

Towards Womens Freedom

a Workers Solidarity Movement position paper

Workers Solidarity Movement

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1. We recognise that women are specially oppressed as a sex, that they face oppression as women as well as due to their class position. We call this oppression sexism. As anarchists we oppose sexism wherever it exists on principle and in practice.

2.1 The questions of whether women have always been oppressed in some form or not and how the oppression of women as a sex first began are still unanswered and, ultimately, impossible to verify. It's generally accepted that in hunter/gatherer societies the status of women was relatively high and that women's social position deteriorated with the development of class society. It is not necessary, however, to prove, that in some past era women enjoyed equal status to that of men in order to believe that in the future women can live as equals to men.

2.2 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. Where women's oppression has existed in different societies it has always had a material basis.

2.3 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. Likewise we believe that men are not inherently sexist. Sexism, racism etc are not genetic traits but, rather, are formed by social existence, upbringing and education.

Class, sex and capitalism

3.1. There are fundamental differences between class exploitation and the oppression of women as a sex. Capitalism depends for its survival on the exploitation and oppression of one class by the other. As anarchists we aim to abolish class society and eliminate all classes. Sexist oppression, on the other hand, 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.

3.2. The experience of sexism is differentiated by class. 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 working class woman. Conversely, it is working women who face the brunt of women's oppression.

3.3 While capitalism is dependent on class exploitation, it can to a large extent accommodate similar treatment of men and women within a capitalist framework. For example, despite the temporary nature of some of the gains women have made over the last, say, 100 years, there has been a general progression in many countries. The situation of women in most first world societies and the underlying assumptions in society of what roles are natural and right for women have changed radically.

3.4. Nevertheless, sexist oppression will never completely disappear in capitalist society. This is because women, due to their potential to get pregnant, will always be more vulnerable than men in a society which is based on the need to maximise profit.

Under capitalism, the fact that women 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.

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).

Thus, the oppression of women under capitalism has an economic and sexual basis, which are inter-related.

These are the root causes of women's oppression from which stem other forms of oppression like, for example, the ideological oppression of women.

3.5. Women's oppression is in the direct interests of capitalism and the State.

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.

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.

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.

Women's Liberation through working class revolution

4.1 Given that capitalism and the State are the key sources of women's oppression, real freedom for women requires a revolution against these structures of oppression.

4.2 Since women in the ruling class benefit from capitalism and the State, and from the super-exploitation of working class women that these structures utilise, they are incapable of challenging the root source of women's oppression. There for we do not call for an alliance of "all women" against sexism, we realise that, some women (the ruling class women) have an objective interest in the preservation of the structures that cause sexism (capitalism and the State).

4.3. Only the working class can defeat capitalism and the State because only the working class does not exploit (they are productive), only this class has no vested interests in the current system, and because only this class has the power and organising ability to do so (they can organise against the ruling class at the point of production). This means that it is only the class struggle that can ultimately defeat sexism. It is not multi-class "women's' movements". Although the class struggle against capitalism and the State is in the interests of all working class people in any case (these systems exploit, impoverish, dominate and humiliate them), women have a additional reason to fight this battle: capitalism and the State's usual oppressions are compounded by the special oppression of women that these systems inevitably produce.

4.4. It follows from the above that the real allies of working class women in the fight against sexism are working class men and not women of the ruling class. These men do not have an interest in the perpetuation of women's oppression — it is in fact directly against their class interests even if they may perceive and receive individual benefits. Working class women benefit from this sort of alliance because it strengthens their overall struggle, because it helps to prevent their issues from being isolated and ghettoised.

4.5. This sort of unity in action requires that two things happen: one, that issues and demands are raised that are in the interests of all workers, both men and women; and, two, that special attention is paid to women's specific issues in order to strengthen unity, prevent the marginalisation of these issues, and consistently fight against all oppression. It is precisely because you cannot mobilise all working class people without raising issues that are relevant to all sections of the workers, that women's issues are not something optional that can just be tacked onto the struggle, but a central plank of a successful workers movement. Thus, the working class can only be mobilised and united for battle and victory if this is on the basis of a consistent fight against capitalism, the state and all forms of oppression.

4.6. Consequently, it is clear that the struggle for women's freedom requires a class struggle by the workers. And, in turn, the class struggle can only be successful if it is at the same time a struggle against women's oppression.

4.7 We thus disagree with those feminists who think that all you have to do is for women to become bosses and politicians to achieve equality. We want to destroy the existing structures of domination and exploitation. The struggle for women's liberation is the struggle against capitalism and the state. And it is both a struggle against sexist institutions (like capitalism) and sexist ideas (as internalised or accepted by both men and women); both are essential to the success of the revolution and the realisation of its full potential.

5. 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 men and women will women's oppression be defeated. Also only by exposure to the arguments will male attitudes change.

Aspects of women's oppression

Domestic Violence

6.1 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.

6.2. 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 viz a viz 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.

6.3 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: Increased funding for shelters and halfway houses for victims of domestic violence, increased lone parents allowance, free crèches for kids, increased salaries for women, conscious raising to encourage women to be more independent to enable them to leave violent relationships and to refuse to accept any form of control from their partners.

Prostitution

7.1 Prostitution, though not exclusively confined to women is a form of exploitation of women.

Money is the main factor in women taking up this profession and is therefore a class issue.

Prostitution is symptomatic of a hierarchical and sexist society.

Prostitution will not end until capitalism does.

“The 1993 Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act criminalised soliciting and kerb crawling. In the first 17 months of the Act 116 women were prosecuted with only 12 prosecutions of men.

Prostitutes can be (and sometimes are) charged with soliciting when reporting attacks.

A survey carried out in 1996 found that one in five prostitutes had been attacked by clients and that 11% had been raped.

Because Brothels are illegal many women are forced to work the streets.

Chest infections, the flu and other illnesses are common because women have to work outdoors for hours at night.”

7.2 Criminalising of soliciting inhibits women from reporting attacks. It makes them more vulnerable. It leads to further harassment by the cops.

It creates a stigma of sleaziness and makes criminals of already marginalised people.

We support the right of women to choose this profession and their right to work in comfort and safety.

We reject any judgments of these women made by the church, the state or other ‘moralists’.

We call for

(a) the decriminalisation of soliciting

(b) ‘tolerance’ zones where prostitutes can work protected and without police harassment

(c) brothels (ideally self-managed but this is improbable) not to be harassed by cops or any legislation.

8. 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. 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.

General Perspectives

9. 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.

Guidelines for day-to-day activities

10.1 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.

10.2. We are opposed to all violence against women and defend women's right to physically defend themselves against abusive men.

10.3. We are for men doing a fair share of the housework and childcare

10.4 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.

10.5. Women should be free to leave relationships that they no longer find satisfying.

10.6. Sexist attitudes and opinions in comrades will be challenged since they are oppressive and incompatible with the principles of an anarchism

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