

Will women always be oppressed?

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With a backlash against women's liberation, it seems that all the gains of recent years are under attack. Why is this happening and how can we fight for real liberation? Lindsey German provides some answers

A book which asserts that 'date rape' is a figment of women's imagination. A novel by the author of Jurassic Park which talks about the dangers of sexual harassment that men face. A number of notorious court cases where women are pilloried for their sexuality. A headmistress who is denounced by the media for being a lesbian.

It all seems a little more than coincidental. The insidious message being put across is that women have to accept their place as inferior. The gains women made in the 1960s and 1970s have redressed the balance too far, and now men are reasserting their rights.

Underlying it all is the 'postfeminist' view: it is no good fighting to change things. Women have to compete on the same terms as men. If they fail to do so, their oppression is their own fault. And if they decide they want to be independent-for example those single mothers who prefer to bring up their children without a man-then they cannot be surprised when men feel threatened.

It would be easy to believe that the world is full of women who grope men at work, cry rape the morning after, and act in such an aggressive way that they turn men into quivering wrecks, too frightened to assert their 'natural' male dominance. The opposite is true.

The facts about women's lives are stark. Every study of rape accepts that the crime is under-reported. One study found that instances of rape were five times higher than the reported figures. A study by America's Ms magazine showed that a quarter of women college students had experienced rape or attempted rape since the age of 14. Sexual harassment at work is now commonly the subject of industrial tribunals.

Women may be workers on an unprecedented scale-10 million of them are in the workforce in Britain today-but they come to the labour market still

carrying the burden of women's oppression. They earn, on average, little more than two thirds the earnings of men. The new jobs being created are increasingly women's jobs: low wage and often part time.

The lack of availability and high cost of childcare means that the majority of working class women with young children are forced to live at home on benefits while caring for their children or working inconvenient shifts which fit in with their partners' work.

The dream of women's liberation in the late 1960s and early 1970s was that women's oppression could become a thing of the past. The real gains won by women at the time-the Equal Pay Act, a sex discrimination law, abortion and contraceptive rights, freer divorce-were all seen as stepping stones to complete equality. Recognition of issues concerning women, such as domestic violence and rape, was demanded by those who knew that the courts, the police and the family structure were all stacked against women. The right of women accusers of rape to be anonymous was won after a series of cases where women's past sexual experiences were used by reactionary judges to heap the blame on them.

Twenty years on at least some of these gains are under attack. Blame the victim has become the watchword of the moral crusaders, centred in the Tory government itself, who want to reduce the number of single mothers, make divorce harder to obtain, and patch up the family whatever horrible secrets lurk within the walls of the family home.

And while some women have done extremely well out of the legal and financial equality ushered in by the 1970s, they remain very firmly in the minority. For every career woman on a high salary, with car, house and nanny or au pair, there are ten in low paid work with few of the material advantages which can help lessen the burden of women's oppression. Some would argue that the movements of the 1960s and 1970s were a failure, that they only created greater opportunity for a tiny layer of women. But it is precisely the changes in women's lives which have created the attempted backlash now. In the 1950s single mothers would have been stigmatised, often forced to put their children out for adoption, and treated as a shameful family secret.

Today single mothers are angry at attacks which try to make them out to be scroungers or somehow immoral. They point to the hypocrisy of their

accusers who preach the sanctity of the family but follow a quite different set of values.

The same is true at work. Women today expect and demand the right to work, and refuse to accept that they should be kept in the home as some bigots want. However it is also true that real liberation seems as distant as ever. In a world where the basic provisions of the welfare state are under attack, where having millions unemployed is regarded as normal, where health cuts make it harder to receive free abortion or contraception, women are finding that many of the services they took for granted are no longer available or are under threat.

Is real women's liberation an impossible dream? No, but it has come up against the limits of capitalist society. Ideas of women's equality arose at the time of the great French Revolution, just over 200 years ago. Its slogans of liberty, equality and fraternity were taken up by feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft, who argued that women too should have their freedom. But the gains of the revolution only went so far. It achieved a system of democracy, but it didn't challenge the existence of private property and so could not achieve real equality and freedom. Rich and poor alike had the vote (eventually) but the economic power of the rich allowed them to make the real decisions about how society was run and to wield real power.

Ideas of women's liberation have faced the same problem. The legal and financial independence achieved by some women under capitalism cannot be true liberation, because women's oppression itself is rooted in class society.

That class society long predates capitalist society itself. Frederick Engels, the great 19th century revolutionary, argued that the development of private property led to the creation of a society divided into classes-essentially of those who owned the wealth and those who did not-and the creation of a state machine, to protect the property of those who owned it, and a family, to ensure that it was passed to the rightful heirs. This represented the development of women's oppression, the monogamous family and with it the 'world historic defeat of the female sex'.

Every form of class society has created its own form of family, and has maintained the oppression of women at its centre. Capitalism itself would,

Engels believed, lead to the disappearance of the working class family. The worker's family, unlike that of the ruling class, was not based on property and so had no basis for existence. Engels based his views on the early 19th century families who worked in the cotton textile industry. Here men, women and children all worked for wages outside the home, and many of the basic feeding and caring functions of the family were performed as services outside the home.

But the family did not disappear. Instead-especially in the second half of the 19th century-it appeared to be strengthened. Many workers desired a family home and a wife who did not need to work and so could care for her husband and children full time. Although the majority of male workers probably never received the 'family wage' which was supposed to make this possible, it became the ideal to which the majority aspired.

Men and women workers did so because they saw the alternative as worse: women working up to 18 hours a day, breast feeding or suffering miscarriages at their machines, children working from as young as four and sustaining terrible injuries.

The needs of the capitalists were also beginning to change. Increasingly, they needed a more stable, skilled and educated workforce. They needed a family where the next generation of workers (and the existing generation) could be fed, cared for, socialised and given rudimentary health care and education-at minimal cost to the capitalist class itself.

The role of the family in the reproduction of labour power was and is central to its existence-and to the oppression of women-today. It is often said that the capitalist system itself acts to break down the family. The pressures on working people mean that the reality of the family does not match the ideal. Families are torn apart by emigration, having to move jobs, or by the pressures of school and work. The divorce rate has soared, teenagers can't wait to leave home, more and more people live outside the conventional nuclear family.

At the same time governments and the state machine act to in, to shore up the family. There are laws to regulate domestic violence, education of children, sexual relations, as well as marriage and divorce. The whole apparatus of social work is designed to prop up a family institution which constantly fails its members.

The state and its representatives have become some of the main oppressors of women. If women's oppression were just due to individual men, it would be much easier to deal with. It is because the actions of individual men are backed up, reinforced or legitimised by the state itself that women's oppression becomes such a burden and why there is no easy way out of oppression without a fight to get rid of that state.

Some feminists argue that it is not capitalism, but patriarchy, that oppresses women. It is said that patriarchy is a separate and parallel system to capitalism which will not be defeated by the overthrow of capitalism. But women's oppression has material roots-inside the capitalist family-whereas the concept of patriarchy (literally 'the rule of the father' but more often meaning a system of male domination) has no such material roots.

Patriarchy does not explain why men dominate, except to say that they have always done so. More importantly, it does not explain why the very structures of capitalism oppress women. It is these, rather than the wishes of individual men, which create women's low pay or the lack of decent childcare facilities.

Patriarchy theory assumes an unchanging relationship between men and women since time immemorial, and has deeply pessimistic implications. Yet if women's oppression is structured into capitalism and its family, then it will take much more than changing men's individual attitudes to end oppression. If we locate oppression in class society then we can only end it by fighting to end class society.

The fight for women's liberation and for socialism are therefore part of the same fight.

Will socialism be the answer to women's oppression? Surely there will still be male chauvinists, still be sexual harassers, even still be a few rapists after the revolution? Won't women still be the carers and the servicers, even if they care for more than their own children? And won't some women want to live within a conventional family as the place where they feel most secure?

In the process of making a revolution millions of women will begin to realise their potential in a way that they never did within the family.

Millions of men will begin to see women not as good cooks or sex objects or loving mothers, but as working class fighters.

But women's oppression has lasted for thousands of years. It goes deeper than any other oppression, both because of the length of time it has existed and because it concerns the most intimate, sexual-both loving and oppressive-relationships between people. So all the problems of oppression will not disappear in the first days or months of revolution. Human beings will have to make choices and decisions about how they achieve their own liberation. But there are some material changes which will lay the preconditions for women's liberation and, eventually, the liberation of all humanity.

Firstly, the resources of society will be channelled into easing the burden of oppression. In capitalist society very little is spent on making women's lives easier and pleasanter. Spending on areas such as childcare is usually meagre and often temporary, designed to fit the needs of capital at any one time (such as temporary nurseries during the Second World War when women workers were needed). In a socialist society money would not be spent on dangerous nuclear weapons, handouts for the rich or subsidies for public schools.

Instead money would go into improving the lives of workers in health, education and childcare. Central to that would be providing an alternative to the family: places where food is prepared, children cared for or washing done. Responsibility for children, the old and the sick, and ensuring adequate care outside the family for those who need it, would be taken by the whole community, not by individual women and men within the family. Housing provision would be on the basis of shared assessed need, not wealth.

The role of the press and the law would also be completely different from today. Whereas today these institutions reflect the oppression of women, with the stereotypical images that they project, in a socialist society they would reflect exactly the opposite. This would not mean the disappearance of male chauvinism, but it would mean that sexist ideas would cease to be the respectable currency of society.

From day one of the revolution there would not be liberation, but there would be complete social, legal and financial equality for women, which

would not only be a massive step forward but moreover would create the conditions for women to achieve their own liberation.

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