

FEMINISM - AN INSIDE VIEW

by Hilda Bernstein

(A reply to an article in the African Communist (Issue 116) by Clara)

It is not the contemporary movement in Britain and America that brought me to feminism. I have been a feminist for more than sixty years.

There are those who think that because there are people who interpret a theory in bizarre ways, the theory itself is not valid. If that were so, it would be necessary to reject Marxism because of Pol Pot. Distortions of feminism come from ^w opposing directions: reactionaries maintain there is no basis for feminism, nothing for women to complain about; while on the extreme left there are women who blame men for everything and state that if women take over, all will change; while the Western media ridicule feminists to make the whole movement seem absurd.

Feminism has no single and generally recognised meaning, but its common ingredient is that women suffer from systematic social injustice because of their sex; and this is the essence of feminism. Anyone who accepts that and wishes to remove that injustice is a feminist - men as well as women.

Feminism is a movement for the elimination of sex-based injustice, whatever the reason for that injustice, which springs from many different sources. These are not purely confined to the economic basis of society. This is why changing that economic basis can only eliminate certain areas of women's oppression, and these mainly in the economic sphere, in wages and job circumstances, and in education. But it does not automatically change human relationships, nor eliminate deeply entrenched convention, habits and cultural prejudices. Some of these do spring from capitalist/imperialist/colonialist conditions; and some are based in feudal and in tribal customs. But whatever their original source, they persist in society long after the source has been removed and the basis changed.

Feminists - like Marxists - are not a homogenous mass, and it is scarcely necessary to waste space debating about the way-out groups - the so-called 'radical' feminists, or the men-haters. The mainstream feminist movement does not set out to compete with men, is not concerned with acquiring special benefits for women. It is concerned with eliminating the injustice women suffer as a result of being female. This applies also to feminists in South Africa in the mass democratic movement; South African feminists are not striving simply to free

WOMEN from apartheid discrimination, but to free the people as a whole. And to do this they must also organise to fight discrimination against women.

This is one of my basic differences with the article on 'Feminism and the Struggle for National Liberation' by Clara, in your issue number 118, and with her interpretation of what she calls Marxism-Leninism. In writing about peasants Lenin said that it is easier to change production relations than to change cultural patterns, because they have a life of their own over and above the change in industrial relations. The same analysis applies to the position of women: it is slower, and takes longer, to change such attitudes. In Marxism, consciousness is a tangible force for transforming society. Clara is wrong when she states that the reason so much still needs to be done in socialist countries for women's emancipation is because 'the objective conditions have not matured sufficiently for full women's emancipation to take root' She is implying that consciousness is totally a reflection of objective conditions, and that a change in these objective conditions of itself will produce a new consciousness. This implies that equality will therefore be established automatically. Marx says that consciousness does arise in the first place from concrete conditions, but once it arises, it becomes in itself a force for the transformation of social conditions. If this were not so, we would not be able to change society in the way we wish - we would have to wait for the conditions to mature, because our social consciousness would be based solely on capitalist ideology; we would not be able to see beyond the objective conditions. Marxism says that ^{ideas arise out of reality} ~~ideas arise out of reality in the first place,~~ ^{are instruments in changing} ~~but then become themselves a force for the transformation of society.~~ It is not only the objective conditions in socialist countries that have 'not yet matured sufficiently', but human consciousness, the way people think; neither have they campaigned sufficiently to counter prejudices of the past. There is room for a feminist movement in socialist countries as well, to mobilise continuously to fight backward ideas; feminist theory plays an important role in changing consciousness of women's oppression.

'Feminism' states Clara, 'is a reformist ideology that appeals strongly to middleclass women.' Yes, some women fall in the category of a middleclass ideology because they do not question the fundamental basis of the social order. But this is only one strand of feminism. She calls for a class alliance of women led by the black working class women around issues they are most affected by. It has

a Workerist ring to it. If this is so, it follows ^{that} the position of women moulds group consciousness, and that implies that only workers accept socialism. You cannot necessarily extrapolate from the theory of the role of the working class in the socially advanced section of production to place black working class women as the vanguard of the women's movement. The largest single area of employment for these women is domestic labour, the most backward, unmechanised form of work, and one where each individual worker must contend with a different employer. The situation must be looked at concretely, not advanced dogmatically as a consequence of Marxism-Leninism. The case must be proven, not asserted from theory.

How are black women to become leaders? Not by saying so, but by taking leading roles in trade union activity. This requires more than calling for women to organise, as COSATU has fully recognised; it means male-dominated unions must consciously make room for and acknowledge the need for women to participate more actively at every level. But this requires more than the resolutions of COSATU leadership - the consciousness of women themselves must be raised, and thus women must be organised as a force to struggle against backward ideas both among women and among men. This is one of the main tasks of the feminist movement, requiring constant propoganda and efforts to integrate more women, most specifically at leadership level. It is NOT just a straight economic question.

The double day, Clara states, 'constitutes another aspect of working class women's oppression'. While in South Africa there are sections of middleclass women who are relieved of the bind of the double day through domestic assistance, the double day in fact burdens women of all classes not only throughout the Western world but in socialist countries, cutting across class lines; it burdens women in professional and managerial posts as well as those of the working class. As a fundamental feature of women's oppression it cuts across class and class systems.

'Our theory,' Clara states, 'guides us to redefine motherhood and fatherhood in non-oppressive ways' I do not know what that means. However, definitions do not change reality. Marxism states that reality is primary and consciousness reflects it, not vice versa.

And what is meant by the statement that 'It is only under people's power that such welfare services (child care, education opportunities, maternity leave, etc) can be provided? What is meant by 'people's power'? Does she mean democratic rule? Is there

'people's power' in Sweden, which has many of the most advanced of such welfare services anywhere in the world? We battle for them under existing conditions because it is possible to obtain at least some of these services. They exist to a greater or lesser extent in many countries because of concerted effort.

Women's emancipation is not simply a woman's struggle and should not be defined as being exclusively their concern. Clara does not deal with the cultural and social patterns of men's behaviour in relation to women, nor with the question of changing men's consciousness, nor with the role of men in participating in the struggle for women's emancipation. She states that aggression against women - rape, battery, pass raids, etc - is oppressive violence which our theory guides us to counter with revolutionary violence. How do you use revolutionary violence against oppressive violence? This needs to be explained. It is neither an adequate explanation of nor solution to the subject of male violence against women (it exists in socialist countries) and she fails to deal with it in the end.

The organisation that first drew women of all colours together - the Federation of South African Women - recognised from its very inception that the liberation of women from all forms of oppression is an integral part of the transformation of South African society, and not as something to be addressed as a separate issue, or only in a post-apartheid South Africa. "Inherent in the principles of the Federation," writes Karin Chubb (a member of that largely 'middleclass white women's' organisation, the Black Sash) "is a commitment to women's issues which can in due course serve as the basis for a common consciousness across the divisions of race and class. That is its great emancipatory potential, the realisation of which is fraught with difficulties in the present situation . . . Too often feminism is dismissed as bourgeois, irrelevant and divisive." And with those statements I agree.

Feminism opposes traditional ideas relating to the role and place of women; and because peoples' ideas and desires have formed on a background of tradition, it therefore must appear to oppose many people's accepted dreams and wishes. Because women's oppression has a customary and traditional background as well as an economic foundation, it has greater depth and significance than the rigid economical dogma that Clara propounds. It requires a more thorough-going change of culture, of custom, of social consciousness in addition to social-change; an attack and exposure of the prejudice which has been built into books, in films, in art, in the presentat-

tion of news, in the interpretations of history, in social relations, in education, and in the use of language. This confronts us with the necessity to carry on a constant struggle in TODAY'S society, while at the same time we challenge the reformist strand, or the approach to feminism that reflects only class aspirations and does not challenge the basis of the economic exploitation of women. We demand the same rights that men demand, not the right to be exploited equally with them.

The reaction to feminism's challenge to all the patterns reflected above is to accuse feminists of divisiveness and pettiness; women are laughed at when they raise questions of the use of language, and 'put down' when they say that women have been omitted from the pages of history; so that women become inhibited about challenging sexism and sexist violence, of social oppression within the family, and of the necessity for sexual rights. These issues are not separate from the struggle for national liberation, nor from the question of the establishment of women's rights after liberation.

Finally a word about words - an appeal to those who speak and write. I found Clara's article difficult to evaluate because of the sociological/political jargon that obscures rather than illuminates. As a result nothing emerges clearly because it is obfuscated in theoretical dogma wrapped in academic cliches.

In a journal about women of the 'third' world an article stated that woman is confronted by six mountains. The first is colonialism; the second is reactionary customs, whether feudally or tribally based; the third is backwardness (and 41% of African women in our country are illiterate); the fourth is colour; the fifth is men; and the sixth - herself.

Start climbing, Clara.

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