towards Marx and Engels' theories, most of the new feminist writing fails to seriously engage with their breakthroughs or examine the validity of their arguments.

Engels' insights gave us an understanding of how class divisions did not exist for the majority of human history and showed the significance of the transition to the first class societies. He described the changes as the "world historic defeat of the female sex". This "defeat" was rooted in the development of the monogamous family structure in which women became responsible for the private reproduction of the next generation and men became dominant in the sphere of socialised production. This occurred against the background of the transition from living in small bands of hunters and gatherers to the formation of more settled societies based on horticulture or agriculture.⁵⁰

The development of the use of ploughs, irrigation and dams, depending on the climate and land, all made vast differences to human productivity. These new techniques had a significant impact on women's role in society: the use of heavy equipment, the beginning of exchanges of surplus, and contact, some of it hostile, outside the limits of the group. From a period where women's work had

produced at least as much food as men's, and in many cases more, the areas of work that men undertook became more productive and more central to survival over time.

Those who produced the surplus controlled its use, and this in turn gave some men power in the group. Child rearing could not so easily be combined with being at the centre of production and so there developed a division between the ever more private and increasingly recurring role of reproduction (static horticultural or agricultural societies needed and could sustain more hands to work the land) played by women and socialised production increasingly performed by men.

Not all men controlled or produced a surplus. Certain circumstances favoured some over others so the divisions arising also divided men from men. Hierarchies appeared for the first time and these had implications. If you own something others don't and want to keep hold of it and pass it on, inheritance becomes important. One way to identify your legitimate heirs is ensuring monogamy. All these developments had profound implications for the position of women in these societies.

Demonstrating that women's oppression is rooted in how the structure of the family grew with the rise of class society and was not a feature of previous societies is vital to our analysis of how to fight. It can be the hardest point to win. It is counterintuitive. It is much easier to accept that the way we work, live and organise our personal lives is the way it has always been and that we can only tweak it. For example, Redfern and Aune suggest that "men need to be willing to drop some hours of paid work to take up care for their families, and workplaces need to adapt to flexible working hours".⁵¹ But all this does is move the burden around and, of course, it is no answer to women who are single parents. So even for feminists who acknowledge the role class plays, who accept that capitalism is a problem and who see a role for working class struggle, the failure to understand the material roots of women's oppression leads to the twin track approach: one struggle against exploitation, and another against oppression and patriarchy. Today, however, patriarchy is rarely fully theorised and is more often just used as a description of a situation where women are discriminated against.

In his notes at the end of his classic article "Women's Liberation and Revolutionary Socialism", Chris Harman wrote that his assertion that revolutionary socialists "do not believe women's oppression is something that has always existed—either because of the biological differences between the sexes or because of something inherent in the male psyche...caused more argument among people to whom I showed the first draft of this article than virtually any other".⁵²

Harman goes through the studies and anthropological data in detail. He examines the flaws, including the motivation and class background of the (mostly) men who carried out the earliest anthropological studies. But the undeniable evidence remains that humans have lived in communities that have been organised in a myriad different ways.

There have been societies in which people did not live in nuclear families, women were not second-class citizens, gay sex was not deemed abnormal, people's skin colour was not seen as important and national boundaries did not exist. There are many examples of societies where women's oppression—the systematic discrimination against women—is not a feature. There have been societies where women have commanded more power than men and others where gender differences are of little or no importance. The essential point is that women and men have lived in different ways in the past and so could potentially live in different ways in the future.

The family today

Today, although the majority of women are not solely dedicated to giving birth and raising children, the role of the family still has enormous economic and ideological benefits for the system: economic because individual families undertake the entire costs of bring up the next generation; ideological because families are encouraged to see themselves as atomised, self-contained units where, if you are poor or unemployed, you blame yourself rather than racism in society, economic crisis or education cuts.

The family is also seen by many as a haven from a brutal world that otherwise treats each of us as a mere cog in the impersonal system. The family can be the one place where we can expect and receive unconditional love and support. Family life is eulogised in the media, advertising and popular culture. References to “hardworking families” were a constant refrain during the general election from politicians of all the main parties.

Marriage is still portrayed as the ultimate aspiration for women. Despite generations of women being a part of the workforce, the home is still assumed to be the woman’s sphere. It is she who must juggle work, shopping, housework and childcare in order to fulfil society’s (and often her own) expectations of her “natural” role. This leads to women often accepting low paid or part-time jobs that fit round school hours and holidays, for example.

At all times the state supports and reinforces this “traditional” view of gender division, with men also expected to fulfil expectations of being the provider. The Tories want to offer tax breaks for couples who marry because they are worried by the trend of people rejecting compliance with the traditional family unit. Women have children later than ever before. Some choose to remain childless. Since the 1970s there has been a fall in the proportion of babies born to women aged under 25 in England and Wales, from 47 percent (369,600 live births) in 1971 to 25 percent (180,700 live births) in 2008.⁵³ While traditional ideas about the family do not fit the reality of society today, their resilience reflects the fact that the it has survived as a dominant social structure, despite many profound changes in how we live and work. It serves an important purpose in maintaining and justifying the status quo. This is the material bedrock for the ideas about women that permeate society.

Fighting for women’s liberation now

Socialists need to start from what unites us with newly politicised women identifying with feminism—their rejection of sexism and anger at injustice and discrimination, and a willingness to fight. We can win a new generation to revolutionary socialism, but not by shrilly denouncing feminism.

We will also do such women a disservice if we merely argue for a different brand of feminism—a socialist or Marxist feminism, for example. Our view of the world and the fundamental revolutionary change we are fighting for are more than one particular approach to fighting for women’s rights. We fight against women’s oppression in its every expression but believe that socialist revolution is the only way that genuine women’s liberation will be achieved.

It is vital that we engage with the new debates. Some may think we can simply rehash arguments we had decades ago. That would be a mistake. Activists coming to these ideas have had a very different experience than women in the 1960s. There are women in many areas of life that were barred to them 40 years ago. Today’s generation have lived through a period when they have been spun the lie that they have it all. They have seen women in government; they have grown up with the assumption that they will work for a living; they have seen the internet transform the ability to access porn; and they

have seen some of the gains of the 1960s, the freedom to express their sexuality, distorted into a clichéd stereotype and sold as liberation.

Marxists have engaged in past debates about pornography and prostitution, commodification and sexual liberation and we have much to offer in the current debates.⁵⁴ Marx wrote of the process of alienation, the ability of capitalism to turn intrinsic parts of our humanity into alien objects to be bought, sold and possessed. We are forced to sell our ability to labour if we want to survive. So even our sexuality is transformed into something alien from us. New freedom of expression, which was hard fought for, is distorted by the system's drive to turn everything into a source of profit. Liberation is turned into its opposite: women feel the pressure to conform to ever more exaggerated caricatures of what is deemed to be sexy, while men are encouraged to see themselves as helpless prisoners of their testosterone: sexually aggressive and insatiable.

So when we talk about fighting against the new sexism we have to make it clear we are for genuine sexual liberation, for increased openness about sex and sexuality. We do not stand with the Tories and others who have a deeply reactionary agenda about sexuality and the role of women in society.⁵⁵ We must distance ourselves from those who criticise the new sexism with ideas that decree that women should be demure and passive when it comes to sexual relations, or that seek to limit sex education in schools or impose censorship. Censorship allows the judges and politicians of the ruling class to sit as arbiters of what is acceptable for us to read, watch and produce. We make it clear that what we oppose is the crass commodification of women's bodies that poses as sexual confidence.

We are in the grips of a global economic crisis, coined by the TUC as an "equal opportunities crisis".⁵⁶ This is because women are a greater proportion of the workforce today than ever before. They will suffer equivalent job cuts and redundancies alongside men. So far the evidence points to men losing jobs at a greater rate than women but it is not conclusive. However, the plans for devastating cuts to public spending planned by the newly elected government will also have an effect. When services for the elderly, for people with disabilities, for children and so on, suffer cuts, it will be assumed that women in working class families, who most depend on such services, will fill the gap. It is clear there will be much to fight for in the coming months. What are the strategies on offer from the new feminist writers? They do advocate getting active. Banyard lists all the campaigning groups women can join. Redfern and Aune suggest writing to your MP, challenging your boyfriend, changing your lifestyle. For example, in response to sexism in popular culture: "Diversify your consumption... reject lazy stereotypes about men and women that you hear in everyday life".⁵⁷ None of these suggestions sound remotely adequate in the face of the problems the authors themselves have described.

Instead we have to win w

omen who are coming to politics because of their experience of women's oppression to a different political tradition, one that does not separate women from the wider struggles of our class. Every period of great working class resistance and revolt has seen the question of women raised. It is no surprise that right now, after a period when working class struggle has not demonstrated its ability to challenge the system, individual lifestyle solutions, or organising separately as women, might initially seem to be the only option.

History has shown that when the oppressed organise to fight back they can inspire mass movements of opposition, but if they remain focused on a single issue they come up against the limits of existing society.

The women's movement of the 1960s was shaped by the assumption that the system was expanding, going forward. There was a feeling that each generation would have a better quality of life and greater opportunities than the last. And for many this was a reality.

Today capitalism is in a prolonged and deep crisis, with brutal wars a permanent feature and climate change posing a threat to the very survival of our planet. Millions in Britain feel a profound sense of anxiety about the future and there is no sense of possibility that the system can deliver a more equal and fulfilled life for ordinary people. The impact of the unbridled market in the name of neoliberalism has ripped away any illusions that collective provision for the vulnerable in society can be expected any longer.

The argument that we need to challenge the capitalist system itself is a popular one. Many of the young women who declare themselves feminists, who sticker over sexist ads or set up new websites and feminist groups, are far from hostile to socialist ideas.

We need to join together with such women in the struggles we face, whether it's against cuts in education or the Tories' potential attempts to attack abortion rights. We should organise debates and protests about sexist advertising and about the fight for genuine sexual liberation. We must be part of every fight against the manifestations of women's oppression but all the time with a vision of how we can win a society free from oppression altogether.

Notes

- 1: Observer, 31 May 2009.
- 2: www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=322
- 3: Guardian, 13 February 2009.
- 4: Economist, 30 December 2009.
- 5: EHRC, 2008, p8.
- 6: EHRC, 2008, p8.
- 7: Orr, 2003, p8.
- 8: Walter, 1998, p7. Emphasis added.
- 9: Cliff, 1984, p86.
- 10: Lenin, 1984, p75.
- 11: Orr, 2009a, p21.
- 12: Trotsky 1970, p73.
- 13: Evans, 1980, p87.
- 14: Evans, 1980, p120.
- 15: Eisenstein, 2009, p1.
- 16: Quoted in Eisenstein, 2009, p131.
- 17: Walter, 1998, p36.
- 18: Valenti, 2007, p1.
- 19: Power, 2009, p11.
- 20: Eisenstein, 2009, p13.
- 21: Levy, 2005, p3.
- 22: Fawcett Society, 2009, p6.
- 23: Saner, 2008.
- 24: Times Higher Education, 17 September 2009.

- [25: www.labiaplastysurgeon.com](http://www.labiaplastysurgeon.com)
- 26: C Scharff, 2009.
- 27: Eisenstein, 2009, p200.
- 28: Banyard, 2010, p8.
- 29: Banyard, 2010, pp121-122.
- 30: Banyard, 2010, p123.
- 31: Banyard, 2010, p141.
- 32: Banyard, 2010, p206.
- 33: Rod Liddle, Spectator, 8 August 2009.
- 34: Walter, 2010, pp121-122.
- 35: Guardian, 9 July 2009.
- 36: Redfern and Aune, 2010, p124.
- 37: Walter, 1998, p23.
- 38: Redfern and Aune, 2010, p113.
- 39: BIS, 2010, p10.
- 40: TUC, 2009, p4.
- 41: BIS, 2010, p15.
- 42: <http://stats.bis.gov.uk/UKSA/tu/TUM2009.pdf>
- 43: Quoted in Eisenstein, 2009, p216.
- 44: Foner, 1984, p77.
- 45: www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1913/womens-day.htm
- 46: See Cliff, 1981a; Cliff, 1981b, and German, 1981.
- 47: Marx and Engels, 1848.
- 48: Walter, 2010, p145.
- 49: Orr, 2009b.
- 50: Engels, 1978, p65.
- 51: Redfern and Aune, 2010, p133.
- 52: Harman, 1984, pp3, 37 n1.
- 53: ONS, 2009, p3.
- 54: For example, McGregor, 1989, and more recently, Pritchard, 2010, and Dale and Whittaker's response elsewhere in this issue.
- 55: Liebau, 2007, is an example of the right wing response in the US.
- 56: www.tuc.org.uk/economy/tuc-15872-fo.cfm
- 57: Redfern and Aune, 2010, p203.

References

- Banyard, Kat, 2010, *The Equality Illusion* (Faber and Faber).
- BIS, 2010, *Work and Families Act 2006 Evaluation Report*(March 2006), www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/employment-matters/docs/10-844-work-families-act-2006-evaluation
- Cliff, Tony, 1981a, "Clara Zetkin and the German Socialist Feminist movement", *International Socialism 13* (summer).
- Cliff, Tony, 1981b, "Alexandra Kollantai: Russian Marxists and Women Workers", *International Socialism 14* (autumn).
- Cliff, Tony, 1984, *Class Struggle and Women's Liberation*(Bookmarks).

EHRC 2008, *Sex and Power*, www.equalityhumanrights.com/advice-and-guidance/here-for-everyone-here-for-business/working-better/sex-and-power/

Engels, Fredrich, 1978 (1884), *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (Foreign Languages Press), www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/index.htm

Eisenstein, Hester, 2009, *Feminism Seduced* (Paradigm).

Evans, Sara, 1980, *Personal Politics* (Vintage).

Fawcett Society, 2009, *Corporate Sexism*, www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/documents/Corporate%20Sexism.pdf

Foner, Philip S (ed), 1984, *Clara Zetkin, Selected Writing*(International Publishers).

German, Lindsey, 1981, "Theories of Patriarchy", *International Socialism* 12 (summer).

Harman, Chris, 1984, "Women's Liberation and Revolutionary Socialism", *International Socialism* 23 (spring) www.marxists.org/archive/harman/1984/xx/women.html

Kollontai, Alexandra, 1998, *Kollontai on Women's Liberation*(Bookmarks).

Marx, Karl and Fredrich Engels, 1848, *The Communist Manifesto*, www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/nov/06.htm

Levy, Ariel, 2005, *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (Free Press).

Liebau, Carol Platt, 2007, *Prude: How the Sex-Obsessed Culture Damages Girls* (Center Street).

McGregor, Sheila, 1989, "Rape, Pornography and Capitalism", *International Socialism* 45 (winter), www.marxists.de/gender/mcgregor/rapeporn.htm

ONS, 2009, *Social Trends, Households and Families* (4 December), www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_social/Social-Trends40/ST40_Ch02.pdf

Orr, Judith, 2003, "Body for Sale", *Socialist Worker* (12 March), www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=3998

Orr, Judith, 2009a, "Z is for Zhenotdel", *Socialist Review*(September), www.socialistreview.org.uk/article.php?articlenumber=10938

Orr, Judith, 2009b, "Lehman Sisters?" *Socialist Review* (March), www.socialistreview.org.uk/article.php?articlenumber=10747

Power, Nina, 2009, *One Dimensional Woman* (Zero Books).

Pritchard, Jane, 2010, "The Sex Work Debate", *International Socialism* 125 (winter), www.isj.org.uk/?id=618

Redfern, Catherine, and Kristin Aune, 2010, *Reclaiming the F word* (Zed).

Rowbotham, Sheila, 2010, *Dreamers of a New Day* (Verso).

Saner, Emine, 2008, "Betraying the Student Body", *Guardian* (5 December), www.guardian.co.uk/education/2008/dec/05/students-gender

C.Scharff (2009) *Young women's Dis-identification with Feminism: Negotiating Heteronormativity, Neoliberalism and Difference* (Unpublished PhD thesis, London School of Economics).

ONS, 2009, *Social Trends 2009* (Office for National Statistics), number 39.

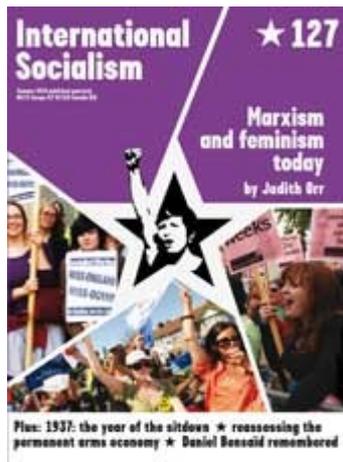
Trotsky, Leon, 1970, *Women and the Family* (Pathfinder).

TUC, 2009, *Women and Recession*, www.tuc.org.uk/extras/womenandrecession.pdf

Valenti, Jessica, 2007, *Full Frontal Feminism* (Seal Press).

Walter, Natasha, 1998, *The New Feminism* (Little, Brown).

Walter, Natasha, 2010, *Living Dolls* (Virago).



New Resources on this website:

For more click on the "Resources" tab above

[Videos from the ISJ event on 'Marxism and Revolution Today' with Alex Callinicos, Claire Ceruti, Neil Davidson and others](#)

[Videos from a discussion of the crisis and the left in Europe with Charlie Kimber and Giorgos Pittas](#)

[Videos from the ISJ conference on 'Crisis, Class and Resistance' with Robin Blackburn, Alex Callinicos, Guy Standing and others](#)

[Why the Earth Summit Failed by David Treece – originally published in ISJ 56](#)

[Video: ISJ seminar on "Egypt, Tunisia and revolution in the 21st century" with Gilbert Achcar and Anne Alexander](#)

["The sex work debate: a response to Jess Edwards" by Thierry Schaffauser](#)

[Video: Seminar on 'Racism in Britain today' with Richard Seymour"](#)

[Audio: Alex Callinicos on the International Socialist tradition in political economy](#)

[Continuing crisis in Thailand](#)

[A report on the presidential election in Cyprus](#)

[Audio: full recordings from the recent International Socialism conference Marxism and Political Economy](#)

[Audio: Harman, Brenner and Itoh discuss the world economy today at Historical Materialism's annual conference](#)

[A report on Turkey's recent elections](#)

[New book on Thailand's coup](#)

From our archives

[The roots of gay oppression \(Norah Carlin 1989\)](#)

[The 'workers' government \(Chris Harman 1977\)](#)

[A critique of Nicos Poulantzas \(Colin Barker 1979\)](#)

[Theories of Patriarchy \(Lindsey German 1981\)](#)

[Mike Kidron on Marxist political economy \(1974\)](#)

[The State and Capital \(Chris Harman 1991\)](#)

[Gramsci versus Eurocommunism \(Chris Harman 1977\)](#)

[The changing working class \(Alex Callinicos and Chris Harman\)](#)