

Sex, Class and the Queen of England

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1992

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Lavinia Kerwick showed great bravery when she spoke out about being raped, thousands took to the streets in support of “X” last February. Violence and discrimination against women are still very real. But for the first time since the early 1980s large numbers of women want to fight back. Aileen O’Carroll looks at some of the issues that have arisen. Can women of all classes share a common goal? Should women organise separately? Is there a connection between fighting sexism and fighting capitalism?

IT WAS NOT until the French Revolution in 1798, that it began to be accepted that all men are equal. Until then the concept was dismissed as irreligious and against the ‘natural order’. Many of the morals, rules and rights that society assumes as constant are actually quite fluid. It is only in the last few decades that the idea of equality has been extended to include women.

Although women still hold a secondary status, the idea of women as second class citizens is beginning to lose ground. Changing attitudes in itself are not going to lead to womens’ liberation (all men aren’t in fact equal in today’s society, though there is no longer strong ideological opposition to the idea of equality). However, the freeing of women from the chains of sexism empowers us to fight for womens’ liberation.

However having said all this, why is it that women aren’t more active in politics, in community groups, in campaigning? What is it that is holding them back? Anarchists believe that the core problem facing women is class society. However overlying that core is a layer of sexist ideas. This ideology serves to reinforce and justify womens’ inferior status. How does this operate? How does it manage to do this?

It’s easy today to underestimate the effects of the conditioning that takes place. Conditioning that tells us, that in the very first place we doesn’t have any right to compete on an equal basis. There is ample proof that this occurs, for example the findings of a recent survey on secondary school children indicated that girls had a much lower self-image than boys of a comparable age. Recent studies in American classrooms showed that when girls answered out of turn they were more likely to be told off, while boys were likely to be praised for showing intelligence or initiative. Given this it was not surprising that in later classes girls rarely spoke unless specifically asked a question while boys often spoke out or chatted with the teacher.

RAPE AND ‘GUILT’

Researchers into the area of sexual harassment have found that people have difficulty in knowing what type of behaviour amounts to harassment. Women feel unsure as to what are their rights are, unsure as to how much hassle they are expected by society to put up with. In a recent interview a representative of Dublin Rape Crisis Centre indicated that in her experiences all the women she saw felt guilt in some way, right down to an old age pensioner raped in her own home. Indeed, this is hardly surprising given the type of reporting of trials such as the Kennedy rape trial this year.

One in three of crimes against women arise from domestic violence. Yet these problems are given low priority. Rape Crisis Centres are constantly under threat of closure due to lack of funding. In the first four months of 1990, the Gardai received 1,568 calls for help in domestic violence situations (and all the experts accept that only a small number of such crimes are ever reported). The Womens’ Aid refuges, run by volunteers, have only 16% of the space that is needed.

Workers in a Dublin refuge reported that between four and seven families are turned away on average, while approximately another 60 women phone seeking advice each week. Our low status in society is reflected not only by the level of violence against us, but by the complete disregard that is shown for the problem by the government and society at large.

A CURFEW ON WOMEN

Though most rapes are committed by somebody known by the woman (92% of Irish rape victims knew their attackers), police propaganda is still aimed at frightening women into maintaining a self-imposed curfew at night. Even though the statistics indicate she is probably in more danger at home! We are forced to leave limited lives. We don't have freedom of movement even within our own communities. We are denied control over our own bodies. Worse of all, we are told how to look and how to behave.

Women are constantly given cues that they are in some way inferior. This conditioning is a symptom of the position of women in society, not the cause but a symptom with far reaching affects. We learn what is the norm through what is seen as acceptable behaviour in the world around us. The media, be it TV, film industry or pop music occupy a very vocal and dominant position. Next time you watch MTV or go to the cinema try and count how many times you see women portrayed as individuals in their own right, rather than as appendages. You won't need more fingers to count on than you have on your own two hands.

Most womens' magazines are still concerned with beauty, fashion and home making. Articles about working women are almost exclusively aimed at professionals and executives. They don't reflect the the reality that most women experience. Company magazine (June 1991) asks "Are you scared of success? Career success can be dazzling and very exciting, yet it can go hand in hand with tremendous fear". The article argues that if we just didn't keep holding ourselves back, we could make it in the career world. The truth for most of us is that it is lack of childcare and job opportunities determines our position as low paid workers, not our lack of confidence.

GLOBAL FORUM OF EGOISTS AND BOSSES

Unfortunately much of the womens' movement does exactly the same thing. Dublin recently hosted the 1992 Global Forum of Women. At £180 a head the forum was dedicated to "visions of leadership". Those attending were all "political, artistic & scientific leaders or prominent in the international leadership of the womens' movement". The brochure advertising the conference proclaimed "the president of Nicaragua is a women".

So what! So is the Queen of England and Margaret Thatcher. I don't see things being much better for our 'sisters' over the water or for those in Nicaragua. The election of Mary Robinson didn't make any noticeable difference for the 'sisters' at home either.

The conclusion of the conference, the message they are sending to the low paid, the part-time workers and the unemployed is that what is needed is 40% representation of women at all levels. Overwhelmingly, the message to us was to get up on our bikes, to seize the opportunities, that the only thing stopping us was ourselves. Class didn't come into it.

A gap exists between what women are meant to be like and what we are, between what we are supposed to achieve and what it is possible for us to achieve. Failure on our part to live up

to an ideal is attributed to some fault within us, rather than to the type of society we live in. It is for these reasons that women often find it more difficult to speak in public. We are often less confident because by standing up we are reacting against a conditioning that tells us we should sit down.

ORGANISING SEPARATELY?

Women are constantly conditioned to believe that we do not have a right to an opinion, to be politically active, to speak out. Sometimes the first step against this conditioning is to organise separately from men. Partly this is because it is felt that men being more confident and more self-assured tend to dominate discussions. Or even more simply some women feel that when men are present they are more likely to take a silent role and leave the arguing up to them.

Under these conditions women organising together is an exercise in empowerment. It's a positive response to the conditioning of society. It's role should be to make it possible for women to participate as equals with men. It should be seen as a temporary but necessary step, not as an end in itself.

However problems arise when this is taken further and when women begin to campaign separately. This identifies men as the root of the problem, which they aren't. It also isolates men from the struggle, when it is obvious that in order to change society we must work alongside them.

Within many Unions and the British Labour Party there exist women only conferences. A problem with this is that womens' issues are often referred to these conferences as a way of avoiding the issues and forgetting about them. Rape is a womens' issue — refer it to the womens' conference, contraception is a womens' issue — refer it to the womens' conference, etc.

In these instances men are rarely confronted with these issues, rarely have to deal with them and are let off the hook. Therefore while we defend the right of women to meet separately we also think it vital in any organisation, in any campaign, that women present their arguments to the entire body of people and win those arguments and fight as a whole. Tactically, this is the only way to widen and then win the fight for womens' liberation.

Things are better for us today. A lot of the institutionalised oppression, such as marriage bars and property laws has been removed. Often equal pay legislation and quota systems have been put in their place. Yet while things may have changed on paper, we are still left with class society. As long as this remains, the majority of us will not have equal access to the workplace or much else. As long as we are denied economic equality, society will continue making up morals and invent so called 'natural laws', as a way of justifying it's treatment of us. By tackling the symptom, sexism in society, we will be in a better position to tackle the root cause. By tackling capitalism we will be fighting for womens' liberation.

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Retrieved on 9th October 2021 from struggle.ws
Published in *Workers Solidarity* No. 36 – Autumn 1992.

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