

Towards Women's Freedom

A Workers Solidarity Movement Position Paper

Workers Solidarity Movement

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1. Specific Oppression of Women

1. The WSM's collectively agreed position on women's freedom.
2. We recognise that women are specially oppressed as a gender, that they face oppression as women. We call this oppression sexism. As anarchists we oppose sexism wherever it exists on principle and in practice.
3. The nature of women's oppression has changed as societies have developed. For example, the oppression of women that might have existed in some pre-class societies assumed a fundamentally new character with the development of class society. Just as the oppression of women in feudal societies changed its character with the development of capitalism.
4. We reject the idea that women are in any way inferior to men or that women are biologically predisposed to assume certain roles in society. Sexism, racism etc are not genetic traits but, rather, are formed by social existence, upbringing and education.

2. Class, Gender, and Capitalism

1. Sexist oppression is not based on an inherently antagonistic relationship between men and women. We fight for a society where women and men can live freely and equally together.
2. The experience of sexism is differentiated by class and other factors, such as race, sexuality, disability etc. Wealthy women have always been able to use their wealth to mitigate their oppression; so for example, a struggle for Free Abortion on Demand will not gain the same support from a woman who could always afford one anyway as it will from a poorer working class woman.
3. Under capitalism, the fact that most women can get pregnant makes them ultimately responsible for any child they bear. In consequence, paid maternity leave, leave to care for sick children, free crèche and childcare facilities etc, in short everything that would be necessary to ensure the economic equality of women under capitalism, will always be especially relevant to women. Because of this, women are generally less economical than men to employ and more vulnerable to attacks on gains such as crèche facilities etc.
4. Women will not be free until they have full control of their own bodies. Yet under capitalism, abortion rights are never guaranteed. Even if gains are made in this area they can be attacked (as can be seen, for example, in the rise and fall of abortion rights in the USA).
5. Thus, the oppression of women under capitalism has an economic and gendered basis, which are interrelated.
6. Women's oppression is in the direct interests of capitalism and the state.
7. When women work outside the home they are paid less and receive less benefits than men, thus providing a cheap pool of labour. When women work at home (in either a full-time or part-time capacity) they are not paid at all and in fact the work they do is rarely considered work. This leads to a devaluation of the work women do in society.

8. The family is the most economic unit of reproduction and maintenance of the workforce. (It must be emphasised that “family values” have more to do with profit than with morality.) Women’s unpaid work in the household supplies the bosses with the next generation of workers at no extra cost, as women are doing the cooking, cleaning and child rearing for free. They also take care of the sick and the elderly in the same way. Most working-class women in Ireland today do the housework as well as join the workforce. In this way, they work a “double shift” at great personal cost.
9. Capitalism thrives off hierarchies and divisions within the working class. Women’s oppression and the sexist ideas that try to “justify” it divide the working class. By promoting divisions between men and women, the bosses and rulers weaken workers organisation and resistance. This increases the power of the ruling class.

3. Women’s Liberation through Working Class Revolution

1. We recognise that the oppression of women is felt only by women therefore we support the right of women to organise autonomously around specific issues, within any movement (anarchist, trade union, community groups). Within the revolutionary anarchist organisation women should have the right to organise as a faction. However policy decisions or stands on women’s issues should be taken by the movement as a whole. Likewise struggles should be undertaken by the movement as a whole. This is because only through the destruction of class society which can only be achieved by all genders will women’s oppression be defeated. Also only by exposure to the arguments will male attitudes change.

Aspects of Women’s Oppression

4. Domestic Violence

1. Domestic violence includes emotional and sexual violence as well as other physical violence.
2. Women are much more likely than men to be victims of domestic violence. Although domestic violence where the male is the victim does occur, because a much higher proportion of domestic violence is against women, domestic violence is an aspect of women’s oppression.
3. The high level of domestic violence against women is caused by the hierarchical structure of a society which worships power and by the uneven power balance that exists between men and women. Men who use violence against women do so because they are in a position of power vis-à-vis women in this society and believe they have the right to enforce their power over women. They want to retain this position and to control the women with whom they are involved. Men such as these use physical violence or the threat of physical violence to establish and then safeguard their control over their partner and force, bully and frighten them into submission.
4. In the vast majority of domestic violence cases violent men do not change so efforts should be made to enable women to leave violent relationships by fighting for:

1. Increased funding for shelters and halfway houses for victims of domestic violence.
2. Increased lone parents allowance.
3. Free crèches for kids.
4. Increased salaries for women.
5. Consciousness raising to encourage women to be more independent to enable them to leave abusive relationships and to refuse to accept any form of control from their partners.
6. Consciousness raising to encourage those outside the relationship to watch out for signs of abuse and create a social safety net for the woman.

5. Sex Work

1. The WSM is for the full decriminalisation of sex work (buying and selling).
2. Sex workers should decide their own fates, and sex workers almost unanimously favour full decriminalisation.
3. We believe that sex work is real work.
4. While sex work has its own unique characteristics (and again significant variations between different kinds of sex work and between different people), in general work under capitalism is exploitative.
5. Not all sex workers are women, but since the overwhelming majority are, and since the treatment of sex workers by broader society has been defined by patriarchal ideas, sex work is a matter of women's liberation.
6. Criminalising soliciting inhibits sex workers from reporting attacks. Hence we oppose the 'Swedish / Nordic Model'. It makes sex workers more vulnerable. It leads to further harassment by the cops.
7. It creates a stigma of sleaziness and makes criminals of already marginalised people.
8. We support the right of people to choose this profession and their right to work in comfort and safety.
9. We reject any judgments of sex workers made by the church, the state or other 'moralists' (including liberals and socialists).
10. We call for:
 1. The decriminalisation of soliciting.
 2. 'Tolerance' zones where prostitutes can work protected and without police harassment.
 3. Brothels (ideally self-managed but this is improbable) not to be harassed by cops or any legislation.

6. Cultural Relativism

1. We reject the idea that specific forms of women's oppression (e.g. female genital mutilation) are acceptable as they are part of a given group's culture. Although we support the right of different ethnic groups and cultures to preserve their traditions and customs, we are against any oppressive practices.
2. It should be noted that traditions change over time and are therefore not fixed. Women in different cultures have the right to strive for liberation within their own cultures and contribute towards the creation of new egalitarian traditions.

7. General Perspectives

1. We believe the fight against women's oppression is vital part of the class struggle and a necessary condition for a successful revolution. Our priorities on this issue are those matters that immediately affect millions of working class women.

8. Guidelines for day-to-day activities

1. We fight for equal pay for equal work, for increased pay for part-time work, for women's access to jobs that are traditionally denied to them, for flexitime, for job security for women, for free 24 childcare funded by the bosses and the State, for paid maternity, paternity and parental leave and guaranteed re-employment.
2. We are opposed to all violence against women and defend women's right to physically defend themselves against abusive men.
3. We are for men doing a fair share of the housework and childcare
4. We believe in the right of women to control their own fertility. Women must be free to decide to have children or not, how many and when. Thus we believe in the right to free contraception and we support free safe abortion on demand.
5. Women should be free to leave relationships that they no longer find satisfying.
6. Sexist attitudes and opinions in comrades will be challenged since they are oppressive and incompatible with the principles of anarchism.

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The WSM's collectively agreed position on women's freedom as amended by the July 2017 WSM National Conference. This position paper sits under the Sex, Gender, and Sexuality paper and does not repeat that material here.

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