



An immaterial analysis of women's oppression

Mon, 01/10/2007 - 17:00

In *Material girls: Women, men and work*, Lindsey German, a member of the Central Committee of the Socialist Workers Party, describes the profound changes in the lives of women, predominantly in Britain, over the last 100 years. She sets out in some detail the shift in attitudes towards gender and sexuality; changes in the family structure and the role of the nuclear family in reinforcing the status quo; the increase in the number of women in wage labour; improvements to women's education; and advances in technology, which have reduced the scale of household drudgery.

She identifies these changes as a result both of a capitalist agenda to draw more women into the workforce, and of women themselves organising and fighting for change, for example, in the first feminist movement which fought for the vote and legal rights, in the Russian revolution of 1917, in the fight for abortion rights, and in other struggles of the 1960s and 1970s.

German also examines the contradictions that limit women's emancipation within capitalism: the commodification of sexuality and women's bodies; the increasing gender gap in pay; the prevalence of rape and domestic violence; the continuation of the double burden of women at work and in the home. She records too the rampant double standards, by which politicians and media pundits promote involvement of women in the workforce, yet at the same time blame working mothers for unravelling the social fabric.

The book is well researched, with statistics and explanations that show both the changes and the fundamental continuities, but its weakness comes when it moves on to outline a strategy for how to combat and overcome women's oppression. Here the economism that characterises the SWP's method comes into view.

For example, when German explores the relation between working class women and men, she refuses to acknowledge the privileges that working class men derive from the capitalist oppression of women. Attempting to rebut feminism by denying that there is any material basis to male workers' sexism means she cannot develop the strategy, tactics and organisational means to overcome it: to create class unity on a higher, revolutionary level.

Neither does she explore the double oppression of women migrants: the racism they experience and the patriarchal oppression within the family and religious institutions. Thus, apart from her undoubted commitment to defending Muslim women against persecution for wearing the hijab or the niqab, her account fails to address these issues. In modern Britain this is a great weakness.

Economism

These problems flow back to the economist and tailist politics of the SWP. They start from the one-sided and inadequate belief that the trade union struggle is the real class struggle. Yet as Lenin pointed out, the economic struggle is not yet the struggle of an entire class. It has to become a political struggle, which relates to the state and its attacks not only on workers, but also on women, youth and racial minorities. This requires a class wide response and therefore, if it is to develop, a political leadership, a party.

Of course the SWP recognises that the employers and the media use all differences of race, gender, skill, immigrant status to divide workers. The SWP wishes to overcome these but sets out to do so by minimising the material basis for these. It fears, for example, that, if you admitted that British or American workers received any material benefit from their country's imperialist status, this would somehow 'justify' social chauvinism. They reject the idea that reformism

has its material roots in the privileged position of the skilled workers, the labour aristocracy and the union bureaucracy that rests on this layer. Likewise, they believe that recognising the material basis for men's sexism leads to the reinforcement of these divisions. Instead they insist these backward ideas are just that, bad ideas, introduced by capitalist propaganda to poison workers' consciousness.

But working class organisations, particularly trade unions and reformist parties, do not automatically or spontaneously oppose to women's oppression. Neither do they spontaneously become socialist. It requires a conscious struggle by a revolutionary party to fight sexism, racism, and reformism. The problem is that the SWP sees socialist consciousness as stemming purely from ever broader struggles, and not as a result of the fight for communist leadership. They replace class-consciousness with confidence. If only workers are confident enough, they will broaden and generalise their struggles.

This is tailism: following the consciousness of the working class rather than giving it a lead. For Leninists, fighting to win the vanguard of the working class to a programme for the conquest of political power through a series of intermediate objectives and the organisations and methods of struggle to achieve them is central. This includes a remorseless struggle first within the vanguard against sexism, racism, etc. and then a struggle by the vanguard amongst the broad masses for the same objectives.

The question, "Do working class men benefit from women's oppression?" must be answered dialectically. In an immediate and very limited sense the answer is yes. They benefit from unloading most of the shopping, cooking, cleaning and childcare onto their partner's shoulders. They benefit from higher wages, from higher social esteem, and the tendency to submit to their priorities that women have to fight so hard against. As Frederick Engels described it in *The Origins of the Family Private Property and the State*:

"The modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife, and modern society is a mass composed of these individual families as its molecules. Within the family he is the bourgeois and the wife represents the proletariat."

Thus working class men do benefit from the oppression of women, not because they are the originating cause of women's oppression, or because they collaborate with the bourgeoisie to keep women down, but by the very fact that they themselves are not oppressed as a result of their gender. The institution of the family is of greater material benefit to men, however marginally in some cases, than it is to women.

Nevertheless this truth, which we have to recognise in order to fight it, remains one-sided and false; the oppression of women also holds the male worker down. This can be seen both in the labour market and in the home.

Employers take on women workers to undercut male wages hoping that women's atomisation in the home, lack of experience of union solidarity, and submission to male authority learned in patriarchal families will make them more pliant. They do the same with poor and desperate migrants. The answer of course is not to exclude women from the workforce (as some unions tried to do for over a century) or exclude migrants through immigration controls (again, as many unions have supported) but to organise all new recruits and fight for their equal rights, wages and conditions.

The consolation for being a (wage) slave at work but the "master in the house" likewise hampers the male workers' fighting spirit. The inequality and misery of the woman undermines the quality of the personal relationship, leading to conflict and breakdown. Looked at from the point of view of whether women's oppression benefits the male worker's capacity to resist the capitalists, the answer is a decisive no. Working class men do not benefit as a class from women's oppression. On the contrary, it weakens and divides our class as a whole.

Patriarchy

This method also leaves German unable to offer a clear alternative to one of the main arguments of the middle class feminists: that patriarchy "or male dominance" is the source of women's oppression. German writes: "feminist theory, correctly in my view, locates women's oppression in the existence of the sexual division of labour, the role of the

family and the separation of home and work, but it had two crucial weaknesses. It could not integrate the theory of women's liberation with an understanding of class. Partly because of this it also often failed to deal with the concrete reality of women's lives.

But not all feminists rejected the importance of class: 'socialist feminists' in particular tried to relate women's liberation and the working class movement. The problem was that feminism had a different analysis of the origin of women's oppression and the agency for its eradication. German does not clearly identify the link between feminism's analysis of women's oppression as caused by patriarchy and its argument that the instrument for overcoming it must therefore be an all-class alliance of women.

By contrast, the Marxist understanding of women's oppression is that it is rooted in the emergence of class society and the struggle to liberate women is intrinsically bound up with the struggle against capitalism. Both have to be waged by the working class, female and male. In sharp contrast, radical feminists, because they saw all men as their oppressors, naturally ruled out men playing any role in the emancipation of women. The socialist feminists generally saw the family, rather than patriarchy, as the root of women's oppression. Thus they saw the socialisation of housework, and working class women's struggles for equal pay and rights at work as central to ending this.

But on the question of the central instrument for conducting this struggle – that it had to be an independent working class party – they nearly all rejected Marxism. Instead they accepted a key tenet of feminism: the idea that an all-class women's movement was the main instrument for women's liberation. Some conceded that a revolutionary party, made up of male and female workers, was needed eventually to overthrow capitalism, but in the here and now they demanded the autonomy of the all-class women's movement from any revolutionary organisation. Their hostility to democratic centralism went so far as to demanding that women from Leninist organisations be excluded. Meanwhile the women's liberation conferences and their local equivalents broke up in bitter recriminations between radical and socialist feminists.

What was the answer to this dilemma? Workers Power in the late 1970s argued (as we still do today) for a mass working class women's movement, rooted in workplaces and communities. We argued that communists should build such a movement and seek to win its to a revolutionary action programme for women's liberation and socialism.

In this period a sharp debate took place within the SWP. It and its predecessor, the International Socialists, organised amongst working class women with a special paper, Women's Voice, and set up local groups around it. Within these groups some socialist feminists became critical of the IS/SWP, often for good reasons. They criticised the party for its economism and its tendency to ignore important questions the feminists raised. A genuine revolutionary leadership would have accepted valid criticisms and argued frankly and directly against criticism it did not accept.

However Tony Cliff, historical leader of the SWP, instead shut down Women's Voice with the aid of Lindsey German. They lost a number of women activists in the process. The SWP thereafter abandoned all ideas of a working class women's organisation or even any special work amongst women. This was particularly negative during the Great Miners' Strike of 1984-85, with the development of Women Against Pit Closures. Lindsey German only briefly mentions this, in the same breath as the Greenham Common women, almost dismissively saying that they failed. The SWP's own role in the 'second wave of feminism' is airbrushed out of German's account.

Migrant women

The final problem is that, except in a small sub-section in one of the later chapters, German gives little attention to ethnic minority women's triple burden: exploitation, sexism, and racism. It is odd, for example, that German omits to mention the Gate Gourmet strike at Heathrow in August 2005, which illustrated a new type of attack on mostly Asian women workers, to rip up their permanent contracts and casualise their working conditions, and to link this to struggles against neoliberal attacks across the developing countries. This experience should be highlighted and explored, but again it comes back to the SWP's political weakness: fear of drawing attention to differences, which can and do divide the working class, and require a conscious struggle against prevailing ideas.

In relating migrant and ethnic minority women's oppression, German limits her analysis to Muslim women – an important form of oppression to expose but not the only experience – and a polemic against the bourgeois feminists, criticising their opposition to the hijab, niqab or burqa. German does not challenge all religions as oppressive to women, but starts from the position that Islam is not inherently oppressive to women. She downplays the deep roots of the patriarchal family within societies with powerful pre-capitalist elements, because she is trying to distinguish her argument from the feminists. Yet she ends up failing to systematically oppose all forms of women's oppression through religion.

German says: "The hijab or any other form of clothing should not be seen as inherently repressive, and Western politicians and feminists should stop telling Muslim women what not to wear. We should oppose the forced covering of women that takes place in countries such as Iran or Saudi Arabia (or the UK? [author's italics]). It is not the business of state or religion to make women wear particular clothes. We should also oppose the prejudice and discrimination that are demanding women to take off their veils or scarves. Women themselves have the right to choose what they wear and when they wear it."

Of course we must oppose all state restriction on the wearing of the hijab, just as we oppose all laws that require women to wear it. Socialists must also fight for the right of women not to be forced to wear the hijab by their parents or their brothers, or be forced into marriage, or suffer brutal treatment if they have sex before marriage. German is right that it is not the business of state or religion to make women behave in a certain way – but socialists should support women exercising their choice to dress as they like, to have sex with whoever they wish to, to have an abortion if need be, even when this means rebelling against their family. This is not a "private matter" for the family or the "community". Socialists have a duty to speak up on these issues and should not fall silent for fear of being accused of racism or Islamophobia. To do so would be to abandon the most oppressed sections of these communities and adapt to the most privileged sections: the religious leaders and businessmen.

Charter of rights or action programme

The last chapter is about "how to change?"; German outlines ten demands that she refers to as "a charter for working women", and argues could form the basis of new campaigns and movements. She insists that they are all "achievable", and "would, if won, redress the balance of women's lives but would also mean a redistribution of wealth and power away from those who hold them at present and an opening up of the possibilities of women's liberation".

They are all couched in terms of "rights": for equal pay, sexual self-determination and control of our own bodies; against violence and sexual harassment, etc. They are however expressed in very vague terms, for example the "right to control our own bodies" misses out the phrase "right to free abortion and contraception on demand". We know that, in defending the evasive policy of the Respect coalition on this question, German has described this demand as a shibboleth, so one has the right to suspect that this vagueness is to attract people, who do not defend a woman's right to terminate a pregnancy. In fact such vague agreements will break apart under the pressures of struggle.

Finally German speaks about the need for a socialist revolution to really liberate women, but there is no indication of how we are going to get from here to there. German does not advance a revolutionary strategy, uniting the fight for women's liberation with the struggle to overthrow capitalism. Instead she sets out a series of rights, with no proposed forms of organisation or struggle to achieve them, and then tells us that we need socialism. There is no connection between the two. This approach, the failed method of the "minimum-maximum" programme, in effect relegates the social revolution to abstract propaganda, and orients all practical activity around the struggle for reforms.

We believe that we must build an international working class women's movement. Not one that is separated from the global working class movement but aiming to organise women of our class and the most exploited and oppressed of other classes. It must highlight the specific oppression of women within the working class and draw both men and women into struggle against women's oppression – and also against racism, nationalism, youth oppression and any division that threatens the unity of the working class.

We also need to fight women's oppression within the workers' movement: in the unions, the political parties, even in

those that call themselves Marxist and revolutionary, even in our own organisation. For this reason we believe that women members must have the right to meet together, i.e. in a caucus to help the organisation as a whole to overcome the pressure of social oppression, and to expose any examples of this oppression and fight for their eradication.

The purpose of both the organisation of a mass working class women's movement and caucuses in unions and parties is not in any way to entrench separation between the sexes. It is to greatly increase the numbers and participation of women class fighters in one common effort. With the expropriation of the capitalist class and the creation of a planned economy, it will be possible to socialise domestic labour and childcare, with men and women playing an equal role. Thus women's oppression will be uprooted and we will be free at last. Without the mass involvement of women there can be no such revolution. With it we will be invincible.

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