

Feminism & Socialism

Putting the Pieces Together

Document of the DSP

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Contents

Introduction by Lisa Macdonald	5
1. The Rise of the Second Wave of Feminism	14
2. The Origin & Nature of Women's Oppression	17
Women's oppression & class society	17
The family system	18
The family under capitalism	21
3. The Basis of the New Radicalisation of Women	26
The first wave of feminism	26
Post-World War II period	27
1. <i>Advances in birth-control technology</i>	28
2. <i>Labour market participation</i>	28
3. <i>Educational levels</i>	30
4. <i>Changes to the family</i>	31
4. Women's Liberation & Other Social Movements	33
The sexual revolution	33
Lesbian-feminist radicalisation	34
Anti-colonial & anti-racist struggles	35
Crisis of religion	36
The antiwar movement	36
Gains under attack	37
5. Responses to the Rise of the Women's Movement	38
Lip-service from the capitalist rulers	38
The far right & abortion access	40
Response of social-democratic parties	41
Trade union bureaucracy	43
Impact on the communist parties	44
Communist Party of Australia	46
New political formations	47

6. Women in the Workers' States: Liberation Betrayed	48
Political counter-revolution	49
Contradictory situation	51
Women's reproductive control & sexuality	52
Collapse of the Soviet bloc	53
Future directions for ex-Soviet bloc women	54
Lessons for the women's movement	56
7. Women's Liberation in the Third World	58
Impact of imperialist domination	58
Peasant production	59
Effect of urbanisation	61
Workforce participation	61
Lack of basic rights	63
Reproductive rights & birth control	64
The way forward	66
National liberation struggles	67
Revolutionary Cuba	68
The Sandinista experience in Nicaragua	69
8. Development of the Women's Movement	72
Organisational fragmentation in the First World	73
Networking in the Third World	74
Theoretical differences	76
Justifying fragmentation	77
Developments in the class struggle	79
9. The Democratic Socialist Party & the Struggle for Women's Liberation	82
The independent women's liberation movement	83
Women-only groups	84
Our commitment to women's liberation	85
Essential demands	88
a. <i>The right of women to control their own bodies</i>	89
b. <i>Full legal, political & social equality for women</i>	89
c. <i>The right of women to economic independence & equality</i>	90
d. <i>Equal educational opportunities</i>	90
e. <i>The right of women to freedom from sexual violence & exploitation</i>	91
f. <i>Against the suppression of human sexuality</i>	92

Introduction

By Lisa Macdonald

Feminism and Socialism: Putting the Pieces Together is a resolution adopted by the 14th National Conference of the Democratic Socialist Party held in January 1992. It is the latest of a series of resolutions adopted by the DSP since its founding in 1972 analysing the nature of women's oppression as part of the ongoing fight to achieve a socially just, democratic and ecologically sustainable future for us all.

The DSP and its associated youth organisation, Resistance, came out of the same struggles that led to the rise of the women's liberation movement in the early 1970s. A strong commitment to women's liberation has been integral to the building of the party over the last 25 years.

The DSP and Resistance have played an important part in the struggles and campaigns of the movement — from the first Sydney Women's Liberation Conference in January 1971 and the first big International Women's Day march in Melbourne in 1972, to the IWD marches and the campaigns of today.

We have been involved in most of the major campaigns for women's rights over those 25 years: in the fight for women's control over their reproduction and fertility organised by the Women's Abortion Action Campaign; in struggles to get the trade union movement to take up women's demands through the Working Women's Charter Campaign; and in struggles to break down sex segregation and discrimination in industry such as in the Jobs for Women campaign which forced BHP to employ women in its Port Kembla and Newcastle steelworks and to pay compensation to them for its discriminatory hiring practices. This campaign established the first class action case in Australia.

We have struggled on the job for better wages and conditions for women; in the community against violence and rape, and for better services for women; on campuses

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for better educational opportunities for women; and against homophobia and discriminatory practices on all fronts.

We have been part of the struggle to free women from the narrow definition of their social role as wives and mothers within the family. In part, this fight has been to reassert positive self-definitions and images of women by women, as well as the struggle against censorship so that women can explore their health, their fertility and their sexuality without accusations of obscenity and the consequent acts of repression.

Neo-liberalism

Today, feminism and women's rights are under the most severe attack in 40 years. Efforts to drive back the rights won by the 1970s women's movement are gathering momentum.

Attacks on women's control over their fertility and their bodies; funding cuts to community child-care services, rape crisis centres and women's refuges; and the dismantling of anti-sex discrimination and equal opportunity programs are all part of a concerted drive by Australian capitalism to claw its way out of economic stagnation and increase its profit margins by cutting public expenditure and production costs.

The neo-liberal economic policies of the Liberal-National Coalition government (and the Labor government before it) of driving down wages and working conditions and cutting the social wage are impacting particularly severely on women. Government spending cuts in education, health, aged care and welfare services, and the extension of user-pays in these sectors, are driving women, already disadvantaged in their access to decent jobs and public services, into greater poverty and exhaustion as they are burdened with the re-privatisation of service provision into the family.

These concrete attacks have been accompanied by a concerted ideological campaign to convince all those who depend on wages or benefits to survive that user-pays is equitable and that it is the family, not government, that is best placed to provide these services. Women, we are told, must assume more responsibility for the care of children, the aged and sick within the family home.

This ideological campaign against feminism is an integral part of the ruling class's offensive against *all* progressive ideas and expectations.

Rolling back the mass consciousness that remains from the second wave of feminism — that women have the right to equal educational, workplace and personal choices and opportunities — and convincing women that their most important roles are in the family, is necessary if capitalism is to create a more “flexible” work force (more part-time, casual, exploitable labour) and cut the social wage without paying too high a political price.

This does not mean that the ruling class wants a return to the social conditions of the 1950s when most women stayed at home and men went out to work.

In the '50s, men's wages were viewed as a "family wage". When equal wages were formally introduced in the '70s, there began a period of wage erosion by stealth. Under the 1983-96 ALP-ACTU Prices and Incomes Accord, wages were sharply eroded (this is continuing under the Coalition government). The full impact of this erosion, however, was masked by women's entrance into the labour force in unprecedented proportions. Two pay packets are now necessary to cover household costs.

Women, who today make up almost 50% of the work force, are now the major source of cheaper labour available to capitalists. Women's wages, even if still secondary in the household income, enable men's wages to be cut without generating massive social unrest. The lower wages paid to women also exert a permanent downward pressure on men's wages.

However, if the capitalists' austerity drive is to be depended and sped up, women's *expectations* of state and society to improve their lot must be lowered.

To this end, throughout the 1990s the capitalist media have heralded "the end of feminism", propagandising that women have achieved equality and that demands for more for women are "going too far". Those who dare to point out the persistence of gender inequality and demand justice are vilified and silenced by being labelled "politically correct thought police".

This accusation is based on the myths that in capitalist society we all start life equal and everyone has equality of opportunity. Regardless of differences in family wealth or the historic legacies and continuing operation of structural inequalities based on gender, race, etc., the myth dictates that society operates as a level playing field. Any attempt to overcome the weight of historic inequality for particular groups of people by offering special programs to enhance equality of opportunity is thus labelled "politically correct" and stigmatised as preferential treatment.

This ruling-class backlash has created more space for the extreme right to go on an ideological offensive against the gains of the second wave of feminism. After two decades of marginalisation by active, progressive social movements, the politics of scapegoating is on the rise again and women — who "take men's jobs", "neglect their children", "get rich on their ex-husbands' alimony payments", "kill their unborn children", and so on — are in the firing line, along with indigenous people, migrants and young people. This offensive by the far right has, in turn, pushed the mainstream political debate further to the right, facilitating faster and harder attacks on women's rights by the parties of government.

Liberal feminism

Resistance to this rapid erosion of the ground gained for women during the 1970s has been extremely weak.

It's not that masses of women aren't aware of the implications of the attacks, or aren't angry about them. Young women, in particular, are participating in significant numbers in campaigns against austerity on a wide range of fronts.

But, reflecting the demobilisation, fragmentation and conservatisation of the women's liberation movement over the last 20 years, there have been few mobilisations against the specific attacks on women's rights in the '90s. This is a direct result of the 1983-1996 Australian Labor Party government's success at coopting the leaderships of all social movements, including the women's liberation movement.

During the 1980s, most of that leadership was bought off. The creation of a few new government bureaucracies to address feminist concerns, and more government funding for women's programs (\$1.3 billion was paid by the federal government to women's organisations and programs in 1994/95 alone), generated niche jobs and career paths for many of the movement's leaders.

While some legal reforms were won during the '80s, these concessions to the movement (such as the Sex Discrimination Act in 1984 and the Affirmative Action Act in 1986) were often unenforceable and imposed only minor, if any, penalties for non-compliance. Without an accompanying economic redistribution in society, they also remained inaccessible to many women. Despite these formal rights being largely toothless, however, their granting was effectively used by the new femocrats to deflect criticism of and bolster support for the ALP. A small minority of individual women "made it" in the process. While women are still a tiny minority in the boardrooms and executive offices of the big corporations and banks (the holders of these positions are still largely determined by class and gender position), there are now more women with "management" careers in parliament, the bureaucracy, academia and the media than ever before.

As well, many of the feminist activists who were initially the militant edge of the movement, became entrapped in government-funded women's services, doing welfare work and often politically compromised by the fear of having funding withdrawn.

The political independence of the movement and mass consciousness around women's liberation was thereby held in check and undermined. Liberal feminism — the view that women's oppression is no more than a form of discrimination that can be eradicated within capitalism simply by winning complete formal equality — grew stronger, strangling the radical potential of the movement.

This occurred both directly via the femocrats and women politicians who actively

demobilised campaigns that threatened the electoral strength of the Labor Party (their source of funds and career paths), and indirectly through the lobbying methods and reformist perspective encouraged by these feminists who worked hard to prevent any radical break from Laborism by the movement.

However, liberal feminism, didn't win dominance in the movement just because its perspective and methods were fundamentally in harmony with the Labor government. The grip of liberalism on the movement was strengthened by the weakness of that section of the socialist wing of the movement which, being shaped by Stalinism and Eurocommunism (primarily through the influence of the Communist Party of Australia), could provide no clear alternative leadership for the movement.

Many of the women who made it under the ALP still argue today for women's rights — after all, they benefited in a disproportionate way from the gains made by the feminist movement. But in practice, these women align themselves with ruling-class interests. While advocating equal rights and the need for women's organisations, they fail to build public support for feminist demands or to use their positions to mobilise people for improvements in the situation of the majority of women.

When they do act in the interests of the majority, it is only in so far as this does not conflict with or undermine their own interests which flow from the privileged positions they now occupy and protect.

These liberal feminists have deserted the project of building a mass women's movement that aims and acts to improve the living conditions of all women. They are now opponents of such a movement which, if powerful and successful, would challenge and defeat their own agendas and (class-determined) interests.

Despite the fundamentally conflicting interests of liberal feminists and the mass of women, over the past decade "feminism" has come to be publicly defined *by* and *as* liberal feminism. Liberal feminists have much greater access to the money, the media and the public policy decision-makers than working-class women or the left. And the capitalist media and political parties are only too eager to promote the transformation of "feminism" from a broadly based, militant movement against women's oppression and for the collective transformation of society — the women's liberation movement — to one defined in terms of individual rights, individual achievements and individual solutions which, bit by bit, without challenging the fundamental structures, or the ruling elites and their ideas, will enable more women to increase their role and career opportunities within the status quo.

Liberal feminists may have publicly claimed the word feminism as their own, but theirs is not a feminism that serves the interests of the majority of women. Nor is it a feminism that the majority of women can identify with: Seats in parliament,

consultancies, lectureships and academic publications are a far cry from the reality of most women's lives.

It is not surprising, therefore, that survey after survey shows that while this generation of young women support and expect equal rights for women, they do not identify as "feminists".

Postmodernism

As in all social movements over the last decade, the weakening of the women's liberation movement occurred in the context of a broader demoralisation and demobilisation of the left.

The ruling-class offensive in capitalist countries during the 1980s, the collapse of the Stalinist regimes at the beginning of the '90s and the subsequent propaganda campaign about the "death of socialism" and the "end of history", forced a rapid retreat by major sections of the traditional left.

This manifested itself in the rise of postmodernism, the form in which liberalism found a new lease on life.

Postmodernist explanations of women's oppression and how to overcome it gained influence in university women's studies departments and in broader feminist networks in all advanced capitalist countries.

In place of the early movement's discovery and focus on women's common experience of oppression in capitalism, postmodernist feminism emphasised "diversity" — the *differences* between men and women, and between women themselves at the individual level, whether based on race, class, religion, ethnicity or psychology.

The politics of difference flow from postmodernism's refusal to seek an understanding of society in terms of the general laws shaping individuals' development and experiences. It argues that because some who have spoken in the name of science and progress in this society have silenced and exploited marginal or less powerful groups, then science and progress as a whole must be rejected. This appears within the feminist movement characteristically as an opposition to science and reason because these are "male discourses", defined wholly by "male value systems". Counterpoising itself to the "universalising" of knowledge and experience, postmodernist feminism asserts that everyone perceives, understands and responds to things differently from everyone else. In practice this means that everyone does their own thing, believes in their own thing, values the individuality of their experiences and ideas, and (supposedly) respects everyone else's individuality. This lays a basis for a politics of lifestyle and personal identity where living out your own life becomes a substitute for political activity and collective action. The economic, social and psychological oppression

common to women is theorised out of existence.

The individualisation of feminist politics by postmodernism was a direct blow to women's desire, confidence and ability to organise and carry out collective struggles for reforms (let alone their full liberation). In the desire not to speak for anyone else, in the desire not to marginalise or "oppress" other women by expressing shared experiences, the point is reached where you can no longer see the commonalities between your own and others' experiences — the things that unite you against an oppressor, the things that would encourage you to reach out and act in solidarity.

As a strategy for liberation, the idea that "we are all individuals" is founded on the illusion that it is possible to profoundly change society to eradicate women's oppression on a piecemeal basis, sector by sector, or one by one, without the need for alliances and common struggle. This perspective flows from and reinforces the idea that getting more individual women into "decision-making" positions within the structures of the status quo is the most effective path to gender equality.

But even a cursory study of radical history, reveals that every significant step towards greater freedom has been won by large numbers of people banding together in struggle. That has been as true for the women's liberation movement as any other.

'Feminist' lifestylism

The dominance of liberal individualism has led to the movement being swamped by careerism, consumerism and lifestylism.

Consuming the media-created images of "feminism" in the '90s — the looks, the venues, the literature, etc. — is now seen by many as "being feminist". Whole industries servicing and selling products to the "self-conscious feminist" have developed. Capitalism is making a nice profit out of "feminist" consumerism.

This lifestylism is not feminism. It is an individual pseudo-solution to women's oppression available only to the (shrinking) minority of women who can afford to "live the life". By abandoning any notion of collective oppression and collective struggle against it, lifestylism does nothing to empower women to struggle for equality, let alone help them win that struggle.

In fact, "feminist" lifestylism actually disempowers women by perpetuating the illusion that women individually can buy their liberation, and by conveying the message that those women who fail to do this are in some way inadequate individuals.

Do-It-Yourself feminism

The latest manifestation of liberal feminism is "Do-It-Yourself" (DIY) feminism. This so-called "third wave" of feminism, heavily influenced by postmodernism, arose as a

direct response to the betrayal of the leaders of the '70s movement who are now firmly ensconced in “feminist” careers and are seen by younger women to have defined feminism according to their own image — patronising, exclusive, bureaucratised and consciously aligned with the establishment. Kathy Bail’s 1996 book *DIY Feminism* says: “For young women, rather than one feminism there are a plethora of feminisms mostly going under new and more exciting tags... This change is allied with a do-it-yourself style and philosophy characteristic of youth culture.”

Despite rejecting the constrictions and conservatism of the “professional” liberal feminists, however, DIY feminism has not escaped its clutches. Rather than a break with it, DIY feminism is a continuation, in fact a deepening, of the individualistic outlook of the femocratic feminism it purports to reject.

“Riot grrrls”, “guerilla girls”, “net chicks”, “geekgirls”, “deep girls”, “action girls”, “cyber chix”, etc. — DIY feminism makes examples of and encourages women to “go for it/go for themselves” and be successful. It not only adopts as its own the sexist language that is predominantly used in this society to trivialise and demean women as immature, non-adults (“chicks” and “girls”), but it assumes that the institutionalised barriers to women’s equal participation in all spheres of society no longer exist.

Implicitly, if not explicitly, DIY feminism thereby dismisses, even condemns, women who have not “done it for themselves” in their chosen area, or who dare to “complain” that sexism is a barrier. The fact that women’s choices of careers, hobbies, interests etc. are not made freely, but shaped and limited by sexism (and racism and their class position), is not even considered.

DIY feminism is, in fact, a step *further* backwards for women’s liberation in so far as it is premised on a more complete and conscious rejection of those aspects of the second wave that made it strong enough to win some reforms for women — the rejection of collectivity and organisation.

Our solution

This resolution advocates a very different strategy. It explains women’s oppression from a Marxist perspective, as a product of class society which will only be ended when we get rid of all vestiges of class society.

While liberal feminism abandons the project of achieving such fundamental social change for the pursuit of individual solutions, women are still being raped, exploited, starved, denied land rights and murdered. The struggle for equality, real justice and freedom is still in front of us and, given the current offensive against women’s rights, becoming more and more distant.

To win that struggle, we need to learn the lessons of history, of those victories that

were won by the movement over the years. The key lesson is that we need to build a women's liberation movement that is broad, inclusive, creative, active and uncompromising in its pursuit of equality and justice for women.

The struggle for equality for women is not a struggle of women against men as their oppressors, but a struggle against the oppression of class society. Feminism must therefore develop a strategy of building alliances with other oppressed groups — educating each other about our different experiences of oppression, but strengthening the links which unite us to fight for an end to class society and for the construction of a society in which everyone has the same life choices and opportunities irrespective of race, class and sex.

The only movement that can defend and extend women's rights, let alone fully liberate women, is a mass movement; that is, a movement that addresses the needs and aspirations of the majority of women, rather than a privileged few.

October, 1997

1. The Rise of the Second Wave of Feminism

Since the late 1960s there has been a growing revolt by women against their oppression as a sex. Throughout the world, millions of women, especially young women — students, working women, housewives — have challenged some of the most fundamental features of their centuries-old oppression.

The first country in which this radicalisation of women appeared as a mass phenomenon was the United States. Thousands of women's liberation groups blossomed and tens of thousands of women mobilised on the August 26, 1970 demonstrations commemorating the 50th anniversary of the victorious conclusion of the US women's suffrage struggle.

But the new wave of struggles by women in North America was not an exceptional and isolated development, as the emergence of the women's liberation movement throughout the advanced capitalist countries soon demonstrated. By the early 1980s it had become a truly international phenomenon, spreading across Third World countries as well.

In Australia, as in other advanced capitalist countries, the women's liberation movement developed as part of a more general upsurge of the working class and other exploited and oppressed sections of the population. Here the upsurge took many forms — from workers' struggles for the right to strike (as in the 1969 general strike against the jailing of union leader Clarrie O'Shea), to struggles to win equal pay for women and the right of married women to permanent employment, to struggles by Aborigines against racist oppression, to mass demonstrations against Australia's role in the imperialist war in Vietnam.

Although the women's liberation movement began among students and professional women, the demands it raised, combined with the growing contradictions within the capitalist system, began to mobilise much broader layers. It began to affect the consciousness, expectations, and actions of significant sections of the working

class, male and female.

But in virtually every case, the women's liberation movement arose outside of, and independent from, the existing mass organisations of the working class, which were then obliged to respond to this new phenomenon. The development of the women's movement thus became an important factor in the political and ideological battle to weaken the hold of the bourgeoisie, and its political agents within the working class.

This new radicalisation of women has been unprecedented in the depth of the economic, social, ideological and political ferment it expresses and its implications for the struggle against capitalist oppression and exploitation.

In country after country, women have taken part in large-scale campaigns against reactionary abortion and contraceptive statutes, oppressive marriage laws, inadequate childcare facilities, and legal restrictions on equality. They have exposed and resisted the myriad ways in which sexism is expressed in all spheres — from politics, employment, and education to the most intimate aspects of daily life, including the weight of domestic drudgery and the violence and intimidation that women are subjected to in the home and on the street.

Women have raised demands that challenge the specific forms their oppression takes under capitalism today, and called into question the deep-rooted traditional division of labour between men and women, from the home to the factory. They have demanded affirmative action programs to open the doors previously closed to women in all arenas, and overcome the legacy of centuries of institutionalised discrimination.

They have insisted upon their right to participate with complete equality in all forms of political, social, economic, and cultural activity — equal education, equal access to jobs, equal pay for equal work.

In order to make this equality possible, women are searching for ways to end their domestic servitude. They have demanded that women's household chores be socialised and no longer organised as "women's work". The most conscious have recognised that society, as opposed to the individual family unit, should take responsibility for the young, the old, and the sick.

At the very centre of the women's liberation movement has been the fight to decriminalise abortion and make it available to all women. The right to control their own bodies, to choose whether to bear children, when, and how many, is recognised by millions of women as an elementary precondition for their liberation.

Such demands go to the very heart of the specific oppression of women exercised through the family system and strike at the pillars of class society. They indicate the degree to which the struggle for women's liberation is a fight to transform all human social relations and place them on a new and higher plain.

Women's oppression has been an essential feature of class society throughout the ages. But the practical tasks of uprooting its causes, as well as combating its effects, could not be posed on a mass scale before the era of the transition from capitalism to democratic socialism.

The struggle for women's liberation poses the problem of the total reorganisation of society from its smallest repressive unit — the family — to its largest — the state. The liberation of women demands a thoroughgoing restructuring of society's productive and reproductive institutions in order to maximise social welfare and establish a truly human existence for all. Without a socialist revolution, women will not be able to establish the material preconditions for their liberation. Without the conscious and equal participation of broad masses of women, the working class will not be able to carry through the socialist revolution and bring into being a classless society.

2. The Origin & Nature of Women's Oppression

The oppression of women is not determined by their biology, as many contend. Sexual difference is a biological reality but oppression and discrimination have not always been attached to such a difference. The origin of such oppression is economic and social in character. Throughout the evolution of pre-class and class society, women's childbearing function has always been the same. While women's social roles have changed from society to society, their social status has not always been that of a degraded domestic servant, subject to man's control and command.

Before the development of class society, during the historical period that Marxists have traditionally referred to as primitive communism (hunter-gatherer societies), social production was organised communally and its product shared equally. This did not mean that different tasks were not carried out by the various sub-groupings based on age, gender, etc. within the larger social group. But it meant that there was no exploitation or oppression of one sub-group by another. No material basis for such exploitative social relations existed. Both sexes participated in social production, helping to assure the sustenance and survival of all. The social status of both women and men reflected the indispensable roles that each played in this productive process for the survival of the group as a whole. Social differentiation was not linked to inequality.

Women's oppression & class society

The origin of women's oppression is intertwined with the transition from pre-class to class society. The exact process by which this complex transition took place is a continuing subject of research and discussion even among those who subscribe to a historical materialist view. However, the fundamental lines along which women's oppression emerged are clear. The change in women's status developed along with the growing productivity of human labour based on agriculture, the domestication of animals, and stock raising; the rise of new divisions of labour, craftsmanship, and commerce; the

private appropriation of an increasing and permanent economic surplus; and the development of the possibility for some humans to prosper from the exploitation of the labour of others.

In these specific socio-economic conditions, as the exploitation of human beings became profitable for a privileged few, women, because of their biological role in production (i.e., the social production to maintain the existing generation and their production of the next generation), became valuable property. Like slaves and cattle, they were a source of wealth. They alone could produce new human beings whose labour power could be exploited. Thus the purchase of women by men, along with all rights to their future offspring, arose as one of the economic and social institutions of the new order based on private property. Women's primary social role was increasingly defined as domestic servant and child-bearer.

Along with the private accumulation of wealth, the family unit developed as the institution by which responsibility for the unproductive members of society — especially the young — was transferred from society as a whole to an identifiable individual or small group of individuals. It was the primary socio-economic institution for perpetrating from one generation to the next the class divisions of society between those who possessed property and lived off the wealth produced by the labour of others, and those who, owning no property, had to work for others to live. The destruction of the egalitarian and communal traditions and structures of primitive communism was essential for the rise of an exploiting class and its accelerated private accumulation of wealth.

The family system

This was the origin of the family institution. In fact, the word family itself, which is still used in the Latin-based languages of today, comes from the original Latin *famulus*, which means household slave, and *familia*, the totality of slaves belonging to one man.

The oppression of women was institutionalised through the family system. Women ceased to have an independent place in social production. Their productive role was determined by the family to which they belonged, by the man to whom they were subordinate. This economic dependence determined the second-class social status of women, on which the cohesiveness and continuity of the family has always depended. If women could simply take their children and leave, without suffering any social or economic hardship, the family would not have survived through the millennia.

The family and the subjugation of women thus came into existence along with the other institutions of the emerging class society in order to buttress nascent class divisions and maintain the private accumulation of wealth. The state, with its police and armies,

laws and courts, enforced this relationship. Ruling-class ideology arose on this basis and played a vital role in the degradation of the female sex. Women, it was said, were physically and mentally inferior to men and therefore were “naturally” or biologically the second sex. While the subjugation of women has always had different consequences for women of distinct classes, all women regardless of class were and are oppressed as part of the female sex.

There is no other institution in class society whose true role is as hidden by prejudice and mystification as that of the family. Bourgeois moralists claim that the family is the basis for the natural and moral unity of society. Bourgeois anthropologists perpetuate the myth that the family unit has always existed. They deny the fact that the family originated with and flowed from the development of private property, class society and the state. They obscure the fact that in pre-class society the basic social unit was the clan and that within each clan goods were shared in common. Clan structures are not the same as the family system, which is based on a legally binding marriage contract that enables the transmission of private property.

Throughout the history of class society, the family system has proved its value as an institution of class rule. The form of the family has evolved and adapted itself to the changing needs of the ruling classes as the modes of production and forms of private property have gone through different stages of development. The family system under classical slavery was different from the family system during feudalism. Under classical slavery, the family institution was restricted to the slave-owning class (there was no family system among slaves). Under feudalism, the family system was extended to the labouring class, the serfs, who owned some means of production (small plots of land, animals, and hand tools), and was the basic unit through which social production was organised. By contrast, the urban “nuclear” family of today has ceased to be a unit of social production.

Moreover, the family system simultaneously fulfills different social and economic requirements in reference to classes with different productive roles and property rights whose interests are diametrically opposed. For instance, the “family” of the serf and the “family” of the nobleman were quite different socio-economic units. However, they were both part of the family *system*, an institution of class rule that has played an indispensable role at each stage in the history of class society.

The disintegration of the family under capitalism brings with it much misery and suffering precisely because no superior framework for human relations can yet emerge. In class society, the family is the only institution to which most people can turn for the satisfaction of some basic human needs, including love and companionship. This is especially true of those doubly oppressed on racial, ethnic, etc. grounds. However

poorly the family may meet these needs for many, there is no real alternative as long as class society exists. Nevertheless, the main purpose of the family is not to provide such basic needs. It is an economic and social institution whose functions can be described as follows:

- a. The family is the basic mechanism through which the ruling classes abrogate social responsibility for the economic well-being of those whose labour power they exploit — the masses of humanity. The ruling class tries, to the greatest degree possible, to force each family to be responsible for its own, thus institutionalising the unequal distribution of income, status and wealth.
- b. The family system provides the means for passing on property ownership from one generation to the next. It is the basic social mechanism for perpetuating the division of society into classes.
- c. For the ruling class, the family system provides the most inexpensive and ideologically acceptable mechanism for reproducing human labour power. Making the family responsible for care of the young means that the portion of society's accumulated wealth — appropriated as private property — that is utilised to assure production of the labouring classes is minimised. Furthermore, the fact that each family is an atomised unit, fighting to assure the survival of its own, hinders the most exploited and oppressed from uniting in common action.
- d. The family system enforces a social division of labour in which women are fundamentally defined by their childbearing role and assigned tasks immediately associated with this reproductive function — care of other family members. Thus the family institution rests on and reinforces a social division of labour involving the domestic subjugation and economic dependence of women.

The family system is a repressive and conservatising institution that reproduces within itself the hierarchical, authoritarian relationships necessary to the perpetuation of the class divisions. It molds the behavior and character structure of children from infancy through to adolescence. It trains, disciplines, and polices them, teaching submission to established authority. It then curbs rebelliousness, nonconformist impulses. It represses and distorts all sexuality, forcing it into socially acceptable channels of male and female sexual activity for reproductive purposes and socioeconomic roles. It inculcates all the social values and behavioral norms that individuals must acquire in order to survive in class society and submit to its domination. It distorts all human relationships by imposing on them the framework of economic compulsion, personal dependence, and sexual repression.

The family under capitalism

Under capitalism, as under previous socio-economic formations, the family has evolved. But the family system continues to be an indispensable institution of class rule fulfilling all the economic and social functions outlined.

Among the bourgeoisie the family provides for the transmission of private property from generation to generation. Marriages often assure profitable alliances or mergers of large blocks of capital, especially in the early stages of capital accumulation.

Among the classical petty-bourgeoisie, such as farmers, craftspersons or small shopkeepers, the family is also a unit of production based on the labour of the family members themselves.

For the working class, while the family provides some degree of mutual protection for its own members, in the most basic sense it is an alien class institution, one that is imposed on the working class, and serves the economic interests of the bourgeoisie not the workers. Yet working people are indoctrinated from childhood to regard it (like wage labour, private property and the state) as the most natural and imperishable of human relations.

It is absurd to speak of abolishing the family. Democratic socialism seeks to remove the economic and social compulsion that drives the vast majority into the family system at the present time, and to give individuals a far wider and freer range of choices as to how they live. Nevertheless, a socialist transformation will inherit many of the institutions of the old society, including the family. The role of the family will only wither away as society as a whole takes increasing responsibility for people's needs.

Capitalism has refined and modified the oppression of women to suit its own needs and ensure economic benefits. Yet the emergence of capitalist industrialisation contains many contradictory features for the maintenance of women's oppression:

- a. With the rise of capitalism and the growth of the working class, the family unit among workers ceases to be a small scale familial unit of production although it remains the basic unit through which consumption and reproduction of labour power are organised. Each member of the family sells his or her labour power individually on the labour market. The basic economic bond that previously held together the family of the exploited and oppressed — i.e., the fact that they had to work together cooperatively in order to survive — begins to dissolve. As women are drawn into the labour market they achieve some degree of economic independence for the first time since the rise of class society. This begins to undermine the acceptance by women of their domestic subjugation. As a result, the family system is undermined.

- b. Thus there is a contradiction between the increasing integration of women in the labour market and the survival of the family. As women achieve greater economic independence and more equality, the family institution begins to disintegrate. But the family system is an indispensable pillar of class rule. It must be preserved if capitalism is to survive.
- c. The growing number of women in the labour market creates a deep contradiction for the capitalist class, especially during periods of accelerated expansion. They must employ more women to profit from their superexploitation. Yet the employment of women cuts across their ability to carry out the basic unpaid domestic labour of child-rearing for which women are responsible. So the state must begin to buttress the family, helping to assure and subsidise some of the economic and social functions it used to fulfill, such as education, childcare, care of the sick and elderly, etc. But such social services are more costly than the unpaid domestic labour of women. They absorb some of the surplus value that would otherwise be appropriated by the owners of capital. They cut into profits. Moreover, social programs of this kind foster the idea that society, not the family, should be responsible for the welfare of its nonproductive members. They raise the social expectations of the working class.
- d. Unpaid work by women in the home — cooking, cleaning, washing, caring for children — plays a specific role under capitalism. This household work is a necessary element in the reproduction of labour power sold to the capitalists (either a woman's own labour power, her husband's, or her children's, or that of any other member of the family). A recent survey (1990) by the Australian Bureau of Statistics has estimated that women's unpaid work in the home is the equivalent to 60% of the Gross Domestic Product.
- ... Other things being equal, if women did not perform unpaid labour inside the families of the working class, the general wage level would have to rise. Real wages would have to be high enough to purchase the goods and services which are now produced within the family. (Of course the general standard of living necessary for this production of labour power is historically determined at any given time in any country. It cannot be drastically reduced without a crushing defeat of the working class.) Any general decrease of unpaid domestic labour by women would thus cut into total profits, changing the proportion between profits and wages in favor of the working class.
- .. It is thus the capitalist class — not men in general, and certainly not male wage earners — which profits from women's unpaid labour in the household.
- e. The indispensable role of the family and the dilemma that the growing employment

of women creates for the ruling class becomes clearest in periods of economic crisis. The capitalist rulers must accomplish two goals:

- They must drive a significant number of women from the labour force to re-establish the reserve labour pool and lower wage levels.
- They must cut the growing costs of social services provided by the state and transfer the economic burden and responsibility for these services back onto the individual family of the worker.

In order to accomplish both of these objectives, they must launch an ideological campaign against the very concept of women's equality and independence, and reinforce the responsibility of the individual family for its own children, its elderly, its sick. They must reinforce the image of the family as the only "natural" form of human relations, and convince women who have begun to rebel against their subordinate status that true happiness comes only through fulfilling their "natural" and primary role as wife-mother-housekeeper. But since the impact of the second feminist wave, the capitalists are now discovering that despite appeals to austerity and dire warnings of crisis, the more thoroughly women are integrated into the workforce, the more difficult it is to push sufficient numbers back into the home.

- f. This is different from the early stages of industrialisation when the unregulated, unbridled, brutal exploitation of women and children went so far as to seriously erode the family structure in the working class and threaten its usefulness as a system for organising, controlling, and reproducing the workforce.

This was the trend that Marx and Engels drew attention to in 19th century England. They predicted the rapid disappearance of the family in the working class. They were correct in their basic insight and understanding of the role of the family in capitalist society, but they misestimated the latent capacity of capitalism to slow down the pace of development of its inherent contradictions. They underestimated the ability of the ruling class to step in to regulate the employment of women and children and shore up the family in order to preserve the capitalist system itself.

... Under strong pressure from the labour movement to ameliorate the brutal exploitation of women and children, in the last quarter of the 19th century the capitalist state intervened in the long-term interests of the ruling class — even though this cut across the aim of individual capitalists to squeeze every drop of blood out of each worker for 16 hours a day and let them die at 30.

- g. Capitalist politicians responsible for shaping policies to protect and defend the interests of the ruling class are extremely conscious of the indispensable economic, social, and political role of the family and the need to maintain it as the basic social nucleus under capitalism. "Defence of the family" is not only some particular

demagogic shibboleth of the ultraright. Maintenance of the family system is the basic political policy of every capitalist state, dictated by the social and economic needs of capitalism itself.

Under capitalism, the family system also provides the mechanism for the superexploitation of women as wage workers:

- a. It provides capitalism with an exceptionally flexible reservoir of labour power that can be drawn into the labour force or sent back into the home with fewer social consequences than any other component of the reserve army of labor.

Because the entire ideological superstructure reinforces the fiction that women's place is in the home, high unemployment rates for women cause relatively less social protest. After all, it is said, women work only to supplement an already existing source of income for the family. When they are unemployed, they are occupied with their household chores, and are not so obviously "out of work". The anger and resentment they feel is often dissipated as a serious social threat by the general isolation and atomisation of women in separate, individual households. Thus in any period of economic crisis, the austerity measures of the ruling class always include attacks on women's right to work, including increased pressure on women to accept part-time employment, exclusion from unemployment benefits for "housewives", and the reduction of social services such as childcare, health, mental and physical retardation, aged facilities.

- b. Widespread acceptance of the sexist idea that women's place is in the home enables capitalists to justify the superexploitation of their labour by:
 - The employment of women in low-paying, unskilled jobs.
 - Unequal pay rates and low pay.
 - The sex segregation of industry.

This fosters deep divisions within the working class itself, weakening its ability to take united action in defence of its class interests.

- c. Since all wage structures are built from the bottom up, this superexploitation of women as a reserve workforce plays an irreplaceable role in holding down men's wages as well. Women workers are not proportionally integrated into the trade unions and other organisations of the working class so that differential working conditions and benefits provide a further base for capitalism to divide and rule.
- d. The subjugation of women within the family provides the economic, social, and ideological foundations that make their superexploitation possible. Women workers are exploited not only as wage labour but also as a pariah labour pool defined by sex.

The involvement of large numbers of women in industry generates a

contradiction between the increasing economic independence of women and their domestic subjugation within the family unit, propelling women to fight against their superexploitation and the sexist ideology that props it up. Since women's oppression is fundamental to class society such struggles bring women to the realisation that in order to achieve their liberation a thoroughgoing restructuring of society will have to take place.

3. The Basis of the New Radicalisation of Women

The women's liberation movement builds from the gains of the earlier struggles by women at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century.

The first wave of feminism

With the consolidation of industrial capitalism in Europe and North America throughout the 19th century, increasing numbers of women were integrated into the labour market. The gap between the social and legal status of women inherited from feudalism, and their new economic status as wage workers selling their labour power in the market, produced glaring contradictions. For women of the ruling class, too, capitalism opened the door to economic independence. Out of these contradictions arose the first wave of women's struggles aimed at winning full legal equality with men. The major focus of this civil equality was the question of suffrage.

Among those fighting for women's rights were different political currents. Many of the suffragist leaders were women who believed the vote should be won by showing the ruling class that they were loyal defenders of the capitalist system. Some linked the suffragist struggle to support for imperialism in World War I and often opposed the right to vote for propertyless men and women, immigrants, and non-whites.

But there was also a strong current of socialist women in a number of countries who saw the fight for women's rights as part of the working-class struggle for the abolition of voting based on property qualifications and mobilised support from working-class women and men on that basis. They played a decisive role in the suffrage struggle in countries like the United States, Britain, and Germany. They also raised and fought for other demands such as equal pay and contraceptive services.

In Australia, women's right to vote was much more tied to electoral manoeuvring by bourgeois parties at the State level rather than large-scale mobilisation of women. Women received the vote in South Australia and Western Australia in the 1890s.

Negotiations to establish federation led to the adoption of universal franchise by 1902 in the Commonwealth. The other States lagged behind, but by 1908 women had the vote in all States.

The leading organisational force advocating women's enfranchisement across Australia was the Women's Christian Temperance League, whose main activity was directed toward changing the morals of the working class and restricting drinking hours. Specific suffragist groups were established only in NSW and Victoria. These groups in turn divided along political lines. These political divisions — between the conservative parties, the Labor Party, the small socialist groups within and outside the ALP, and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) — continued as women mobilised around the conscription issue during the First World War.

Women's suffrage, following or sometimes accompanying universal male suffrage, was an important objective gain for the working class. It reflected, and in turn helped advance, the changing social status of women. For the first time in class society, women were legally considered citizens fit to participate in public affairs, with the right to a voice on major political questions, not just private household matters.

Through struggle, women in most advanced capitalist countries won, to varying degrees, several important civil rights — the right to higher education, the right to engage in trades and professions, the right to receive and dispose of their own wages (which had been considered the right of the husband or father), the right to own property, the right to divorce, the right to participate in political organisations and the right to stand for public office.

Even though the underlying cause of the subordinate status of women lies in the very foundations of class society itself and women's special role within the family, not in the formal denial of equality under the law, the extension of democratic rights to women gave them greater latitude for action and helped later generations see that the manifestations of women's oppression lay deeper.

Post-World War II period

The basis of the second wave of feminism lies in the economic and social changes of the post-World War II years, which have effected deepening contradictions in the capitalist economy, in the status of women, and in the family system. To varying degrees the same factors were at work in every country that remained within the world capitalist market. But it is not surprising that the resurgence of the women's movement today first came about in the most advanced capitalist countries — such as the United States, Canada, Australia and Britain — where these changes and contradictions had developed the furthest. These factors included:

1. Advances in birth-control technology

Advances in medical science and technology in the field of birth control and abortion have created the means by which masses of women can have greater control over their reproductive functions. Control by women over their own bodies is a precondition for women's liberation.

While such medical techniques are more widely available, reactionary laws, reinforced by bourgeois customs, religious bigotry, and sexist ideology often stand in the way of women exercising control over their own reproductive functions. Financial, legal, informational, psychological, and "moral" barriers are fabricated to try to prevent women from demanding and exercising the right to choose whether and when to bear children. In addition, the limits placed on research due to capitalist profit considerations and sexist disregard for the lives of women, have meant continuing health hazards for women using the most convenient methods of birth control.

This contradiction between what is possible and what actually exists affects the lives of all women. It has given rise to powerful abortion rights struggles, which have played a key role in building the women's liberation movement internationally.

2. Labor market participation

The prolonged economic boom conditions of the postwar expansion significantly increased the percentage of women in the labour force.

For example, in Australia in 1950, 19% of all women 15 to 64 years of age were in the labour force. By 1975 this had doubled. Between 1960 and 1975, nearly two-thirds of all new jobs created were taken by women. Working women accounted for 20.5% of the total labour force in 1901; 22.8% in 1954 and 41.8% by 1991. Equally important, the percentage of working women who were married increased dramatically, from 12.5 in 1933, until today when over half of all mothers with dependent children under 14 years are in the workforce.

As the influx of women into the labour force has taken place, there has been substantial change in the degree of wage discrimination against women. In many countries this differential between the sexes has actually widened. In Australia the right to equal wages wasn't won until the late 1960s and the plan to implement the shift was phased in between 1972 and 1975. But equal pay only applied to "work of equal value" and was interpreted in the narrowest way to mean only identical work. So this hasn't meant that women's wages now equal men's. Sixteen years on, the average female wage is 33% lower than the average male rate. Even where women work in comparable jobs with men their earnings are 5-6% lower.

While gender differentials in over-award payments is a factor, inequality of wage

levels are primarily because the increased employment of women has not been spread evenly over all job categories. In nearly all countries women represent from 70-90% of the work force employed in textiles, shoes, ready-to-wear clothing, tobacco, and other light industry — that is, sectors in which wages are lowest. Women also account for 70% or more of those employed in the service sector, with the great majority of women occupying the least remunerative positions: secretaries, file clerks, health workers, teachers in primary schools, keyboard operators.

In Australia, the sex segregation of women by industry group into the three major areas of clerical, sales and services is the highest in the world. Women's work in these areas is not valued at an equivalent rate to the work of men in similarly skilled, predominantly male industries. And estimates of future employment growth continue this trend tomorrow's worker will be a female, working part-time in the private services sector of industry.

There has been further work force segregation within Australian industry in this period. Shortage of labour led to the massive immigration program from the late 1940s onward. Increasingly, non-English speaking immigrants have moved into the unskilled areas of work in both traditionally male and female-segregated industry. The failure of the labour bureaucracy to combat the discrimination faced by non-English speaking immigrant workers, particularly women workers, has weakened unionisation and led to greater wages differentials and erosion of conditions in areas predominantly employing these workers.

Women are further disadvantaged in promotional opportunities and career paths. Until the late 1960s married women could only occupy temporary positions in the public service. Since State and Commonwealth public services provided many of the clerical opportunities for women workers, and promotion depended on length of permanent service, women were highly under-represented in the medium and upper levels of the occupational hierarchy where higher rates of pay apply. Other factors such as discriminatory hiring practices and interview techniques for promotion exacerbated the gap in wages.

Despite their growing place in the work force, women are still forced to assume the majority, if not the totality, of domestic tasks in addition to their wage labor. This has led to a significant increase in part-time work by women — either because they cannot find full-time employment, or because they cannot otherwise cope with their domestic chores in the absence of cheap quality child care. But part-time work invariably brings with it lower wages, less job security, fewer working condition benefits, and less likelihood of unionisation.

Increasingly, since the early 1970s, employers have moved to lower labour costs,

erode conditions and increase productivity. This has led to a decline in full-time work and a massive growth in part-time and casual work. These moves have disproportionately affected women workers and their wages. Men form 59.8% of the paid workforce, but they hold almost 70% of full-time jobs; 51.9% of employed women work part-time, i.e., women account for 78% of all part-time workers.

The growing proportion of women in the paid work-force has had a strong impact on the attitudes of their male fellow workers, helping to break down sexist stereotyping. This is especially true where women have begun to fight their way into jobs in traditionally male-dominated industries from which women were previously excluded.

But women workers still face many forms of discrimination and sexist abuse — promoted, organised and maintained by their bosses. Their fellow workers are often not aware of these, and/or are imbued with backward, anti-woman attitudes. The labour bureaucracy blocks the use of union power to overcome many of the special obstacles women workers face — such as lack of maternity leave, health hazards, discriminatory job practices, and harassment by foremen and supervisors who use their control over jobs to sexually pester women and try to pressure them into sexual relations.

3. Educational levels

The rise in the average educational level of women has further heightened the contradictions. As labour productivity increases and the general cultural level of the working class rises, more women complete secondary education. Women are also accepted into institutions of higher education on a qualitatively larger scale than ever before.

Yet, as the employment statistics indicate, the percentage of women holding jobs commensurate with their educational level has not kept pace. In all areas of the job market, from industry to the professions, women with higher educational qualifications are usually bypassed by men with less education. Moreover, throughout primary and secondary education, girls continue to be pushed — through required courses of study or through more indirect pressures — into what are considered women's jobs and roles. For example, while women outnumber men among university undergraduates in Australia today, women are still concentrated in the arts faculties rather than in science, engineering and commerce.

As women receive more education and as social struggles raise their individual expectations, the stifling drudgery of household chores and the constrictions of family life become increasingly unbearable. Thus the heightened educational level of women has deepened the contradiction between women's demonstrated abilities and

broadened aspirations, and their actual social and economic status.

4. Changes to the family

The functions of the family unit in advanced capitalist society have continually contracted. It has become less and less a unit of petty production — either agricultural or domestic (weaving, sewing, baking, etc.). The urban nuclear family of today has come a long way from the productive farm family of previous centuries. At the same time, in their search for profits, consumer-oriented capitalist industries and advertising companies seek to maximise the atomisation and duplication of domestic work in order to sell each household its own washer, dryer, dishwasher, vacuum cleaner, etc.

As the standard of living rises, the average number of children per family declines sharply. Industrially prepared foods and other conveniences become increasingly available. Yet, in spite of the technological advances, surveys in a number of imperialist countries have shown that women who have more than one child and a full-time job must put in 80-100 hours of work per week — more hours than similar surveys conducted in 1926 and 1952 revealed. While appliances have eased certain domestic tasks, the shrinking size of the average family unit has meant that women are less able to call on grandparents, aunts, or sisters to help.

With all these changes, the objective basis for confining women to the home becomes less and less compelling. Yet the needs of the ruling class dictate that the family system be preserved. Bourgeois ideology and social conditioning continue to reinforce the reactionary fiction that a woman's identity and fulfillment must come from her role as wife-mother-housekeeper. The contradiction between reality and myth becomes increasingly obvious and intolerable to growing numbers of women.

This contradictory state of affairs is frequently referred to as “the crisis of the family”, which is expressed in the soaring divorce rates, increased numbers of runaway children and rising reported incidence of sexual abuse of children and domestic violence.

Cracks in the privacy of the institution of the family have opened up as women have become more confident and more self-assertive. Physical and sexual violence within the family has been challenged. Women's refuges, youth housing, and rape crisis centres have been established but are far from adequate to cope with the demand for their services. Laws and legal practices concerning rape in marriage and domestic violence have and are being put in place.

While the brutal degradation of women in the family has been opened up for greater scrutiny, the family system itself has not been abandoned:

- There has been a shift to serial monogamous families, that is, couples who marry, then divorce, then marry a new partner. So monogamy becomes relative to the

current partner and the children from such relationships are linked to several family units.

- There has also been an increase in the number of non-married cohabiting couples and of children born outside of marriage. The capitalist state has sought to reintegrate these relationships within the family system by establishing the legal category of “*de facto* relations”, i.e., *de facto* marriages.
- While the number of single parents, mostly women, with children has dramatically increased, through restrictions and cutbacks on state subsidised social services such as child care the ruling class has kept them within the family system, with women still carrying out the unpaid domestic labour of child-rearing. As a result, there has been a sharp increase in the number of women living in poverty, a phenomenon known as the “feminisation” of poverty. Some 80% of adults classified as living below the poverty line are women.

Greater democratic rights and broader social opportunities have not “satisfied” women, or inclined them to a passive acceptance of their inferior social status and economic dependence. On the contrary, each achievement towards equality exposes even further ways, often in quite subtle forms, that sexist barriers operate in capitalist society.

The initial development of the women’s liberation movement served only to emphasise the depth and scope of women’s oppression. Even those with many advantages in terms of education and other opportunities were, and continue to be, propelled into action. The most oppressed and exploited are not necessarily the first to articulate their discontent.

4. Women's Liberation & Other Social Movements

While the feminist radicalisation has an independent dynamic of its own, determined by the specific character of women's oppression and the objective changes that have been described, it is not isolated from the more general upsurge of struggles and the emergence of other social movements. It is not directly dependent on other social forces, subordinate to their leadership, or beholden to their initiative. At the same time, the women's liberation movement has been and remains deeply interconnected with the rise of other social struggles, all of which have likewise affected the consciousness of the entire working class.

From the beginning, the new upsurge of women's struggles was strongly affected by the international youth radicalisation of the late 1960s and early 1970s and the increased challenge to bourgeois values and institutions that accompanied it. Young people — both male and female — began to question religion, to reject patriotism, to challenge authoritarian hierarchies from family, to school, to factory, to army, and to reject the inevitability of a lifetime of alienated labor.

The sexual revolution

Radicalised youth began to rebel against sexual repression and to challenge the traditional morality equating sex with reproduction. The sexual revolution opened up massive challenges to sexual relations and sexual identity. For women, this involved a challenge to the time-honored education of females to be sexually passive, sentimental, fearful, and timid. Masses of youth, including young women, became more conscious of their sexual misery and tried to search for more fulfilling types of personal relationships.

Women's awareness of their reproductive functions and their physical and health needs flowed on into struggles for women to control their reproductive choices as well as special women's health and abortion clinics. Women's support and counseling services

grew to provide alternative information and services to mainstream medicine where research and general practice reinforced women's traditional role in the family.

The sexual revolution opened up a climate in which female sexuality and sexuality in general came under intense scrutiny and debate. This led to splits in the women's movement as a growing number of feminists made sexuality the focal issue of their concerns. But the sexual revolution also enabled a massive rethinking and questioning about the extremely restricting gender roles of masculinity and femininity and the human misery suffered by the majority of individuals who are forced to try to fit these idealised norms under class society.

Lesbian-feminist radicalisation

The lesbian-feminist movement emerged as an inter-related but distinct aspect of the radicalisation of women. Lesbians have organised as a component of the major upsurge of the gay and lesbian rights movement which has arisen as a consequence of the challenges of the sexual revolution. The lesbian movement has generally found it necessary to fight for the specific demands of lesbians to be recognised within that movement.

Although lesbian sexuality has rarely been legislated against, lesbians face a number of specific denials of their democratic rights. There is no social or legal recognition of the validity of a relationship between two women. There are numerous cases of women being denied access to their partner by the partner's family against the express wishes of the partner following injury or disability; of women being denied access to accommodation and personal belongings such as photos and joint possessions, following the death of one partner. Lesbians who are mothers are often not viewed as "fit and proper" guardians of their children by the courts and even their own families.

But lesbians are not just discriminated against on the basis of their sexuality, they are also oppressed as women. Many radicalised as women first and felt the discrimination they suffered because of their sexual orientation was only one element of the social and economic limitations women face in trying to determine the course of their lives. Thus many lesbians were in the forefront of the feminist movement from the very beginning. They have been part of every political current within the women's liberation movement, from lesbian separatists to revolutionary Marxists, and they have helped to make the entire movement more conscious of the specific ways in which lesbians are oppressed.

Because of the lesbian movement's insistence on the right of women to live independent of men, they often become the special target of attacks by reaction. From hate propaganda to violent physical assaults, the attacks on lesbians and the lesbian

movement are really aimed against the women's movement as a whole.

Anti-colonial & anti-racist struggles

One of the factors that contributed to the international youth radicalisation was the role played by the liberation struggles of oppressed nations and racial groups, both in the colonial world and in the advanced capitalist countries. These struggles have had a powerful impact on the consciousness concerning women's oppression in general. For example, the civil rights struggle by blacks in the United States played a crucial role in bringing about a widespread awareness and rejection of racist stereotypes. Similar awareness has been generated by Aboriginal struggles in Australia. The obvious similarities between racist attitudes and sexist stereotypes of women as inferior, emotional, dependent, dumb-but-happy creatures produced an increasing sensitivity to and rejection of such caricatures.

As the feminist movement has developed in the advanced capitalist countries, women of the oppressed nationalities and racial groups have begun to play an increasingly prominent role. As members of oppressed nationalities or racial groups, as women, and frequently as superexploited workers, these women suffer a double and often triple oppression.

Immigrant women too face many similar aspects of oppression. In Australia, they are exploited as workers in the lowest paid jobs with the worst conditions, excluded from an understanding of unionisation and their rights by their lack of English and the disregard of unions for their conditions, and they also suffer racist and sexist oppression.

But there has generally been a lag in the pace with which women of oppressed racial groups and immigrant women have become conscious of their specific oppression as women. There are several reasons for this:

- For many, the depth of their racial oppression initially overshadows their oppression as women. Many radical anti-racist movements have refused to take up the demands of women, calling them divisive to the struggle against racism.
- The organised women's movement has often failed to address itself to the needs of the most oppressed and exploited layers of women and understand the special difficulties they face.
- The hold of the family is often particularly strong among non-Anglophone immigrant women and among women of oppressed racial groups since the family provides a partial buffer against the devastating pressures of racism and cultural annihilation.

Nevertheless, experience has already shown that once the radicalisation of these women

begins it takes on an explosive character, propelling them into the leadership of many social and political struggles, including struggles on the job, in the unions, on campuses and in the communities, as well as the feminist movement. They rapidly come to understand that the struggle against their oppression as women does not weaken but strengthens the struggle against their ethnic or racial oppression.

Crisis of religion

Also contributing to the rise of the women's movement has been the crisis of the traditional organised religions, especially the Catholic church. The weakening hold of the church (accompanied by a growth in occultism and mysticism) is a dramatic manifestation of the ideological crisis of bourgeois society. All organised religion, which is part of the ideological buttressing of class society, is predicated on and reinforces the notion that women are inferior, if not the very incarnation of evil and animality.

Christianity and Judaism, which mark the cultures of the advanced capitalist countries, have always upheld the inequality of women and denied them the right to separate sexuality from reproduction. As these have weakened, there has been a rapid growth and organisation of Christian fundamentalism in imperialist countries which has been exported to the Third World as part of imperialism's efforts to bolster right-wing forces. This effort has been aimed at countering many of the gains of the women's movement in particular, and more generally, anti-imperialist struggles in the Third World which have radicalised sections of the Catholic Church through liberation theology.

The upsurge of anti-imperialist sentiment and struggles in many parts of the Muslim world has had a contradictory impact on the situation of women. Because of the economic backwardness of many of these countries, which has been maintained by imperialist domination, religion has a powerful influence among the poor and oppressed. Their struggles against imperialist domination have thus tended to find ideological expression in religious terms. While such anti-imperialist struggles have mobilised broad masses of women, as was the case with the 1979 revolution in Iran, the religious garb in which these struggles have been cloaked has helped the Islamic clergy to reinforce reactionary anti-women attitudes and practices.

The antiwar movement

While the women's movement emerged alongside of the huge upsurge against the Vietnam War, women's role in the antiwar and the anti-nuclear movement has increased since then. In England, the Greenham Common women became an

inspiration to millions of women for their dogged opposition to nuclear weapons. In Australia, women were increasingly involved in the anti-uranium movement. The upsurge against the imperialist war against Iraq witnessed a major increase in the female composition and leadership of the antiwar movement. It also saw an increase in the participation of immigrant Arabic women speaking out against the war and also resisting the xenophobic attacks whipped up by the war.

Gains under attack

The exhaustion of the long postwar boom and the deepening economic, social, and political problems of imperialism on a world scale since the mid 1970s, have led to an intensification of the attacks on women's rights on all levels. This has not led to a decline in women's struggles, or relegated them to the sidelines as more powerful social forces came to the fore. Far from diminishing, feminist consciousness, whether consciously acknowledged or taken for granted, continues to spread and to become deeply intertwined with the developing social consciousness. Cuts to social and welfare services, slashes to health, hospital and education services have led to some of the most radical struggles in the past period as women have increasingly taken up the fight against such cuts.

Women's role in the fight against erosions of democratic rights has been major and women's resistance to the economic, political, and ideological offensive of the ruling class has been stiffened by the heightened feminist awareness. Their struggles have been a powerful motor force of social protest and political radicalisation and their participation in the forefront of other progressive social struggles has increased.

5. Responses to the Rise of the Women's Movement

Divisions rapidly appeared inside the capitalist class over how best to respond to the new rise of women's struggles in order to blunt their impact and deflect their radical thrust.

Lip-service from the capitalist rulers

After initial attempts to dismiss the women's movement with ridicule and scorn, however, the prevailing view within the ruling class has been to give lip service to the idea that women have at least some just grievances. There have been attempts to appear concerned — by setting up some special government departments, commissions, or projects to catch women's attention, while working assiduously to integrate the leadership of the women's movement into the accepted patterns of class collaboration. In most countries, the ruling class was forced to make a few concessions that seemed least harmful economically and ideologically and then steadily tried to take them back.

In each case the aim has been the same, whatever the tactics — to contain the nascent radicalisation within the framework of minimal reforms of the capitalist system.

In many industrialised countries, there have been moves to expand maternity benefits by extending leave, raising the percentage of pay women receive while on leave, or by guaranteeing work after a maternity leave without pay. In other countries, governments have extensively debated the justice of promises for equal pay laws, or liberalised divorce laws.

Under the pressure of women's mobilisation and organisation most governments have introduced a series of legal reforms on women's rights — anti-discrimination laws, equal rights legislation, and even the notion of affirmative action programs in some form. However, these laws have generally had little practical impact on the daily lives of the majority of women.

In Australia, such moves have led to legal judgments against individual cases of discrimination after long, exhaustive and protracted courtroom battles. In some cases these legal rulings have backfired on the victims of discrimination, leading to further harassment and notoriety which has distressed and damaged the woman complainant even though she may have won her case. In most cases the lack of major penalties and the individual case-by-case approach has meant that the impact of such rulings has been minimised. The one major exception to this general situation was the Jobs for Women campaign where 34 women took on BHP in a class-action suit against discrimination in hiring. What was unique in this case was that it did not rely on the legal process alone but was the basis for an active campaign over a 10-year period until the case was won.

Affirmative action and equal employment opportunity guidelines, while set in place in the public sector and in the large private companies, have proved very little more than a monitoring assessment procedure of the level of female employment across sectors and promotional levels. There are no penalties for non-compliance with raising participatory targets. At best such projects have raised awareness of discriminatory employment and promotion practices.

The increased public consciousness about discrimination against women has led both conservative and liberal bourgeois parties to engage in wide-ranging tactics to win over women voters. And indeed there has been a shift in women's voting patterns as their social and economic situation has changed since World War II — their votes have tended to shift toward liberal (including social-democratic) parties and away from the conservative parties.

Bourgeois parties across the spectrum have responded by increasing the number of women standing for office. But as governments are formed the number of women who have achieved cabinet or executive positions has been minuscule.

While liberal parties have played the most lip service to issues specifically affecting women, the feminist ideas and concerns have also had an impact on the most conservative parties.

In Australia, the coalition between the conservative Liberal and National parties has been strained by the question of women's rights — particularly by the question of women's right to work as unemployment rates began to rise. The liberal split from the Liberals, the Australian Democrats, has shifted leftwards during the 1980s. This shift has been reflected in the Australian Democrats' adoption of policies supporting many of the demands raised by the women's liberation movement and their promotion of women to their parliamentary leadership.

However, when it comes to social programs that would have immediate and

significant economic impact — such as the expansion of cheap, high standard, child-care facilities — the gains made by women have been virtually nonexistent. Capitalist governments and bourgeois politicians have made abundant promises. But as the long-term capitalist economic crisis has deepened, cuts to the already limited child-care facilities have been some of the first to be made. These have been accompanied by other cuts to areas traditionally viewed as private — those involved in the reproduction and maintenance of labor, driving back many health and community services into the unpaid sector of domestic labor.

The far right & abortion access

One of the most significant gains made by the women's liberation movement has been a substantial expansion of access to legal abortion. In more than 20 countries there has been a marked liberalisation of abortion laws.

In every country where women have made measurable progress toward establishing abortion as a right, it has rapidly become clear that this right is never secure under capitalism. Real reproductive choice, particularly abortion, isn't guaranteed under capitalism where access to legal abortion is viewed by the ruling class as a necessary evil rather than as a guaranteed personal choice by the woman concerned, backed up by health service alternatives, information and counseling.

Wherever women begin to fight for the right to control their own reproductive functions, the most reactionary defenders of the capitalist system have immediately mobilised to prevent that elementary precondition for women's liberation from being established. The right to choose is too great a challenge to the ideological underpinnings of women's oppression.

However, it is politically important to see clearly that far-right organisations such as “Laissez les vivre”, “Oui a la vie”, “Right to Life”, and “Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child”, which are linked to xenophobic, clerical, racist, or outright fascist currents, are nourished by official governmental policies. They function as fanatical protectors of the status quo, attempting to appeal to and mobilise the most backward prejudices within the working class and petty bourgeoisie, and they render a valuable service to the rulers. But without the backhanded — and sometimes open — encouragement of the dominant sections of the ruling class, their role would be far less influential.

The clearest indicator of this is provided by the attempts in the USA to erode access to abortion and reverse the 1973 *Roe vs Wade* ruling which recognised a woman's constitutional right to abortion. Federal and State governments and courts have eroded this constitutional right by reducing the period of pregnancy in which an abortion can be

performed, or by limiting women's right to decide (giving greater power to parents or partners, demanding parental permission for minors, etc.), and by restricting access to health services or cutting back funding to the health system in order to make access to abortion difficult. The opposition of the Reagan and Bush administrations to women's right to abortion and the weakening of this right by Supreme Court judgments, has been combined with and encouraged a fanatical grass-roots mobilisation by extreme sectors of the "Moral Majority" and evangelical churches, taking the form of arson attacks on abortion clinics and mass pickets to physically prevent women from entering them.

In Australia, restrictions on women's access to abortion have taken the form of repeated attempts to pass legislation taking abortion out of the public health insurance scheme; attempts to limit the time period when abortion is available; or attempts to limit abortion facilities to hospitals by trying to get rid of clinics, particularly feminist ones. These attempts have been defeated due to widespread public pressure focused by pro-choice mobilisations.

Response of social-democratic parties

The emergence of the women's liberation movement has posed a profound challenge to all political currents claiming to represent the interests of the working class. The social-democratic parties especially were taken aback initially by the rapid development of a significant radicalisation that did not look to them for leadership.

The Social Democrats' responses to the women's liberation movement have varied from one country to another, depending on the strength of the movement, its impact upon the working class, and the Social Democrats' own proximity to responsibility for the government of their own capitalist state. But in every case the reflexes of the Social Democrats have been determined by two sometimes conflicting objectives: their commitment to the basic institutions of class rule, including the family; and their need to maintain or strengthen their influence in the working class if they are to contain working-class struggles within the bounds of capitalist property relations.

The rise of the women's liberation movement forced the Social Democrats to adapt to the changing political situation. The year 1975 in particular gave rise to a flurry of position-taking, partly in response to the initiatives of the bourgeoisie in the context of International Women's Year.

Even though social-democratic parties officially have been reluctant to recognise the existence of the independent women's movement, individual women members have often participated actively in the new organisations that emerged.

Faced with a growing women's movement in Australia in the early 1970s, the Whitlam Labor government attempted to win political support by granting subsidies

to numerous small projects initiated by the movement, such as women's health centres and refuges, introducing supporting mothers pensions, removing tax from contraceptives, and putting in place a three-year schedule for the introduction of equal pay for work of equal value. While these moves were not major in economic terms, they served to temporarily draw the attention of women away from the inadequacy of their overall policies (on abortion and child care, for example) and helped the ALP to project itself as a "pro-woman" government. Responding to their success in wooing the women's vote, anti-discriminatory and equal opportunity laws were established by State Labor governments.

The ALP and the trade union bureaucracy have actively sought to integrate feminists into the institutional framework of bourgeois reformism, producing changes that appear as the natural evolution of a "democratic society" and thus blurring the role and combativity of women in winning these changes. Women's advisory committees have been set up and many of the early women's activists have been incorporated into the governmental and union bureaucracy as upper-level management, researchers, and advisors. While these "femocrats" have been long on speeches for women's equality, in practice their lack of executive power and their respect for official policy has put real limitations on their activity.

Many feminists have taken the fight for equality into the ALP so that today affirmative action policy guarantees women access to preselection as candidates in proportion to their overall numbers in the party. Positions held by women in the ALP officialdom have also increased although not in the same proportion. These "victories" have been won at the cost of the fight for the implementation of social policies to improve the situation of the majority of women.

While loudly proclaiming their commitment to easing the burdens of working-class women, the social-democratic parties have not hesitated to impose the austerity measures demanded by the bourgeoisie. The record of the Hawke Labor government, elected in 1983, has provided a graphic illustration of this.

Through its Accord with the ACTU the Hawke government embarked on a decade-long austerity program that cut wages and living standards across the board. The Accord was sold on rhetoric about the need to address the plight of lower-paid and the traditionally ignored sections of the working class, women workers in particular. Cuts in real wages were thus to be traded off against improvements to the "social wage", i.e., social and welfare benefits and tax reforms.

Under the various versions of the Accord over the years, welfare, health, education, and child care services have all been massively slashed. These austerity measures have been implemented under a rhetorical veneer of seeking "social equity", of improving

the lot of the disadvantaged, particularly women. Yet during this period the decline in real average wages has been in the order of 25%.

Trade union bureaucracy

The period since the emergence of the women's movement has seen big shifts in the practices and attitudes in the trade union movement. It took much longer for the trade union bureaucracy to respond to the demands of women workers than the ALP. It was only in 1977 that the ACTU adopted a charter of demands for working women and appointed advisory committees at the ACTU and at State Trades and Labor Council levels. Reforms to policy affecting women slowly followed from this point on. National cases for maternity leave and later parental leave were negotiated and an anomaly case for comparative wage justice was won by nurses. There was an increased awareness of women's right to work and the barriers to women's promotional opportunities, and particular health and safety problems like repetitive strain injury were taken up by particular unions. Even the recognition that abortion access is an industrial issue has been affirmed. As the pressure for part-time work has increased, proportional working conditions and job security guarantees were set in place in many white-collar areas.

Questions such as child care and the socialisation of domestic work, and affirmative action programs for women have been raised with greater frequency in the union movement. In some cases women have explicitly posed these demands in the general framework of the need to break down the traditional division of labour between men and women.

By raising these issues, women workers call into question the reformists' attempts to maintain a division between economic and political issues and otherwise limit whatever struggles develop. They help the working class to think in broad social terms.

As women try to win the union ranks and leadership to support their demands, they are obliged to take up the question of union democracy as well. They have to fight for the right to express themselves freely, to organise their own commissions or caucuses, to be represented in the union leaderships, and for the union to provide the kinds of facilities, such as child care during meetings, that will permit women to be fully active in the workers' organisations.

The right for women to organise themselves into separate committees and women's structures has been recognised by some union leaders as ways to increase union membership and respond to the particular needs of women workers articulated through these bodies. Others have seen such organisations as ways to marginalise and thus ignore women's demands. But the gender segregation of the workforce, the

growth of the tertiary sector, the growth of the new information technology and the increased unionisation of traditional white-collar areas such as banking, the public service, welfare services, nursing, etc., have led to an increase in the number of women joining unions at a time when male union membership has declined dramatically.

On the other hand, the Accord's restrictions on strike action, its trade-off method of bargaining, and its emphasis on tripartite negotiations between the employers, the government and the unions has led to a real decline in working-class activity, including the struggles of women workers. Many of the gains won by women in the industrial arena remain limited in their impact because the will to fight to have them implemented across industry has been eroded. Enterprise bargaining will further erode these gains.

The restructuring of industry, the trade-union movement and the industrial relations system has weakened the unions as organs of struggle for the moment. This weakening of the unions has been masked by phrases championing their heightened awareness and commitment to women's equality. Thus, while the living standards of women workers have been reduced under the Accord, the ACTU has paraded the increased representation of women on its executive as evidence of major advances by women unionists.

Impact on the communist parties

From the 1930s on, after the Stalinist bureaucracy consolidated its control of the USSR and transformed the parties of the Third International into apologists for the policies of the Kremlin, defence of the family as the ideal framework of human relations has been the line of most communist parties throughout the world. This not only served the needs of the bureaucratic caste in the Soviet Union itself but coincided with the need to defend the capitalist status quo elsewhere. Openly reactionary theories on the family began to be promoted by the communist parties in the West when the new family code was introduced in the USSR in 1934 and abortions were prohibited in 1936.

However demagogic they may have been at times concerning women's double day of work, the demands raised by the Stalinised CPs were most often proposals to rearrange things so women had an easier time meeting the tasks that fall on them in the home. From better maternity leaves, to shorter hours, to improved working conditions for women, the fight was often justified by the need to free women *for* their household chores — rather than *from* them by socialising the domestic burdens women bear. The other solution, which they sometimes proposed, was to demand that men share the work load more equitably at home.

But the rise of the women's movement, the attempts of the bourgeoisie to capitalise

on it, the responses of their own ranks, all compelled the communist parties to modify and adjust their line. Even the most hidebound and rigid followers of the Stalinist bureaucracy, like the Communist Party of the USA, were forced to abandon some of their most reactionary positions such as opposition to an equal rights amendment to the constitution.

The deeper the radicalisation, the more adroitly the CPs have had to manoeuvre by throwing themselves into the movement and adopting more radical verbiage. This has particularly been true of those CPs in the imperialist countries that sought to demarcate themselves from the Soviet bureaucracy from the late 1960s on in order to widen the base of public support — the so-called Eurocommunist parties. However, this shift did not involve a turn by these parties toward revolutionary politics. Rather it involved a systematic codification of the reformist orientation imposed on the communist movement by Stalin in the mid 1930s.

The Eurocommunist CPs let their women members engage in public discussion and develop scathing condemnations of capitalism's responsibilities for the miserable status of women. But when it came to program and action, their approach to women's liberation duplicated their opposition to a class-struggle fight for other needs of the working class. These parties were ready to shelve any demand or derail any struggle in the interests of consolidating or preserving whatever class-collaborationist alliance they were working for. Thus, despite the Italian Communist Party's formal shift and decision to support the liberalisation of abortion laws, in 1976 the PCI parliamentary deputies made a bloc with the Christian Democrats to kill abortion law reform because it was an obstacle to advancing toward their "historic compromise" with the latter.

Moreover, there was often a conflict between the positions taken by the CP locally — where they sometimes expressed support for struggles to establish child-care centres or abortion-contraception clinics — and the actions of the CP nationally — where they supported austerity measures to cut back on such social programs.

The discrepancy between the formal positions of the communist parties and their class-collaborationist practice brought about some sharp tensions within those parties and in the trade unions they dominated. This was especially true because the absence of internal democracy within the CPs deepened the frustrations of many women who began to see the contradictions between their own personal commitment to women's liberation and the line of their party. They had no way to influence the positions of their organisation.

Organisationally, too, the communist parties were forced to adjust. In a number of countries the Stalinists formed their own women's organisations after the Second World War. Faced with the new radicalisation of women, they invariably tried to pass

these organisations off in the eyes of the working class as the only real women's movement. The independent movement threatened their pretense of being the party that spoke for working-class women, and their initial reaction was to deepen their sectarian stance.

Communist Party of Australia

In Australia, the Eurocommunist evolution of the CPA leadership led to a series of splits and to different orientations toward the women's liberation movement by the forces that had constituted the CPA at the beginning of the 1960s.

The Maoists, who formed the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist) in 1964, and the pro-Moscow current which constituted itself as the Socialist Party of Australia in 1971 maintained the traditional Stalinist approach to the "woman question", i.e., defending the family system and seeing women's equality as being guaranteed through working-class struggle rather than through the independent mobilisation of women. Women's struggles are seen by them as limited to the economic arena — as women workers or women's auxiliaries to support their husbands in struggle.

The CPA itself, however, shifted its position in the mid 1970s. It made a deliberate orientation to women's liberation activists. However, it failed to overcome the legacy of its Stalinist miseducation.

The CPA leadership continued to identify Leninism with Stalinism, and as it moved to distance itself from its Stalinist past, it rejected its formal adherence to "Marxism-Leninism". The economistic conception of the class struggle (and the opportunist orientation to the trade union bureaucracy and the ALP) the CPA had inherited from Stalinism was retained as the central core of its political practice. But around this central core it added an eclectic mass movementism to its political orientation — a shopping list approach in which the struggles of women, Aborigines, gays, for peace, for environmental protection, etc., were seen as separate from each other and from the working-class struggle against capitalism (which was identified with trade unionist struggles). In relation to women's liberation, the CPA leadership rejected Marxism as an inadequate theory, as "outdated class reductionism" and accepted various bourgeois feminist theories of the origin and nature of women's oppression.

This theoretical shift was mirrored organisationally. The CPA became organised sectorally. Women were organised in women's collectives rather than into all arenas of the party's activity and work. This had the effect of marginalising the question of women's liberation within the CPA, absolving the CPA leadership from educating all the party's members, particularly those in the trade union movement and leadership, on the need to take women's liberation seriously.

With the coming to office of the Hawke Labor government, the CPA's opportunist eclecticism became the means for providing a left apology for the ALP-ACTU Accord's austerity program. Indeed, key leaders of the CPA in the trade union bureaucracy were involved in drafting the original Accord document, and they were often the key promoters of it in the unions, using the argument that "well-off" male workers should hold back from wage demands to let women's wages catch up.

In seeking to defend its support for the class-collaborationism embodied in the Accord, the CPA leadership developed a right-wing version of gender politics by arguing against "the old-time unionism of mobilisation and struggle" and supporting calls for a "feminist incomes policy" explicitly aimed at increasing women's incomes at the expense of men's.

New political formations

In response to the decline in the credibility of social-democratic and Stalinist reformism, new centrist and radical-democratic political formations emerged in the 1980s. The West German Green Party is probably the best known and most developed example of this trend.

Peace, anti-nuclear, environmental, and women's liberation activists, as well as many smaller community-based movements and a substantial layer of left socialists, formed the Green Party as an electoral alternative in opposition to the right-wing evolution of the Social-Democracy in West Germany. The German Greens' electoral success strengthened moves to construct similar parties in other countries, but these tend to have less of a base among activists in the social movements and have more of a single-issue appeal around environmental questions.

Where Green political formations have elaborated political programs on a range of social issues they have often incorporated many of the demands raised by the women's liberation movement. However, their lack of a revolutionary perspective and their tendency to see social change being achieved purely through parliamentary means has made them susceptible to opportunist deals with social-democracy. Where, as in Germany and in Tasmania, the Greens have entered into such coalitions or "accords" with the Social Democrats they have alienated their activist base and undermined their credibility even as a parliamentary alternative to social-democracy.

6. Women in the Workers' States: Liberation Betrayed

The Bolshevik revolution in Russia indicated the potential gains for the exploited, the dispossessed and the oppressed that come from a successful united struggle against capitalist rule.

The Russian Revolution and each subsequent socialist revolution brought significant gains for women, including democratic rights and integration into social production. The measures enacted by the Bolsheviks under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky demonstratively showed that the proletarian revolution meant immediate steps forward for women. Comparisons with the struggles of women in the most advanced capitalist countries of the same period demonstrate just how fundamental these immediate steps were.

Between 1917 and 1927 the Soviet government passed a series of laws giving women legal equality with men for the first time. Marriage became a simple registration process that had to be based on mutual consent. By 1927, marriages did not have to be registered and divorce was granted on the request of either partner. The concept of illegitimacy was abolished. Free, legal abortion was made every woman's right. Anti-homosexual laws were eliminated in 1918.

Free, compulsory education to the age of 16 was established for all children of both sexes. Legislation gave women workers special maternity benefits.

The 1919 program of the Russian Communist Party stated: "The party's task at the present moment is primarily work in the realm of ideas and education so as to destroy utterly all traces of the former inequality or prejudices, particularly among backward strata of the proletariat and the peasantry. Not confining itself to formal equality of women, the party strives to liberate them from the burdens of obsolete household work by replacing it with communal houses, public eating places, central laundries, nurseries, etc."

This program was implemented to the extent possible given the economic

backwardness and poverty of the new Soviet Republic, and the devastation caused by almost a decade of war and civil war.

A conscious attempt was made to begin combating the reactionary social norms and attitudes toward women, which reflected the reality of a country whose population was still overwhelmingly peasant, where women were a relatively small percentage of the workforce, and in which the dead weight of feudal traditions and customs hung over all social relations.

As would be expected under such conditions, backward attitudes toward women were reflected in the Bolshevik Party as well, not excepting its leadership. The party was by no means homogeneous in its understanding of the importance of carrying through the concrete and deep-going measures necessary to fulfill its 1919 program.

Political counter-revolution

Establishing and maintaining working-class political power in a backward and predominantly peasant-based economy through the vicissitudes of a civil war, foreign intervention and economic blockade exacted a huge toll on the most conscious activists and revolutionary fighters in Soviet Russia. The decimation of this layer and the crushing of the postwar revolutionary upsurges in Western Europe in countries like Germany where industrialisation was much more developed, weakened and demoralised the Soviet working class, and laid the basis for the usurpation of political power in the first workers' state by a bureaucratic caste, headed by Stalin, in the 1920s.

While the economic foundations of the new workers' state were not destroyed, a privileged social layer that appropriated for itself many of the benefits of the new economic order, grew rapidly in the fertile soil of Russia's poverty. To protect and extend its new privileges, the bureaucracy reversed the policies of the Bolsheviks in virtually every sphere, from government based on soviet democracy, to control by the workers over all social and economic planning, to the right of oppressed nationalities to self-determination, to a revolutionary internationalist foreign policy.

By the late 1930s the political counter-revolution carried out by the Stalinist bureaucracy had physically annihilated the entire surviving Bolshevik leadership and established a dictatorship that kept hundreds of thousands in prison camps, psychiatric hospitals, and exile and ruthlessly crushed every murmur of opposition.

For women, the Stalinist counter-revolution led to a policy of reviving and fortifying the family system. Trotsky described this process as follows:

Genuine emancipation of women is inconceivable without a general rise of economy and culture, without the destruction of the petty-bourgeois economic family unit, without the introduction of socialised food preparation and education. Meanwhile

guided by its conservative instinct, the bureaucracy has taken alarm at the “disintegration” of the family. It began singing panegyrics to the family supper and the family laundry, that is, the household slavery of women. To cap it all, the bureaucracy has restored criminal punishment for abortions, officially returning women to the status of pack animals. In complete contradiction with the ABC of communism the ruling caste has thus restored the most reactionary and benighted nucleus of the class regime, i.e., the petty-bourgeois family. (*Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1937-38* [New York, 1976], p. 129).

The most important factor facilitating this retrogression was the cultural and material backwardness of Russian society, which did not have the resources necessary to construct adequate child-care centres, sufficient housing, public laundries and dining facilities to eliminate the material basis for women’s oppression. This backwardness also helped perpetuate the general social division of labour between men and women inherited from the tsarist period.

But beyond these objective limitations, the reactionary Stalinist bureaucracy consciously gave up the perspective of moving in a systematic way to socialise the burdens carried by women, and instead began to glorify the family system, attempting to bind families together through legal restrictions and economic compulsion.

The bureaucracy reinforced the family system for one of the same reasons it is maintained by capitalist society — as a means of inculcating attitudes of submission to authority and for maintaining the privileges of a minority. As Trotsky explained: “The most compelling motive of the present cult of the family is undoubtedly the need of the bureaucracy for a stable hierarchy of relations, and for the disciplining of youth by means of forty millions points of support for authority and power.” (*The Revolution Betrayed* [New York, 1972], p. 153)

As part of this political counter-revolution, the old tsarist laws against homosexuality were dusted off and reintroduced.

Reinforcement of the family enabled the bureaucracy to perpetuate an important division inside the working class: the division between man, as “head of the family and breadwinner” and woman, as responsible for tasks inside the home and shopping — in addition to whatever else she might do. On a more general level, it meant maintaining the division between private life and public life, with the resulting isolation that affects both men and women. Bolstering the nuclear family also reinforced the bureaucracy through encouraging the attitude of “each family for itself”, and within the framework of a policy of overall planning that had little to do with satisfying the needs of the workers, it allowed the bureaucracy to minimise the costs of social services.

The conditions created by the proletarian revolution and the Stalinist counter-

revolution in the Soviet Union have not been mechanically reproduced in all the countries in which Stalinist regimes came to power in the post-World War II period. Important differences exist, reflecting historical, cultural, economic, and social variations from one country to another, even one region to another. However, despite differences of degree in the participation of women in the process of production or the extent of child-care centres and similar social services, maintenance of the economic and social inequality of women and policies aimed at reinforcing and justifying the domestic labour of women remained official policy in all of the “socialist countries” of Eastern Europe, China, Mongolia and North Korea.

Contradictory situation

The situation of women in the USSR and Eastern Europe under Stalinist rule demonstrated that the material basis for the liberation of women doesn't simply lie in the removal of formal inequalities of access to employment, education, etc.

Soviet women undoubtedly made considerable gains in these areas. For example, by 1986 92% of Soviet women were in the paid workforce or studying outside the home. Soviet women constituted 51% of the paid workforce, with their percentage of the population standing at 53%. Forty per cent of Soviet scientists and technicians were women. By the late 1970s the proportion of Soviet female students gaining college degrees was 82% that of male students, while in the US it was 62%. By the mid 1970s 40% of Soviet engineering graduates were women, compared with only 4.5% in the US.

Stalinist ideologues claimed that by opening up the way for masses of women to enter paid employment, real equality for men and women had been established in the USSR and Eastern Europe. But while women were formally equal under the law and made up more than half of the paid work force, the maintenance and reproduction of labour power continued to fall heavily and almost exclusively on their shoulders.

By maintaining the individual family as the basic economic unit of society, Stalinism maintained the economic oppression of women and concealed real social inequality between men and women. And by renegeing on providing socialised alternatives to domestic labor, and reinforcing backward attitudes to the sexual division of labor, Stalinism encouraged barriers that held back women from full participation in social, economic and political life.

Perpetuation of the responsibility of women for the domestic chores associated with child-raising, cooking, cleaning, laundry, and caring for the personal needs of other members of the family unit is the economic and social basis for the disadvantages and prejudices faced by women and the resulting discrimination in jobs and wages.

This deeply affects the way women view themselves, their role in society, and the goals they seek to attain.

While 53% of the wage earners in the Soviet Union were women, they were concentrated disproportionately in less skilled, lower paying, less responsible jobs and in traditional female sectors of production and services. According to the 1987 *USSR Yearbook* women made up 87% of the workforce in retail trade and public catering. Eighty per cent of all primary and secondary school teachers, and 100% of all preschool teachers, were women.

Soviet women were conspicuously absent from the higher managerial and top bureaucratic positions. In 1983, women made up more than 40% of elected officials (compared with only 8% for the US). However, they were concentrated overwhelmingly in local government bodies. In 1983, only 6% of the members of the CPSU Central Committee were women. In 1976, while more than 40% of all scientists were women, only three out of 243 full members of the USSR Academy of Sciences were women. Only 6.6% of all industrial enterprises were headed by women. This concentration of women in lower paid jobs, of course, had its reflection in gender wage differentials. In 1991, average women's wages in the Soviet Union were between 60-65% of men's — in comparison to 64.4% in 1924!

In the 1970s in the East European countries as a whole, the salary differential between men and women ranged from 27-30%, despite the laws on equal pay that have been in effect for decades in these countries. This reflected the fact that women do not work in the same jobs as men. Not only did they continue to be pushed toward the lower paid "women's occupations", and not only were women often overqualified for the jobs they held, but very few of those who completed apprenticeship programs for better-paying, more highly skilled jobs (notably in heavy industry) continued working in these sectors. Domestic responsibilities made it difficult to keep up with new developments in one's speciality. Also, protective laws establishing special conditions under which women could work often had discriminatory effects that prevented them from holding the same job as men.

Women's reproductive control & sexuality

Stalinism didn't just distort women's equality in the economic and social sphere, it distorted women's reproductive role as well. The social division of labour between men and women was reinforced through government policies in these countries aimed at increasing the birth rate to alleviate labour shortages. The Stalinist bureaucracies placed humiliating conditions as well as economic penalties on women seeking abortions such as denial of paid sick leave time to obtain an abortion or refusal to

cover abortions as a free medical procedure.

In fact, the Stalinist bureaucracies repudiated the view of Lenin and other leaders of the Russian Revolution that unrestricted access to abortion is a woman's elementary democratic right.

While legal abortion was generally available in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe from the '50s and '60s onward, sex education and widespread information on contraceptive methods were explicitly rejected in most East European countries until very recently. Even by the 1980s contraceptive devices and methods like the pill and sterilisation were strictly limited in their availability and very unreliable when they were available. Family planning centres were nonexistent so abortion remained *the* method of contraception by default.

In China, on the other hand, the Stalinist bureaucracy introduced special economic penalties for couples with more than two children, in order to try to limit population growth. But the principle is the same. The right of women to choose was subordinated to the economic decisions made by the bureaucracy.

In all the Eastern European countries, and in China, the bureaucracy promoted policies aimed at reinforcing sexual repression. The extreme housing shortage, the kind of education given to children from earliest infancy, the frequent refusal to rent hotel rooms to non-married couples, pressure to postpone marriage, all reflected the bureaucracy's opposition to any form of sexual liberation. Exploration of sexuality was viewed with suspicion and labeled deviant. Given their place within the family, women bore the brunt of these repressive norms and policies.

In 1988, as the political situation began to open up in the USSR, one of the first public opinion polls noted that marital and sexual morals were beginning to loosen — that there was “a narrowing of the possible types of behavior being roundly condemned”. The previously condemned behavior included activities such as premarital sex, cohabitation with refusal to register as man and wife, and increased rates of divorce.

Collapse of the Soviet bloc

The reactionary social norms and attitudes promoted by the Stalinist bureaucracy, combined with its reinforcement of the family system, weakened the ability of the working class in Eastern Europe and the USSR to resist the bureaucracy's solution to the social and economic crisis that resulted from decades of bureaucratic overcentralisation and mismanagement — the restoration of capitalism, with significant sections of the bureaucracy attempting to convert itself into the new bourgeoisie.

Prior to the collapse of their bureaucratically centralised planned economies in

1989-90, most of the Soviet bloc countries had full employment. Today unemployment is skyrocketing and women's jobs are disappearing faster than men's. Women make up the bulk of factory workers across Eastern Europe and the push to privatisation combined with the end of Soviet energy subsidies means factories are closing at an alarming rate. In Moscow in November 1991 77% of the unemployed were women. Eighty per cent of the job cutbacks in the Moscow city administration were borne by women.

At the same time, social services like child care, public laundries, access of married women to unemployment benefits — limited though they may have been under the Stalinist regimes — are now under attack.

The bureaucratic elite has sought to block the development of a unified resistance by workers to the massive loss of jobs and free social services that its "free market" policies have imposed by reinforcing the reactionary idea that women's "natural" role is inside the home, as mother-wife-housekeeper. As part of this offensive, significant sections of the bureaucratic elite, particularly in Poland, have accommodated to the demands of the Catholic hierarchy to have abortion banned. Similar moves have taken place in the re-unified Germany to get rid of accessible abortion in the former German Democratic Republic and to impose West Germany's criminalisation of abortion.

Future directions for ex-Soviet bloc women

The collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the former USSR opens up a very contradictory period for women in these countries. On the one hand, the attacks on the rights they have taken for granted for decades (the right to employment, to social services and to access to limited reproductive choices) open up the potential for the independent mobilisation of women to develop. On the other hand, there is the legacy of conservative social attitudes maintained by Stalinism and the heritage of its hostility to feminism, to the independent mobilisation of women for their own specific interests.

There are specific historical reasons for the long delay in the development of a mass feminist consciousness in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe:

- a. In the advanced capitalist countries, a mass feminist movement grew out of the contradiction between, on the one hand, the material possibilities for women's liberation opened up by the technological, economic and social changes that occurred in the 1950s and '60s, and, on the other, the legal and ideological obstacles capitalism placed in the way of women fully utilising these possibilities. As a result of the emergence and growth of the feminist movement, women in the advanced capitalist

countries were able to achieve a level of formal equality comparable to that enjoyed by women in the post-capitalist countries. In the West these gains were a product of, and helped generalise, a massive shift in public attitudes about women's status and role in society. By contrast, the comparable gains made by women under Stalinism were a combined product of the legacy of the October Revolution and of the labour policies that flowed from the bureaucracy's emphasis on extensive industrialisation.

- b. In the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, as in the advanced capitalist countries, sufficient material wealth and technology existed by the 1960s to significantly alleviate the double burden of women. Yet the distortions introduced in economic planning and the productive process because of the absence of democratic control over production by the workers and the domination of the privileged bureaucracy were the source of resentment. Women felt the dead weight of the bureaucracy in this respect even more than men because they were forced to compensate for the distortions in the economy through the double day's labour they performed.
- c. From the mid-1960s on, these potentially explosive resentments forced the various Stalinist regimes to plan expanded production in consumer goods and increased social services. While this shift was inadequate to meet women's growing expectations, it led to an expectation that these would eventually be met. These expectations, and the continued suppression of independent social organisation and activity by the bureaucracy, blocked the development of a feminist movement even among dissident intellectuals.
- d. Moreover, in the historical evolution of women's struggles leading up to the Russian Revolution, those who identified themselves as feminists did not champion the interests of the majority of women — women workers and peasant women. They were bourgeois and urban middle-class women who fought for civil equality on a class basis, i.e., for the rights enjoyed by the men of the propertied classes to be extended to the women of those classes. In pre-revolutionary Russia the struggle for the rights of women as a whole was part of the revolutionary-democratic struggle against autocracy and the vestiges of serfdom. It was led by Marxists. There was no independent women's movement. As a result, feminism was seen as a divisive and essentially bourgeois movement. This view was maintained and reinforced by the Stalinist bureaucracies.

However, the conscious struggle of women for their liberation will be a significant component of the political process now unfolding in these countries. The collapse of Stalinist totalitarianism with its rigid restrictions on travel and access to information and ideas from the West has created greater possibilities for women in the ex-USSR

and Eastern Europe to make contact with women in the West. As they begin to organise to resist the attacks on their rights by the pro-capitalist regimes that have come to power with the collapse of Stalinism, the women of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union will inevitably be affected by ideas generated by the radicalisation of women in the capitalist countries over the last two and a half decades.

Already some very limited organisation is taking place in Moscow. In March 1991 a women's congress was organised by feminists which was attended by 200 women from all over Russia. The most pressing questions of interest were economic and political rights of women in the "new democracy".

Lessons for the women's movement

The Stalinist counter-revolution in respect to women and the family, and the vast inequality of women in the Soviet Union more than 70 years after the October Revolution, constituted one of the key obstacles to winning radicalised women elsewhere to revolutionary Marxism. As with all other questions, the policies of Stalinism were equated with Leninism rather than recognised for what they were — the negation of Leninism.

Women fighting for their liberation elsewhere often looked to the USSR and Eastern Europe and concluded that if this was what "socialism" did for women, they didn't need it. And of course many anti-Marxists pointed to the situation of women in these countries as "proof" that the road to women's liberation is not through class struggle. This led to enormous political and ideological confusion in the women's movement — a confusion heightened by the post-1985 revelations of the state of social, economic and political disorder in these countries.

But there are enormous lessons to be learnt from these experiences — negative as well as positive.

The Bolshevik Revolution demonstrated how the conscious struggles for women's liberation and socialism are interlinked — that the struggle for women's liberation is not one of women against men but a united struggle in which women, as both a major component of the working class and of its allies, actively combined to improve the situation of all while, at the same time, championing their own specific demands. But Soviet history also strikingly confirms the fact that the family institution is the cornerstone of the oppression of women.

As long as women's domestic servitude is sustained and nurtured by economic and political policy, as long as the functions of the family are not fully taken over by superior social institutions, the truly equal integration of women in productive life and all social affairs is impossible. The responsibility of women for domestic labour is the

source of the inequalities they face in daily life, in education, in work and in politics.

Because the oppression of women is historically intertwined with the division of society into classes and with the role of the family as the basic unit of class society, this oppression can only be eradicated with the abolition of private ownership of the means of production. Today it is these class relations of production — not the productive capacities of humanity — which constitute the obstacle to transferring to society as a whole the social and economic foundations borne under capitalism by the individual family.

However, the liberation of women cannot be achieved simply by abolishing the capitalist economic system. This is necessary, but by itself it is not sufficient. What is also required is a dynamic transformation and eradication of all the social attitudes and ideological justifications which prop up and justify the economic, social and political inequalities faced by women. That can only be achieved by the conscious self-mobilisation of the victims of such oppression — of women themselves.

7. Women's Liberation in the Third World

Women's liberation is not a matter of interest only to women of the advanced capitalist countries with their relatively high educational level and standard of living. On the contrary, it is of vital concern and importance to the masses of women throughout the world. The underdeveloped countries of the Third World are no exception.

There is great diversity in the economic and social conditions and cultural traditions in these countries. They range from an extremely low level of economic activity in some areas to considerable industrialisation in countries such as Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, South Korea and Taiwan. All underdeveloped countries, however, are defined by the imperialist domination they suffer in common and the consequent distortions to their economies. This also has specific effects on women in these countries.

Impact of imperialist domination

Imperialist domination has meant that capitalist relations of production have been superimposed on, and have combined with, archaic, pre-capitalist production and social relations, transforming them and incorporating them into the capitalist economy. In Western Europe the rise of capitalism was punctuated by bourgeois-democratic revolutions in the more advanced countries which broke the economic and political power of the old feudal ruling classes. But in the colonial countries imperialist penetration most often reinforced the privileges, hierarchies, and reactionary traditions of the pre-capitalist ruling classes, which it utilised wherever possible to maintain stability and maximise imperialist exploitation.

Using torture, extermination, rape, and other forms of terror on a mass scale, and in Africa through the outright enslavement of the native peoples, expanding European capitalism brutally colonised Latin America and parts of Asia and Africa and thrust them into the world market. With the European conquerors came Christianity which was usually turned to advantage as one of the central links in the chain of subjugation.

In the post-World War II period, under the combined impact of the weakening during the Second World War of the old European colonial powers, the desire of the new hegemonic imperialist power — the USA — to have unrestricted access to Third World markets and resources, and an upsurge of national independence struggles, most of the colonial countries of Asia and Africa won formal political independence. However, their economies remained dominated by the giant capitalist corporations of the imperialist countries.

Today, the imperialist banks and transnational corporations use the weapons of loans and unequal trading relations, rather than troops and gunboats, to plunder the resources of the underdeveloped world. This results in an enormous flow of wealth and resources from the world's poorest nations to the richest. The impact of this plundering is not only economic. Huge environmental damage is taking place as vast forest areas are destroyed; major pollutants are released in the air, sea, land and water table; massive soil exhaustion and erosion is occurring. These ecological consequences are adding to a long-term environmental crisis of global warming, depletion of the ozone layer, and the unchecked production of toxic products that are multiplying at a frightening rate.

For women in the Third World the penetration of the capitalist market has a contradictory impact: on the one hand, it introduces new economic relations that begin to lay the basis for women to overcome their centuries-old oppression. But on the other hand, it takes over and utilises the archaic traditions, religious codes, and anti-woman prejudices, initially reinforcing them through new forms of discrimination and superexploitation. In general, the situation of women is directly related to the degree of industrialisation that has been achieved. But uneven development in some societies can produce startling contradictions, such as relative economic independence for women who dominate primitive agriculture in some areas of Africa.

In the Third World, the development of capitalist production proceeds according to the needs of imperialism. For this reason, industrialisation takes place only slowly and in an unbalanced, distorted way, if at all.

Peasant production

In most underdeveloped countries, the majority of the population still lives on the land and is engaged in subsistence farming, utilising extremely backward methods. The extended family — which generally includes various aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, and grandparents — is the basic unit of small scale agricultural production.

Women play a decisive economic role. Not only do they work long hours in the fields and home, but they produce children to share the burden of work and provide

economic security in old age. They marry at puberty and often give birth to as many children as physically possible. Their worth is generally determined by the number of children they produce. An infertile woman is considered a social disgrace and an economic disaster. Infertility is often grounds for divorce.

Because of its productive role, the hold of the family on all its members, but specifically on women, is strong. Combined with a low level of economic development, this brings about extreme deprivation and degradation for peasant women in the rural areas. In practice, they scarcely have any legal or social rights as individuals, and are often barely considered human. They live under virtually total domination and control by male members of their family.

In many cases the restricted resources of the family unit are allocated first of all to the male members of the family; it is not uncommon for female children to receive less food and care, leading to stunted growth or early death from malnutrition. Female infanticide, both direct and through deliberate neglect, is still practiced in many areas. Often illiteracy rates for women approach 100%.

The incorporation of these countries into the world capitalist market inevitably has an impact on the rural areas however. Inflation and the inability to compete with larger agricultural holdings using more productive methods lead to continuous waves of migration from the countryside to the cities. Often this migration begins with the males of the family leaving the women, children, and the elderly with an even heavier burden as they try to eke out an impoverished existence from the land on their own. But sometimes it is the young women who go to obtain work in the free trade zones established to encourage industrial investment and development, and which are specifically based on the cheap, superexploited labour of predominantly young women workers. Or sometimes young women are recruited to work in the brothels and bars as prostitutes.

The desperate search for a job eventually leads millions of workers to leave their country of birth and migrate to the advanced capitalist countries or to the oil rich countries of the Arab-Persian Gulf, where if they are lucky enough to find a job, it will be under miserable conditions of superexploitation.

The isolation and backward traditions of the rural areas tend to be challenged and broken down not only by migration to and from the cities but also by the diffusion of the mass media, such as radio and television.

Effect of urbanisation

With migration to the cities, the new conditions of life and labour begin to challenge the traditional norms and myths about the role of women.

In the cities the extended family as a productive unit rapidly disappears for most. Each family member is obliged to sell his or her labour power on the market as an individual. However, due to the extremely precarious employment situation, lack of social welfare support and the financial responsibilities that semi-proletarian city dwellers often have vis-a-vis their rural relatives, the familial obligations of the immediate family often still includes aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers and sisters and their children, besides father, mother, and children. Among the urban middle class and the more stable sectors of the working class, however, the family unit begins to become more restricted.

As they migrate to the cities, women have greater opportunities for education, for broader social contact, and for economic independence. The needs of capitalism, which bring increasing numbers of women out of family isolation, come into conflict with the old ideas about the role of women in society.

In taking jobs as industrial or service workers, women begin to occupy positions that were previously forbidden them by backward prejudices and traditions. Those able to secure an education that permits them to break into professions, such as teaching and nursing, also serve as examples that contradict traditional attitudes, even in the eyes of those women who don't work.

The myth of women's inferiority is increasingly called into question by this reality, which challenges their time-honored subordination.

Even for women who are not able to get an education or to work outside the home, city conditions help provide the possibility of escaping the mental prison that the rural family's isolation imposes on them. This happens through the greater impact of the mass media, the proximity of political life and struggles, the visibility of modern household appliances, laundries, etc.

Workforce participation

In underdeveloped countries, women generally comprise a much lower percentage of the paid work-force than in the imperialist countries. It tends to vary between 8% and 20% as opposed to the advanced capitalist countries, where women make up roughly 40%. But women's participation in the paid work-force is growing in both cases.

As would be expected, women are concentrated in jobs that are the least skilled, lowest paying, and least protected by laws on safety conditions, minimum wages, etc. This is especially true for agricultural work, piecework in the home, and work as domestics, where a high proportion of women are employed. The average wage of female workers tends to be one-third to one-half of that of male workers. When

women are able to get an education and acquire some skills, they are confined even more strictly than in the advanced capitalist countries to certain “female” occupations, such as nursing and teaching.

But women are also concentrated in industries such as textile, garment, food processing, and electrical parts and often make up a majority of the labour force employed there. Given the overwhelming predominance of such light industry in the more industrialised colonial countries, this means that, although they are a low percentage of the work force as a whole, women workers can occupy a strategically important place.

The employment of women in such industries is crucial for the superprofits of the imperialists, both because they are a source of cheaper labour and also because the employment of women at lower wages or in lower-paying jobs allows the capitalists to divide and weaken the working class and keep down the overall wage scale. The process of imperialist accumulation cannot be fully understood without explaining the role of the super-exploitation of women workers in the underdeveloped countries.

Unemployment and under-employment are of crisis proportions, and much of the responsibility for family spending and daily maintenance falls on women. To help their family survive, women are often forced to resort to such desperate and precarious sources of income as selling handicrafts or home-cooked food in the streets, or taking in laundry.

Hyperinflation means housewives in the cities have to go from market to market searching for the lowest prices, eating less so their children can have a little more, if there is any to have at all. Domestic labour is often carried out in urban fringe districts or shanty towns which do not have running water or electricity, medical facilities or schools. Prostitution is frequently the only recourse. The endemic unemployment also exacerbates alcoholism and drug addiction, which results in greater violence against women as well as even more desperate poverty.

In the countryside the situation for women is even worse. Lack of basic public services means that domestic labour has to be carried out in brutal conditions. Domestic labour itself is expanded to include care for animals and preparation of products for market. Women must cover huge distances to find water or wood. Possibilities for peasant women to find paid work have decreased forcing women to become unwaged tenant farmers, or day workers.

Lack of basic rights

In many countries, women have not yet won some of the most elementary democratic rights secured by women in the advanced capitalist countries in the 19th and 20th

centuries. Numerous countries still retain laws that place women under the legal control of their male relatives. These include for example, laws that require the husband's permission for a woman to work, laws that give the husband control over his wife's wages, and laws that give the husband automatic guardianship of his children and control over the residence of his wife. In some countries women are still sold into marriage. They can be murdered with impunity for violating the "honor" of their men.

In countries where reforms have been made in the legal code, providing women with more rights, these often remain largely formal. Women are unable to assert these rights in practice because of the crushing weight of poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, their economic dependence, and backward traditions that circumscribe their lives. Thus imperialism, in distorting the development of these countries, stands as an obstacle to the most elementary democratic rights for women.

The power and influence of organised religion is especially strong in the colonial and semicolonial countries, because of the prevailing economic backwardness and because of the reinforcement and protection of the religious hierarchies by imperialism. In many countries there is no separation of religious institutions and state. Even where there is official separation, religious dogma and customs retain great weight. For example, many of the most barbaric anti-women laws are based on religious codes. In India, the misery of millions of women is accentuated by the caste system, which, though no longer sanctioned by the law, is based on the Hindu religion. In some Muslim countries, restrictions on public activity, rigid separation of women and men, even the tradition of the veiling of women, is designed to totally banish women from public life. In Catholic countries the right to divorce is often restricted or denied.

Violence against women, which has been inherent in their economic, social, and sexual degradation throughout all stages of development of class society, becomes accentuated by the contradictions bred under imperialist domination. The greater access of women to education and jobs along with their broader participation in society in general, gives women the opportunities to lead a less protected, more public life, in violation of the old traditions and values.

But attempts by women to take advantage of these opportunities and break out of the old roles often lead to reactions by male relatives or others, which can take the form of ostracism, beatings, mutilations, or even murder. Such barbaric violence against women is frequently sanctioned by the law. Even where illegal, it is often so widely accepted in practice that it goes unpunished.

Educational opportunities for women in the colonial and semicolonial countries remain extremely limited by comparison with the advanced capitalist countries. This is reflected in the high female illiteracy rate. From the level of primary school to the

university level, female enrollment is lower than male, and the gap generally increases the higher the educational level.

The educational system in the colonial and semicolonial countries is organised — often more blatantly than in the imperialist countries — to reinforce the exclusion of women from social life and to bolster the imposition of the role of mother-housekeeper-wife on all female children. Coeducation is notably less prevalent, with the schools for girls invariably receiving smaller budgets, fewer teachers, and worse facilities. Where coeducation exists, girls are still required to pursue separate courses of study such as cooking, sewing, and homemaking.

Within the framework of these disadvantages, however, the pressure of the world market has brought some changes in the educational opportunities open to women. The need for a layer of more highly trained technicians has opened the doors to higher education for at least a small layer of women.

Reproductive rights & birth control

Women in the underdeveloped world have even less control over their reproductive functions than women in the imperialist countries. The poor educational opportunities for females, combined with the strong influence of religion over the content of education, means that women have little or no access to scientific information about reproduction or sex.

Economically and socially they are under personal pressure to produce more, not fewer children. When there is access to birth control information and devices, this is almost always in the framework of racist population control programs imposed by imperialism. In some countries forced sterilisation of masses of women has been carried out by the government. In Puerto Rico, the forced sterilisation policies promoted by the US government have victimised more than one-third of the women of child-bearing age. Forced sterilisation schemes are foisted on oppressed groups within these countries as well, such as the Indian population of Bolivia.

Even in countries where forced sterilisation is not official policy, racist population control propaganda permeates society and constitutes an obstacle to the fight by women to gain control of their own bodies and their lives.

While there is a finite limit to the size of the human population that the Earth can sustain, the experience of the advanced capitalist countries has shown that birth rates drop naturally where women have a measure of economic security and control over their reproductive functions. Better standards of living; social, economic and political equality; improved education; women's control over their own reproductive choices — these are the policies needed to deal with the problem of rapid population growth,

not further violation and coercion of women's bodies.

Women in underdeveloped countries have been widely used as unwitting guinea pigs for testing birth control devices and drugs. And access to abortion, too, is tied to coercion, not freedom of choice. Each year, millions of women throughout the Third World are forced to seek illegal abortions under the most unsanitary and degrading conditions possible, leading to an unknown number of deaths.

In all these ways, women are denied the right to choose when and if to bear children.

As capitalism's anarchic drive to maximise profits deepens both the global ecological crisis and the impoverishment of the Third World, population control schemes will become more widespread and there will be more cases like Puerto Rico. The "population explosion" will be blamed for the economic and ecological catastrophes in the underdeveloped countries in order to divert attention from the responsibility of imperialism for causing and maintaining this misery.

Racism and sexism are also imposed on the Third World through the propagation of alien cultural standards. If the cosmetics merchants' standards of "beauty" for women in Europe and North America are oppressive to women in those areas, they are even more so when these same standards are foisted on women from underdeveloped countries through advertising, movies, and other forms of mass propaganda.

The strong influence of religion reinforces extreme backwardness regarding sexuality, which results in a special deprivation and degradation of women. The general proscription that women are supposed to be asexual themselves, but at the same time be a satisfying sexual slave to their husbands, is imposed more brutally on women in these countries than in the imperialist countries, through traditions, laws, and the use of violence including the sexual mutilation of female children. Women are supposed to save their virginity for their husband. In many instances, if women do not provide sexual satisfaction to their husbands, or if they are charged with not being a virgin at the time of marriage, this is grounds for divorce. The dual standard of sexual conduct for men and women is more strictly enforced than in the imperialist countries. The practice of polygamy is merely an extreme example.

Another reflection of the backwardness regarding sexuality is the harsh oppression of homosexuals, both lesbians and gay men.

The way forward

The fact that capitalist development in the colonial countries incorporated pre-capitalist economic and social relations, many of which survive in distorted forms, means that

to win their liberation, women, as well as all the oppressed and exploited, have to wage a struggle taking up a complex range of tasks.

The struggle against imperialist domination and capitalist exploitation often begins with unresolved problems of national sovereignty, land reform, and other basic democratic tasks. Many of these involve achieving very elementary rights for social, political and economic equality so basic for women. They are interlinked with the issues arising from under-development and super-exploitation — rising prices, unemployment, inadequate health, educational facilities, and housing facilities. They also include all the general demands that have been raised by the women's movement in the advanced capitalist countries, such as child-care centers, rights and medical facilities that would assure women the ability to control their reproductive lives, access to jobs and education.

But none of these demands, including the most elementary democratic ones, can be won without the mobilisation and organisation of the working class, which constitutes the only social force capable of leading such struggles through to a victorious conclusion, nor without the mobilisation of women to ensure their demands are met.

Because of the relative weakness of capitalism and of the ruling capitalist classes in underdeveloped countries, civil liberties, where they exist, are in general tenuous and often short-lived. Political repression is widespread. When women begin to struggle — as when other sectors of the population begin to rebel — they are often rapidly confronted with repression and the necessity to fight for political liberties such as the right to hold meetings, to have their own organisation, to have a newspaper or other publications, and to demonstrate. The struggle for women's liberation cannot be separated from the more general struggle for political freedoms.

The increased participation of women in social and political struggles has meant that women are a growing proportion of political prisoners in the colonial and semicolonial countries. In the prisons, women face particularly humiliating and brutal forms of torture. The struggle for freedom of all political prisoners, exposing the plight of women in particular, has been and will be an important part of the fight for women's liberation in those countries. And women have stepped into the limelight to lead this struggle — to highlight conditions of illegal arrest, of mass murder, of the struggle to know what has happened to those who “disappear”.

National liberation struggles

The struggle for women's liberation has always been intertwined with the national liberation struggle. Whatever women do, they come up against the might of imperialist control, and the need to throw off the chains of this domination is an urgent and

overriding task for all the oppressed in these countries, as the examples of Nicaragua and El Salvador have once again clearly demonstrated.

Large numbers of women become politically active for the first time through participation in national liberation movements. In the process of the developing struggle, it becomes evident that women can and must play an even greater role if victory is to be won. Women become transformed by doing things that were forbidden to them by the old traditions and habits. They become fighters, leaders, organisers, and political thinkers. These deep contradictions stimulate revolt against their oppression as a sex, as well as demands for greater equality within the revolutionary movement.

In Vietnam, Algeria, Cuba, Palestine, Angola, Mozambique and elsewhere, struggles by women to end the most brutal forms of their oppression have been closely intertwined with unfolding anti-imperialist struggles.

The participation of women in the national liberation struggle also begins to transform the consciousness of men about women's capacities and role. In the process of struggling against their own exploitation and oppression, men can become more sensitised to the oppression of women, more conscious of the necessity to combat it, and more aware of the importance of women as an allied fighting force.

Since the rise of the colonial revolution at the beginning of this century, women have participated in anti-imperialist upsurges, but there has not been a tradition of women organising as women, around their specific demands, as a distinct component of these struggles. However, the development of the world capitalist system since World War II has sharpened the economic, social, and political contradictions which will more and more propel women into struggle around their own demands.

The long-term capitalist depression which was signaled by the generalised international recession of 1974-75 has had a magnified effect on the underdeveloped world. The Third World debt crisis is the attempt by imperialists to foist the burden of the crisis onto the backs of the masses in these countries. A disproportionate weight of the economic crisis falls on women, in the forms of rising prices, cutbacks in the rudimentary health and education facilities that exist, and increased misery in the countryside. Thus the gap between what is possible for women and what exists is widening.

The impact of this contradiction on the consciousness of women is reinforced today by the impact of the international women's liberation movement which has inspired women around the world and popularised and legitimised their demands. This has been exemplified by the extent of involvement of women worldwide during the Decade of Women from 1975 to 1985. At the first major conference in Mexico in

1975, the major representation and focus came from women in the industrialised countries. By the final conference in Harare in 1985, Third World women and their situation predominated.

But even more influential are examples of what can be achieved by the victorious liberation movements, even in the face of constant harassment and military attack by imperialism. Vietnam, Cuba and Nicaragua are seen as symbols of the struggle to overthrow the yoke of imperialism. They provide living examples of what can be achieved when the wealth of the country is channeled to address the needs of the majority, decided by the direct democratic control of that majority, and the consequences for what this can mean for women. They demonstrate the real possibilities for change — not some abstract utopia. These revolutions, just as the Chinese and Russian revolutions did before them, serve as an indication of the gains that can be made in economically backward and predominantly peasant countries.

Revolutionary Cuba

The Cuban Revolution has more consciously taken up the struggle against women's oppression than any other since the early days of the Russian Revolution.

After the victory of the socialist revolution in Cuba, extensive health and education services and employment programs in a wide variety of fields were set in place. The Federation of Cuban Women was established so that women's equality was not just proclaimed but a structure was set in place for women to organise and wage the battle for equality. The battle to change sexist attitudes has been taken up and codified in law where men's family responsibilities to take half the domestic work is elaborated.

Today Cuban women are spread across the most skilled areas in the economy. Women hold 54% of technical jobs. Women dominate the educational and medical sphere, from the lowest to the highest strata, and they win access to these areas in open competition with men. Hundreds of child care centres have been opened.

Women have played a leading role in Cuba's many international aid projects — from humanitarian to military. Women are increasingly filling major public positions in government and diplomacy.

These advances for women have taken place in a small Third World island nation 140 kilometres off the coast of its most determined enemy, the USA. Cuba is resource poor. Moreover, it has suffered a 30-year economic blockade imposed by the United States, forcing it to rely on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe for the supply of fuel and machinery. It has repeatedly been subjected to acts of aggression from the US, with the US military base at Guantanamo Bay providing a permanent threat to Cuba's security.

Today, after the collapse of the Soviet bloc, Cuba faces enormous economic difficulties. Cuba has lost access to its most significant trading partners and faces an even more stringent economic blockade imposed by the US on ships of any country trading with Cuba. Yet the economic privations which the Cuban people are suffering are collectively shared. And the programs to extent greater equality for women continue.

Despite all these problems, Cuba continues to serve as a shining example to other Third World peoples and particularly to the poor in Latin America over the past 30 years.

The Sandinista experience in Nicaragua

The Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua has built on the lessons of revolutionary Cuba and on the impact of the emergence of the second wave of women's liberation struggles world-wide. Nicaraguan women organised as a separate force in the national organisation of women, AMPRONAC, which was part of the revolutionary struggle to overthrow the brutal dictatorship of Somoza and to mobilise women to play their part in this struggle.

In 1979, after the overthrow of the US-backed Somoza dictatorship, AMPRONAC changed its name to AMNLAE with two objectives — to fight to defend the revolution and to fight for women's liberation within the revolution.

In 1977 only 29% of women were economically active. By the late 1980s women represented 37% of industrial workers, 35% of agricultural workers and 44% of the cooperative movement. Many women joined the women's battalions in the army and the popular militias. Around 80% of the revolutionary nightwatch and 70% of the Civil Defence Brigades were women. Women held 31% of the leadership posts in the Sandinista government. They were offered technical training and scholarships for tertiary education. Childcare centres in the city and rural areas were built.

The increased participation of women in the political and productive life of Nicaragua was spurred on by the fight against the US-backed contra war. But throughout this period, not only economic advances were made. Advances were made in all areas of attitudinal change. Civil equality began to be established, the use of women's bodies for advertising prohibited, the divorce law amended to provide unilateral divorce, and laws establishing joint responsibility of both parents to provide food, medical attention, housing for children in and out of marriage were set in place.

While there was a period in the mid 1980s during the war when the demands of the women were put to one side, within two years this was reversed and AMNLAE increased its role. Women entered the constituent assemblies where discussions of a

new constitution were taking place. And women began to organise within the trade union and other mass organisations. This activity was directed at examining the obstacles to increased participation of women.

These initiatives brought the problems of the “private sphere” — family planning, abortion, domestic violence, sexual harassment in the workplace, combating machismo — into the public sphere for the first time in Nicaraguan history. The ratification of the new constitution meant that many of these demands became law. Special legal offices and centres were established to ensure these laws were enforced. These centres helped women resolve their immediate problems, educated them about their legal rights, and provided counseling. They also led campaigns to expose violence against women. Similar transformations of better conditions and women’s demands have taken place in the workplace with unions for the first time taking on some of the responsibilities and demands, even offering sex education and family planning at work.

At the time of the 1990 parliamentary elections in Nicaragua, laws concerning physical abuse of women and children and decriminalisation of abortion were waiting to be passed in the National Assembly. Since the FSLN lost these elections, AMNLAE has had to go on the offensive to prevent erosions to the gains made for women by the pro-US government of President Violetta Chamorro who has made a point of promising that her government would return women to the home under *patria potestad* — the “right” of the husband to “control” his family. Massive cuts of jobs and cuts to women’s projects have taken place. In 1992 one of the most repressive anti-homosexual laws in Latin America was adopted by the Chamorro government.

Discussions and evaluations are also taking place about the role of AMNLAE, its relation to the FSLN and ways to improve the organisation of women in the struggle for their rights. But the gains made by Nicaraguan women during the 10-year period of revolutionary government under the FSLN’s leadership provide an inspiring example of the way forward for women in other under-developed capitalist countries.

In many countries today women are organising themselves in a similar way to the Nicaragua experience. Women’s organisations and the separate mobilisation of women are taking place in unity with the general mobilisation of the oppressed in countries like the Philippines, Palestine, Indonesia, etc.

Increasingly the Nicaraguan experience of “the revolution inside the revolution” is seen as the model to organise the struggles of women with those of the oppressed — whether in the Third World or internationally. The content and intent of the first early years of the Russian Revolution is thus reaffirmed as the way forward even if the organisational forms have developed since that time.

8. Development of the Women's Movement

The birth of the women's liberation movement reflected major structural changes in the lives of the mass of women. The feminist movement succeeded in revealing the social character of women's situation and gave expression to the revolt of women as a gender. While many changes and greater equality have resulted from this revolt, women continue to suffer discrimination, subordination and oppression.

Many of the ideas and issues raised by the movement have been accepted by the majority of society, so much so that in the advanced capitalist countries there has been an attempt by the ruling class to convince women that they live in a "post-feminist" era, where equality between the sexes has been achieved and there is no longer any need for a women's liberation movement.

However, despite the obfuscation of the ruling class, the reality is very different: women in the advanced capitalist countries not only continue to be oppressed, the gains they have made over the last few decades have come under increasing attack as the social and economic crisis of late monopoly capitalism has steadily deepened.

In the advanced capitalist countries, where the movement first emerged, the 1970s was a period when it was possible for the various currents in the movement to unite and engage in mass action in alliance with trade-union and other progressive movements nationally and internationally to win and defend women's rights, such as abortion. To some degree success in winning such reforms slowed down this type of activity.

During the same period, however, the movement was increasingly affected by the shift to the right of the traditional leaderships of the working-class movement as the latter accommodated to the austerity drive of the bourgeoisie. The labour bureaucracy's acceptance of the need for austerity has led to a weakening of labour struggles and this in turn has weakened the striking power of other social movements.

Organisational fragmentation in the First World

At the beginning of the 1980s there was a significant decline and a fragmentation of the feminist movement. This has occurred for a variety of reasons:

- Many activists have become integrated into governmental institutional and/or social service activities, building careers within these frameworks.
- The labour bureaucracies and the managerial structures of companies have increasingly been opened up to women.
- Many feminists have turned their energies to building movements around social issues such as peace and environmental protection.

In many cases women's organisations continue, although isolated and focused on concrete and/or one-off activities. Today, with a few exceptions like Spain, Canada and the National Organisation for Women (NOW) in the USA, there are no national coordinating structures of women's groups. This signifies a weakness in the movement, a sectoralisation of struggles and demands.

In Australia, the general women's liberation meetings in each capital city have ceased. At best, women's liberation centres have become venues where different groups can hold meetings. International Women's Day activities remain the only focus for joint activities by feminist groups. Even the big national women's conferences, such as the Women and Labour Conferences where all issues and views were aired, ceased in the early 1980s.

While there has been a decline of "organised feminism" over the last decade, this hasn't meant that women haven't continued to radicalise. Quite the reverse. Broad layers of women have begun to struggle for their rights in quite diverse areas — cultural struggles against the images of women in the media and in education, religious struggles for equality in the churches, women fighting against domestic violence and incest and for more refuges, struggles for economic independence — for equal pay, for greater job access and training, for more child care facilities, etc.

Moreover, women have been actively resisting the attacks on their rights as these have stepped up. New organisations have emerged for the defence of particular issues, or coalitions have developed to coordinate a united fightback for a period of time. These initiatives point to possible organisational developments for the women's movement in the future.

The question that faces the movement at the beginning of the 1990s is how to draw the new layers of radicalising women into a unified movement.

The women's liberation movement has always been a heterogeneous movement containing many different political viewpoints and theories about the nature and the origin of women's oppression. The diversity of opinion within the movement reflects

the variety of interests and experiences, and the different social realities women encounter based on intersections between class, race, age, ethnicity, etc. These differences inevitably led to a variety of feminist organisations, each giving priority to their particular experience of oppression and inequality, for example, neighborhood groups, student groups, groups organising at workplaces, lesbian-feminist groups, groups of older women, groups based around feminist magazines, action coalitions around specific demands, etc.

While it is understandable that political consciousness begins to develop out of particular subjective experiences of oppression and then spreads to a more general feminist understanding, this process became somewhat distorted in the women's movement. The heterogeneity of the movement was accompanied by a commitment of each group to organisational autonomy, to independence.

However, over time, this notion of autonomy became increasingly interpreted as an absolute, with each group asserting its own needs and identity at the expense of the need for united action, not only with other movements for radical social change, but even with other feminist groups. This set up a process of definition, limitation and in some cases exclusiveness that led to competition with other groups about who were the "true" feminists. Fragmentation was, as a consequence, inevitable and was extolled by many as a virtue.

The elevation of organisational autonomy above all else became the basis for emphasising splits and fragmentation — it became part of the *de facto* political strategy of the movement. Ways of building bridges for joint activity, or building alliances in order to win shared objectives, suffered accordingly. Fragmentation as "affirmation of difference" replaced the capacity of the movement to plan strategically how to win liberation for all women. Even questions of tactics in ordering immediate priorities for struggle have fallen victim to the ideological shift of "affirming our differences" as basic to feminism. Consideration of shared fundamentals of women's oppression has been replaced with "contextual" impressions and relativism.

Yet, at the same time, women's participation in various types of struggles — in the unions, on the job, in the social movements — has increased. Although this has not always been translated into an organisational strengthening of the movement, the potential exists for this.

Networking in the Third World

By contrast, women in the Third World have had a different experience. In many cases the first impact of the feminist movement was on better-educated and more privileged women in the Third World. This led to a similar development to that

experienced by the movement in the advanced capitalist countries — consciousness-raising groups; discussion and activity around questions like housework, violence, sexuality, abortion; and the failure to establish forms of organisation to unify women and build a movement accessible to the majority of women.

As the international impact of the women's movement led to greater awareness of women's oppression, many of the autonomous feminist groups in the Third World were absorbed into government projects.

But in the Third World, the 1980s were a period of desperate struggles for survival by the masses of women and men in the face of growing debt crisis and the International Monetary Fund's savage austerity programs. The vast majority of Third World women were, and are, permanently organised around the question of the economic survival of themselves and their families:

- Peasant and indigenous women often organise as women to take up problems linked to the need for better conditions for carrying out domestic labour and for the well-being of their families, such as fighting for their own right to land and loans, and the need to have their own income to increase family revenue.
- They are continually confronted by the need to organise against political repression and for human rights and democracy. In many underdeveloped countries women are the driving force for the committees of relatives of political prisoners and the disappeared.
- Millions of Third World women have been forced out of the home or the extended peasant family into broader economic, social and political struggles. Civic urban movements fighting for solutions to the problems of housing, social services and high prices involve huge numbers of women. The development of trade union and peasant struggles involve a growing proportion of women as they make up an increasing proportion of both the agricultural work force and many new industries in the Third World which are almost exclusively based on female labor. This entry into public life creates a contradictory dynamic. The majority of women go into public life as wives and mothers, with a growing minority who enter as young women workers. Leaving their homes and neighborhoods, they come up against the centralised force of repressive governments. As a result, they more immediately acquire an understanding of the need for coordinated action and alliances.

A series of working networks have been built at national, regional and even subcontinental level, for example, Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Meetings. Many sectoral conferences have taken place on a regional level as well. And national women's organisations are emerging in a number of Third World countries.

Theoretical differences

A key factor determining the development of the women's liberation movement, of the issues and demands it campaigns around, and the organisational forms it adopts is the theoretical understanding among feminists of the origins and nature of women's oppression.

Different ideas on this question invariably lead to the adoption of different strategies and forms of organisation. From the very beginning of the second wave there have been divergent views on the origins and nature of women's oppression within the movement.

As the movement has developed over the past 20 years, impacting on social attitudes and practices, and as the ruling class shifted its response from an initial attempt to dismiss the movement to an active policy of trying to co-opt it, the confusion of competing theories and strategies within the movement has increased.

The materialist analysis of the historical origin and economic roots of women's oppression is essential to developing a program and perspective capable of winning women's liberation. To reject this scientific explanation inevitably leads to one of two errors:

- a. One error, made by many who claim to follow the Marxist method, is to deny, or at least down-play, the oppression of women as a sex throughout the entire history of class society. They see the oppression of women purely and simply as an aspect of the exploitation of the working class. This view gives weight and importance to struggles by women only, or mainly, in their capacity as wage workers on the job. It says women will be liberated, in passing, by the socialist revolution, so there is no special need for them to organise as women fighting for their own demands. In rejecting the need for women to organise against their oppression, such views only reinforce divisions within the working class, and retard the development of class consciousness among women who begin to rebel against their subordinate status. This viewpoint has suffered major setbacks with the development, growth and experiences of the second wave of the women's movement and with the failure of women to make decisive advances toward their liberation in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.
- b. A symmetrical error is made by those who argue that male domination of women — “patriarchy” — existed before class society began to emerge. This was concretised, they hold, through a sexual division of labor. Thus, “patriarchal” oppression must be explained by reasons other than the development of private property and class society. They see “patriarchy” as a set of repressive relations parallel to but independent of class relations.

Those who have developed this analysis in a systematic way usually isolate the fact of women's role in reproduction and concentrate on it alone. They largely ignore the primacy of cooperative labor, the essence of human society, and place little weight on women's place in the process of production at each historical stage.

Some even go so far as to theorise a timeless "patriarchal" mode of reproduction with male control over the means of reproduction (women). They often put forward psychoanalytical explanations which readily fall into ahistorical idealism, rooting oppression in biological and/or psychological drives torn out of the materialist framework of social relations.

This current, sometimes organised as "radical feminists", contains both conscious anti-Marxists and others who consider themselves to be making a "feminist redefinition of Marxism". They are hostile to and reject the need for women and men to organise together to end both class exploitation and sexual oppression. They see little need for alliances in struggle with others who are oppressed and exploited.

Both of these one-sided approaches deny the revolutionary dynamic of the struggle for women's liberation as a form of the class struggle. Both fail to recognise that the struggle for women's liberation, to be successful, must go beyond the bounds of capitalist property relations. Both reject the implications this fact has for the importance of building alliances within the women's movement and between it and other progressive social forces.

Justifying fragmentation

The fragmentation of the women's liberation movement in the imperialist countries over the last decade has been accompanied, and to some degree caused, by the proliferation of theories about "patriarchy". A major part of this theorising has been the development of theoretical justifications for the fragmentation of the movement based on redefining the idea of autonomy as separateness and elevating "difference" (between men and women, and between different groups of women) into an absolute.

The basis for this error rests on the view that there is an "essential" (i.e., inherent and timeless) difference between the psychological drives and behavioral characteristics of men and women. In some cases, feminists holding this analysis have aligned themselves with traditional bourgeois ideas and reactionary myths about the "natures" of men and women, disguised in liberation rhetoric and jargon.

By the mid-1970s distinct and often opposed tendencies, perhaps latent from the beginning, emerged sharing to some degree an "essentialist" framework: socialist feminism, radical feminism, separatism, cultural feminism, and most recently

ecofeminism.

For these feminists, the struggle for women's liberation has ceased to be one aimed at overcoming unequal access to economic, political and cultural life based on a notion of a shared humanity and a passage to equality. Instead, they see feminism as a "celebration of difference" based on some fundamental and inherent divide between masculine and feminine identity. In some cases this involves the assertion of essential "femaleness", of motherhood, of the maternal, the caring. In the case of ecofeminism this is linked to the notion of Earth as "mother", the goddess, fruitfulness, or other mythical allusions. In many cases the notion of difference implicitly or explicitly rests on some form of reductionism whether biological or psychological.

In terms of its social and political implications, difference theory tends to evoke an inversion of the old logic of the "naturalness" of male superiority and women's unquestioned inferiority. The inversion is then justified in terms of women's unique and "morally superior" capacity to bring new life into the world. By contrast, the inevitable consequence of "masculinity", or the "essential" quality of maleness, is violence. This is generalised into the position that all that is evil, bad and destructive is caused by men — not just rape and violence, but also racism, the destruction of the environment, war, exploitation, etc. The biological imperative "dooms" man and "elevates" women. In such an analysis, woman will transform society by her intrinsic moral superiority.

This parallels the theorising of 19th century Social Darwinism which buttressed the right of the father or *patria potestad* but it inverts women to the position of power and action. Proponents of these views either project "sex war" as the way forward or they counterpose individual solutions, like lifestylism or individually re-educating men, to social and political action. Or they blame men for their frustration at the pace and degree of change in social institutions, not recognising that the liberation of women involves the radical restructuring of society — a transformation that cannot be achieved through a gradual accumulative process. Frustration leads to cynicism and pessimism about the possibility of changing social relations at all and this leads in turn to disorientation and lack of clarity about where to go next.

One example of such lack of clarity has taken place around images of women — what to do about pornographic, violent or degrading imagery. One strand of cultural feminism whose main advocates are Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, equate these images with acts of violence and rape from an essentialist analysis of difference. For them a form of censorship, or anti-discriminatory law used in this manner, will remove the image and thus the violent act. However, to achieve the passage of such legislation they have had to work with the most right-wing, anti-

feminist layers concerned with any expression of sexuality in image, word or act as representing the growth of immorality and obscenity and threatening the traditional values of the family and religion.

But an image is very different from an act. Dealing with images of violence is really dealing with the symptoms not the causes of violence. These lie in the structure of social and economic relations of class society. Censorship only drives these images underground, into the black market. It doesn't deal with the social problems at all. Moreover, the question of pornography is even more problematic given that pornography and erotica lie on one continuum. One of the gains of the second wave has been bringing questions of sexuality into the open, not hiding them away as something "dirty" to be ashamed of.

But if some feminists have been confused on this issue, the way that MacKinnon/Dworkin-type legislation has been used provides no ambiguity. In Canada these types of laws have been used to declare lesbian and gay literature as obscene.

While such an "essentialist" analysis has been more or less explicitly upheld by "radical feminists" and "cultural feminists", and some variants of ecofeminism, it also underpins the analysis of "socialist feminism". For most of those identifying themselves as "socialist feminists", socialist theory is simply an addition to their "patriarchy" theory of women's oppression. While recognising class exploitation, the "socialist feminist" current sees it as separate from, or only loosely connected with, the oppression of women.

As a result, this current is incapable of elaborating a materialist and historical view of the nature and origins of women's oppression that takes into account all aspects of social reality, nor is it able to develop a coherent strategy for women's liberation. Its rejection of Marxist analysis of the interconnection between class exploitation and women's oppression leaves it susceptible to a reformist perspective, i.e., women's liberation (the destruction of "patriarchy") can be achieved within class society. Indeed, it is perhaps no coincidence that most "socialist feminists" have been politically aligned with either social-democracy or with Eurocommunism.

Developments in the class struggle

Of course these ideological developments within the women's movement in the imperialist countries haven't taken place in isolation from broader political and social developments. They are a reflection within the women's movement of the relative success of the bourgeoisie's ideological offensive during the 1980s against the socialist movement, and even against the ideas espoused by Keynesian liberalism.

The latest wave of academic "death of Marxism" theories — post-modernism and

post-structuralism — deny the very possibility of a general, scientific, theory of society and social evolution, accusing any such theories of being the root cause of totalitarianism. Instead, variations of pragmatism and “partial”, “sectoral”, or “contextual” theorising are held up as the only possible options. These idealist, anti-historical, anti-scientific and politically reactionary conceptions have had a pervasive influence among left-leaning middle-class intellectuals in the imperialist countries, particularly those with political links to the labour bureaucracy. They have provided a convenient theoretical rationalisation for the latter’s role in stifling social resistance to the bourgeoisie’s attacks on wages, jobs, and social services.

The bourgeoisie’s austerity drive has sought to dismantle the gains made by the working class in the 1950s and 1960s, which included forcing the capitalist state to provide a range of subsidised social services (health, education, unemployment and social security benefits). A major part of the ruling class attack on these gains has been an effort to convince working people that social (“collectivist”) solutions to social problems do not work, and that society can only prosper through unfettered private enterprise, competitive individualism and the “free market”.

The evident failure of bureaucratic and overcentralised planning in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and the failure of the Gorbachev leadership to mobilise Soviet workers to replace it with democratic socialist planning has added a further impetus to the ideological retreat of the left-reformist intellectuals in the imperialist countries. Many leading “socialist feminists”, for example, are now questioning that there is any relevance to socialism at all.

The shifts in the women’s movement, both ideological, political and organisational, are part of the developing class struggle. The movement is polarising around just whose interests it should defend. Will it defend the interests of the majority of women? Or will it only defend the interests of the minority of ruling-class and upper middle-class women who occupy privileged positions within capitalist society, and who benefited in a disproportional way from the gains made by the movement over the last two decades?

This question has come to a head recently in the struggle over the right to abortion in the USA. The 1973 *Rowe vs Wade* decision recognising a woman’s constitutional right to abortion was won under the pressure of mass mobilisations. But instead of launching a struggle in 1973 to make the legal right to choose a practical option for the greater majority of women in the US through greater access, information, availability and affordability, the relatively privileged women who dominated the National Organisation for Women put their trust in an abstract “right” and displayed a lack of concern about the real availability of abortion for other women. Their approach made

it easier for reactionary forces to erode the real content of the legal right for the majority of women. Within four years of the *Roe vs Wade* decision, the Hyde amendment removed abortion from the limited national health scheme, Medicaid, making abortion an option available only to those women with money and private health insurance.

Since that defeat, practical access to the right to choose has been further constrained until today the very legal right itself is under challenge. Only now are women mobilising nationally and organising politically to try to turn the tide of reaction on the abortion issue. But by choosing to fight in a united way only now, after years of right-wing victories, the abortion rights struggle is starting from a much weaker position than it was in 1973.

The process of class differentiation that has occurred within the contemporary women's liberation movement also took place in the first wave of feminism. It reflects the fact that the struggle for women's liberation is not separate from the class struggle, but is an integral part of it and is influenced by its development.

9. The Democratic Socialist Party & the Struggle for Women's Liberation

As the 20th century draws to an end, humanity faces the threat of unprecedented ecological catastrophe which puts in jeopardy the future of life on Earth. How to prevent such a catastrophe and to build a society in which this situation is resolved is not a matter of simply looking at the symptoms — the surface manifestations of this crisis — but requires an understanding of the social causes behind them.

Society and nature are not bipolar opposites. They are an inter-related whole. Measures that address only one aspect will not effectively provide solutions to this whole. Solutions to environmental problems will not succeed unless they also address basic human needs, and these in turn cannot be met unless the oppressed, who constitute the vast majority of humanity, are freed from the oppression imposed on them by class society. This can only be achieved through a radical restructuring of society to ensure that society's productive capacity is placed under its democratic control and directed toward meeting the rational needs of all its members, rather than the private enrichment of a tiny propertied minority at the expense of the working majority.

Such a solution is not one that can be imposed from above. Freedom from oppression can only be forged by the oppressed themselves consciously struggling together to overthrow their oppressors. Such a struggle takes many forms and will require a complex system of alliances in order to overcome the divisions fostered by class society among the oppressed and weld them into a powerful, united movement. It will be only through the establishment of such alliances and the experience of joint actions that the oppressed majority can, by democratic means, map out and implement a common strategy to achieve a society free of oppression and exploitation.

The perspective of the Democratic Socialist Party is to help to build such alliances

with other progressive forces and individuals in order to help mobilise the broadest numbers of people in the struggle for radical social change. Our goal is to build the confidence of the masses to rely on their own united power, rather than delegate their struggle to others. Parliament and other institutions of bourgeois democracy can be used to publicise our ideas. But we counterpose extra-parliamentary mass action — marches, rallies, strikes, public meetings — to reliance on elections, lobbying, parliaments, and the capitalist politicians who haunt them.

The independent women's liberation movement

The oppression of women as a sex constitutes the objective basis for the mobilisation of women in struggle through their own organisations. We support and help build the independent women's liberation movement.

By the women's *movement* we mean all the women who organise themselves at one level or another to struggle against the oppression imposed on them by this society.

The women's movement is characterised by its heterogeneity, its penetration into all layers of society, and the fact that it is not tied to any particular political organisation, even though various currents are active within it. Moreover, some groups and action coalitions, though led and sustained by women, are open to men as well, such as the National Organisation for Women in the United States and the National Abortion Campaign in Britain.

While most women's groups initially developed separately outside the organisations of the labour and other social movements, the deepening radicalisation has led more and more women to find ways to organise themselves within these organisations. This has led to an increased activity of women inside the trade unions, peace committees, environmental coalitions, committees for international solidarity, etc., as well as organising independently as women around their own demands.

By *independent* we mean that the movement is organised and led by women; that it takes the fight for women's rights and needs as its first priority, refusing to subordinate that fight to any other interests; that it is not subordinate to the decisions or policy needs of any political party or any other social group since the movement must be open to all women who wish to fight against their oppression; and that it is willing to carry through the fight by whatever means and together with whatever forces prove necessary.

Clearly, not every group within the movement measures up to those criteria fully or equally but that is the direction in which the movement will evolve if it is to be successful.

We fight to keep women's liberation organisations and struggles independent of all bourgeois forces and parties. We oppose attempts to channel women's independent struggles into the construction of women's caucuses inside of, or oriented, to capitalist parties or bourgeois politics, as has occurred in the United States, Canada and Australia.

We oppose the formation of a women-only political party, such as arose in Belgium and has been advocated by some feminist groups in Spain and elsewhere. All such attempts politically limit the political heterogeneity of the women's movement as well as its range and impact. At best it will represent the interests of only one strand of the movement and it will divert the movement from the need to mobilise broad layers of women in struggle and from the alliances the movement will need to forge. The election of more women to public office on a reformist program, while a reflection of changing attitudes, will not radically transform the basis of women's oppression — at best it can only clarify the limitations of reforms in class society.

Women-only groups

The dominant organisational form of the women's movement has been all-female groups. These have emerged in virtually all arenas from the schools and churches to the factories and trade unions. This expresses the determination of women to take the leadership of their own organisations in which they can learn and develop and lead without fear of being put down or dictated to by men or having to compete with them from the start.

Before women can lead others they must throw off their feelings of inferiority and self-deprivation. They must learn to lead themselves. Feminist groups that consciously and deliberately exclude men help many women to take the first steps toward discarding their own slave mentality, gaining confidence, pride and courage to act as political beings.

But the decision to form such women-only groups within mass movements, trade unions and even bourgeois parties is a tactical decision determined by how best to raise awareness of women's oppression within that organisation and how best to develop the struggle to have women's demands addressed. Often the formation of women-only subgroups or caucuses can allow the leadership of the organisation to pay lip service to women's equality while in practice marginalising its importance.

The small "consciousness raising" groups that have sprung up everywhere as one of the most prevalent forms of the second wave of radicalisation have provided the first step to help many women realise that their problems do not arise from personal shortcomings, but are socially created and common to other women. They lay the groundwork for women to break out of their isolation for the first time, to gain

confidence, and to move into action.

But if they remain inward-turned and limit themselves to discussion circles as a substitute for joining with others to act, they can become an obstacle to the further political development of the women involved.

To those who claim women-only groups divide the working class along sex lines, we say it is not those who are fighting against their oppression who are responsible for creating or maintaining divisions. Capitalism divides society — by class, by race, by sex, by age, by nationality, by skill levels and by every other means possible. Our task is to help organise and support the battles of the oppressed who seek to overcome these divisions and the exploitation on which they rest.

Our commitment to women's liberation

The DSP welcomes and supports the development of the movement for the liberation of women. We base this commitment on the following considerations:

- a. The oppression of women emerged with the transition from preclass to class society. It is indispensable to the maintenance of class society in general and capitalism in particular. Therefore, struggles by masses of women against their oppression is a form of struggle against capitalist rule.
- b. Women are both a significant component of the working class, and a potentially powerful ally of the working class in the struggle to overthrow capitalism. Without a socialist revolution, women cannot establish the preconditions for their liberation. Without the mobilisation of masses of women in struggle for their own liberation, the working class cannot accomplish its historic tasks. The destruction of the bourgeois state, the eradication of capitalist property, the transformation of the economic bases and priorities of society, the consolidation of a new state power based on the democratic organisation of the working class and its allies, and the continuing struggle to eliminate all forms of oppressive social relations inherited from class society — all this can ultimately be accomplished only with the conscious participation and leadership of an independent women's liberation movement.
- c. All women are oppressed as women. Struggles around specific aspects of women's oppression necessarily involve women from different classes and social layers. Even some bourgeois women, revolting against their oppression as women, can break with their class and be won to the side of the revolutionary workers movement as the road to liberation.
- d. While all women are oppressed, the effects of that oppression are different for women of different classes. Those who suffer the greatest economic exploitation are generally those who also suffer the most from their oppression as women.

- e. While all women are affected by their oppression as women, the mass women's liberation movement we are trying to build will be basically working-class in composition, orientation and leadership. Only such a movement will be able to mobilise the majority of women and play a progressive role under conditions of sharpening class polarisation.
- f. Struggles by women against their oppression as a sex are interrelated with, but not totally dependent on or identical with, struggles by workers as a class. Women cannot win their liberation except in alliance with a revolutionary mobilisation of the organised power of the working class.

But this historical necessity in no way means that women should postpone any of their struggles until the current labour officialdom is replaced by a revolutionary leadership that picks up the banner of women's liberation. Nor should women wait until the socialist revolution has created the material basis for ending their oppression. On the contrary, women fighting for their liberation must wait for no-one to show them the way. They should take the lead in opening the fight and carrying it forward. In doing so they will play a leadership role within the workers movement as a whole, and can help create the kind of leadership necessary to advance on all fronts.

- g. Sexism is one of the most powerful weapons utilised by the ruling class to divide and weaken the working class and the progressive movements. But it does not simply divide men against women. Its conservatising weight cuts across sex lines, affecting both men and women.

Its hold is rooted in the class character of society itself, and the manifold ways in which bourgeois ideology is inculcated in every individual from birth. The bosses pit each section of the working class against all others. They promote the belief that women's equality can only be achieved at the *expense* of men — by taking men's jobs away from them, by lowering their wages, and by depriving them of domestic comforts. The reformist bureaucracy of the labour movement, of course, also plays upon these divisions to maintain its control.

Educating the masses of people, male and female, through propaganda, agitation, and action around the needs of women is an essential part of the struggle to break the stranglehold of reactionary bourgeois ideology. It is an indispensable part of the politicisation and revolutionary education of the progressive movements.

- h. The full power and united strength of the working class can only be realised as the workers' movement begins to overcome its deep internal divisions. This will only be achieved as the workers come to understand that those at the top of the wage-scale do not owe their relative material advantages to the fact that others are

discriminated against and specially oppressed. Rather it is the bosses who profit from such stratification and division.

The class interests of *all* workers are identical with the needs and demands of the most oppressed and exploited layers of the class — the women, the oppressed nationalities, the immigrant workers, the youth, the unorganised, the unemployed. The women's movement has a particularly important role to play in helping the working class to understand this truth.

- i. Winning the organised labour movement to fight for the demands of women is part of educating the working class to think socially and act politically.
- j. The struggle against the oppression of women is not a secondary or peripheral issue. It is a life-and-death matter, especially in a period of sharpening class polarisation.

Because women's place in class society generates many deep-seated insecurities and fears, and because the ideology that buttresses women's inferior status still retains a powerful hold, women are a particular target for all clerical, reactionary and fascist organisations. Whether it be the Festival of Light, the National Party, the Klu Klux Klan, the fundamentalist religions, the opponents of abortion rights, or even sections of the women's movement itself, reaction makes a special appeal to women for support, claiming to address women's particular needs, glorifying their "essential" difference, taking advantage of their economic dependence under capitalism, and promising to relieve the inordinate burden women bear during any period of social crisis.

From the "Kinder-Kirche-Küche" propaganda of the Nazi movement to the Christian Democrats' mobilisation of middle-class women in Chile for the march of the empty pots in 1973, history has demonstrated the mystique of motherhood-and-family is one of the most powerful conservatising weapons wielded by the ruling class.

Chile once again tragically showed that if the workers movement fails to put forward and fight for a program and revolutionary perspective answering the needs of masses of women, many middle-class and even working-class women will either be mobilised on the side of reaction, or neutralised as potential supporters.

The objective changes in women's economic and social role, the new radicalisation of women and the changes in consciousness and attitudes this has brought about, make it more difficult for reaction to prevail. This is a new source of revolutionary optimism.

- k. While the victorious revolution can create the material foundations for the socialisation of domestic labour and lay the basis for the complete economic and

social equality of women, this socialist reconstruction of society, placing all human relations on a new foundation, will not be accomplished immediately or automatically.

During the period of transition to socialism, the fight to eradicate all forms of oppression inherited from class society will continue. For example, the social division of labour into feminine and masculine tasks must be eliminated in all spheres of activity from daily life to the factories. Decisions will have to be made concerning the allocation of scarce resources. An economic plan that reflects the social needs of women, and provides for the most rapid possible socialisation of domestic tasks, will have to be developed.

The continuing independent organisation of women will be a precondition for democratically arriving at satisfactory economic and social decisions. Thus, even after the revolution, the independent women's liberation movement will play an indispensable role in assuring the ability of the majority of humanity, male and female, to carry this process through to a successful conclusion.

Essential demands

While the totality of the system of demands put forward by the DSP — which deal with every issue from freedom of political association, to unemployment and inflation, to workers' control of production and the need for a working people's government — are in the interests of the working class, and are thus in the interests of the great majority of women, we also put forward demands that speak to the specific oppression of women.

The DSP seeks to convince the women's liberation movement to struggle for demands directed against those responsible for the economic and social conditions in which women's oppression is rooted — the capitalist class, its government and agencies. In fighting for these demands, masses of women will come to understand the interrelationship of their oppression as victims of class rule.

While the oppression of women is institutionalised through the family system, the family as an economic unit cannot be "abolished". It can only be replaced over time. Our goal is to create economic and social alternatives that are superior to the present family institution and better able to provide for the needs currently met, however poorly, by the family, so that personal relationships will be a matter of free choice and not of economic compulsion.

The specific demands we advocate be taken up by the movement at any particular time will depend on the situation facing the movement and the general level of struggle. While no exhaustive list of demands can be presented, it is necessary to indicate the

main themes necessary to sharpen and develop the struggle for women's liberation:

a. The right of women to control their own bodies

It must be the sole right of each woman to decide whether or not to prevent or terminate pregnancy. All anti-abortion laws should be repealed. Abortion should be available to all on demand regardless of age, in the venue of their choice — in a specialised clinic or within the public hospital system, with information and support services available. The cost should be fully covered by a universal health-care system.

Safe reliable contraceptives for both women and men should be freely available to anyone wanting them. State-financed birth control and sex education centres should be set up in schools, neighborhoods, hospitals and large workplaces.

The right of reproductive freedom includes the right of a woman to bear children if she chooses. Programs to help women conceive should be available to any woman who freely chooses to participate in such a program without coercion, regardless of sexual preference. Full information and support systems should be available.

Sterilisation without a woman's consent, or the use of pressure to obtain her consent, should be outlawed. This includes the rejection of population-control schemes which are tools of racism or class prejudice.

There should be an end to all medical and drug experimentation on women without their full, informed consent.

b. Full legal, political & social equality for women

There should be no discrimination on the basis of gender. Women should have the right to vote, engage in public activity, form or join political associations, live and travel where they want, engage in any occupations they choose. All laws and regulations with special penalties for women should be eliminated and all the democratic rights won by men should be extended to women.

Laws that discriminate against women's right to receive and dispose of their own wages and property should be abolished. Women should have equal access to unemployment benefits regardless of age and marital status.

The stigma of the concept of "illegitimacy" must be eradicated. This involves an end to all discrimination against unwed mothers and their children and an end to the prison-like conditions that govern special centres set up to take care of single mothers and other women who have nowhere else to go. Special centres, run by the women using them, should be established to provide information, emotional support and retraining opportunities.

c. The right of women to economic independence & equality

This includes the right to full-time employment at a nationally based living wage, coupled with a sliding scale of hours and wages to combat inflation and unemployment among women and men.

Women should be paid equal wages with one rate for the job and encouraged to enter non-traditional occupations. There should be a revaluing of traditional female occupations through comparative worth assessment with those traditional male occupations requiring similar levels of skill and the raising of women's wages accordingly. Discrimination against women in training and retraining programs and in promotional opportunities must be eliminated.

We support paid parental leave and the continuity of job seniority during such leave. Beneficial protective legislation providing special working conditions to women should be extended to men in order to improve the working conditions for all workers and to prevent the use of such measures as pretexts for discrimination against women.

Part-time workers should be guaranteed the same hourly wages and benefits as full-time workers.

Affirmative action programs, with legally enforced provisions, are essential to redress the effects of decades of systematic discrimination in hiring, training and promotion. To overcome existing imbalances, preferential treatment must be accorded to women in hiring, training, job upgrading, and seniority adjustments.

The rearing, social welfare, and education of children to be seen as the responsibility of society, rather than the sole burden of individual parents. Abolition of all laws granting parents property rights and total control over their children. Strict laws against child abuse.

Cheap and conveniently available childcare services are essential to this process. A program is urgently needed to create a network of free, government-financed childcare centres in every neighborhood and at large workplaces. Such centres should be open around the clock and be able to cater for all children from infancy to adolescence.

Women will not be able to enjoy genuine equality as long as they are forced to bear the main burden of domestic work. This is a socially created problem that demands a social solution. This would include the socialisation of domestic services through the creation of a network of easily accessible, low-cost, high-quality public laundries, cafeterias and restaurants, house-cleaning services organised on an industrial basis, etc.

d. Equal educational opportunities

The present education system discriminates against women at all levels, from preschool to postgraduate. There must be an end to sex stereotyping in educational textbooks,

an end to channeling of students into supposedly male and female subjects, and to all forms of pressure on female students to prepare themselves for so-called women's work (homemaking, nursing, teaching and clerical work).

Special preferential admissions programs should be introduced to encourage women to enter traditionally male-dominated fields and learn skills and trades from which they have previously been excluded. Special education and refresher courses should be set up to aid women re-entering the job market along non-sexist lines.

e. The right of women to freedom from sexual violence & exploitation

Sexist violence is a daily reality that all women experience in some form or another. Any law, secular or religious, sanctioning penalties, physical abuse, or even murder of wives, sisters, and daughters for so-called crimes against male "honor" has to be abolished.

Violence against women is a vicious product of the general social and economic conditions of class society. It inevitably increases during periods of social crisis. The capitalist mass media and advertising create a social climate that fosters sexual violence and harassment by portraying women as sex objects. These images also create insecurities among women about their self image, and combined with cultural images of women's sexuality and traditions of beauty, can lead to various forms of mutilation of women and girls, or self-abuse.

Many, including some feminists, advocate censorship of these images of sexual violence as the way to eradicate the violence itself but this only drives it underground and onto the black market, away from public view. What is needed is a massive education campaign to counter this debased view of women, promoted by the government in collaboration with the women's movement. Positive images of women need to replace the negative debased images.

Laws against sexual harassment of women should be strengthened and strictly enforced.

Increasing reported incidence of rape, incest, wife-bashing and sexual assault on children reveal the need for a massive increase in the provision of facilities for the victims of such abuse. Such facilities must be independent of the courts and the police, both of which see their role as to enforce the status quo.

All laws that require physical corroboration of sexual assault or evidence of physical injury, or which imply blame on the part of the female rape victim, should be repealed. Questioning of sexual assault victims about their past sexual activity should be prohibited.

Prostitution is also a product of the general social and economic conditions of class society, in particular, poverty and the restrictions placed on women gaining skills and access to productive employment. Prostitutes should not be treated as criminals. All laws victimising prostitutes should be repealed.

f. Against the suppression of human sexuality

Class society distorts all human relations by transforming social interaction into relationships between property owners. This applies not only to human cooperation in production, but also to all other social relations, including sexual relations. For this reason, the party stands for complete non-interference of the state and society in sexual matters, so long as nobody is injured or coerced.

This general principle means that all sexual relations between women or between men should be treated in exactly the same way as sexual relations between men and women, and this should be reflected in law in regard to marriages and de facto relationships. Sexual preference should be recognised as a matter of individual choice, a basic democratic right.

The oppression and persecution of lesbians and gay men is a by-product of the oppression of women, a result of the ruling class's need to maintain the stability of the family system by restricting all sexual activity except for purposes of procreation within the family. Homosexuality represents a challenge to the ideology through which the capitalist class tries to shore up the family system. The fight against lesbian and gay oppression is thus part of the class struggle against capitalism.

The party demands the repeal of all anti-homosexual laws, the outlawing of discrimination against gays and lesbians in employment, housing, child custody and an end to police harassment on the streets, in bars, etc. In addition, sex education for young people and the broader community should stress the variety of non-coercive sexual relations that exists, without moral judgment or preference.

* * *

All these demands indicate the breadth and pervasiveness of women's oppression. The struggle against this oppression — for women's liberation — will require the total reorganisation of society. Unless such a thoroughgoing restructuring of society's productive and reproductive institutions takes place to maximise social welfare, no truly human existence will be established for all.

This book evaluates the state of women's rights and feminism today around the world — in the industrialised Western countries, the Third World and the former Soviet bloc, as well as Cuba and Central America — explaining women's oppression from a Marxist perspective.

A resolution of the Democratic Socialist Party, the book draws on the party's rich experience of activism in the women's movement since its beginnings in Australia in the early 1970s. It outlines a strategy to protect the gains made so far and extend the struggle to build an inclusive women's movement — one that can win the liberation of all women.

Resistance books