

Fighting for Women's Freedom

A Position Paper of the Zabalaza Anarchist Communist Front

Bikisha Media Collective

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Why do you women allow people to mistreat you? Because you depend on others to eat... Why don't you have food to eat? Because the rich have stolen our property and walk over the majority of the people...

What is [the] solution? Practising Anarchism... All women know that there is nothing more evil than money.

Everyone, become of one mind! Unite with men and completely overthrow the upper classes and the rich! Then money will be abolished... At this time, not only will eating not require reliance on others, but the food that will be eaten will be good food, too.

He Zhen, Chinese woman Anarchist

“What Women Ought to Know about Anarchist Comunist”

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Anarchists recognise that women are specially oppressed as a sex (they face oppression as women as well as due to their class position). We call this oppression **sexism**.

As Anarchists we oppose this oppression on principle and in practice.

Our movement has long championed the rights of women, recognising the specificity of women's oppression but always linking it to the class struggle. Examples of this commitment:¹

The US Anarchist **Emma Goldman** focused specifically on issues affecting working class women and was jailed for distributing information on contraception; she criticised the male-dominated family and called for equality between men and women; she was critical of the reformist feminists of her time and argued that they were detached from the economic realities of working class women; she was a class struggle revolutionary;

In **Argentina**, the women Anarchist's who set up **La Voz De La Mujer** in the 1890s were the first to link women's liberation with revolutionary working class ideas in Latin America as a whole and called for women to mobilise against their oppression as both women and workers;

In **China** the movement developed a distinct Anarchist position on women's liberation that argued that women's oppression is linked to the class system, economic exploitation and traditional culture and called for a total social revolution;

In **Spain** Anarchists set up the *Mujeres Libres* (“Free Women”) group in 1936 with the aim of focussing attention on women's specific concerns and increasing the amount of women activists in the movement; *Mujeres Libres* saw its role as working to emancipate women from the traditional passivity, ignorance and exploitation that enslaved them in order to move towards a real understanding between men and women so that they could work together; it organised

¹ for Emma Goldman see P. Marshall (1993), *Demanding The Impossible: A History Of Anarchism*. Fontana. London. Pp 403–9, p279; on China, P. Zarrow, 1988, “He Zhen and Anarcho- Feminism in China,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 47 (4), and P. Zarrow, 1990, *Anarchism and Chinese Political Culture*, Columbia University press. New York. Chapter 6; also see M. Molyneux, 1986, “No God, No Boss, No Husband: Anarchist Feminism In Nineteenth Century Argentine” in *Latin American Perspectives*, 13 (1); on Mujeres Libres, see M.A. Ackelsberg, (1993), “Models of Revolution: rural women and anarchist collectivisation in Spain” *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 20 (3); P. Carpena, (1986), “Spain 1936: Free Women – a Feminist, Proletarian And Anarchist Movement” in M. Gadant (ed.), *Women of the Mediterranean*. Zed Books. London and New Jersey; V. Ortiz, (1979), “Mujeres Libres: Anarchist Women In The Spanish Civil War” In *Antipode: A Radical Journal Of Geography* 10 (3) & 11 (1).

women workers; distributed information on health, contraception and sexuality, combated illiteracy amongst women, opened child care facilities and organised military brigades that fought in the Spanish revolution (1936- 1937).

ASPECTS OF WOMEN’S OPPRESSION

Women face special exploitation and oppression in the workplace, community and home.²

Workplace:

In the workplace women are forced into low paying, insecure and unskilled jobs and are often paid less than their male co- workers. They are often sexually harassed by their male co-workers and bosses. They are also not given full maternity rights and are often fired if they are discovered to be pregnant. Some pregnant women have to work in dangerous working conditions and place their own lives at risk.

Unions tend to be male-dominated and few women are elected as shop stewards or worker leaders.

This is partly due to the sexist ideas that both men and women workers harbour. Workers question the competence of women in these positions and tend to think that men naturally make better worker “leaders”.

In some cases unions will set up women’s structures or special posts for women. What usually happens in these cases is that the union is just paying lip service to women’s problems, and as a result women’s issues are often ignored or ghettoised.

Women also find it difficult to participate effectively in the Union and partake in meetings. Often husbands and boyfriends prevent their wives and girlfriends from being active in the union. When these men get home they expect their food to be on the table and the kinds to be fed and washed. When they come home to find that these things have not been done because their wives are at a union meeting they get angry instead of giving their wives support they need. Union meetings are often held at night and this makes it difficult for women to attend. We all know how dangerous it can be for women to go out at night were they are the potential victims of rape and assault.

Home and community

Working women face a double shift of housework. When they come home from a long day of unrewarding work they have to cook, clean, and take care of the children with little help from the male members of their families. Poor social services (such as electricity; hot water; and sewerage facilities) and the lack of child care facilities for working mothers, intensifies this double load for poor working class black women.

² See, for example, A. Bird, 1985, “*Organising Women Workers in South Africa*”, *South African Labour Bulletin*, vol. 10, no. 8; J. Baskin, 1991, *Striking Back: a History of COSATU*. Ravan. Chapter 23; F. Haffajee, 12 November 1993, “*Putting Gender on the Union Agenda*”, in *Weekly Mail*; and the various materials produced by the POWA (People Opposing Women Abuse) organisation.

Women are often subject to abuse: thousands of are raped, beaten, and emotionally abused. In a lot of cases of violence against women, it is not strangers that rape and beat women, but the very same people that they love and trust (such as husbands and fathers). In South Africa, it has been estimated that every 6 days a women is killed by her husband or boyfriend.

There are very few crisis centres in working- class and poor communities. Those that do exist are under resourced and understaffed. When women report cases of violence to the police they are treated like dirt. In most cases when a case is brought against a husband or a boyfriend, nothing is done and these bastards get off scot- free. The courts and the police are not interested in protecting women against violence, they are only concerned about protecting the property and privileges of the rich.

ROOTS OF WOMEN'S OPPRESSION³

We reject the idea that women are biologically inferior to men, or that women are biologically predisposed to assume certain roles in society (like childcare). There is no evidence whatsoever to support such arguments.

There is absolutely no evidence that women are biologically “inferior” to men. And women’s oppression has not always existed, so it follows that there is no “natural” basis for this oppression. There is no sound evidence that women are especially “suited” to cook etc. These so-called “female” characteristics are not genetic traits but have been socially constructed- they have changed over time and differ between societies, depending on the norms and production requirements of the social and economic order. What is seen as women’s work changes over time in given societies. For example, mining was women’s work in nineteenth-century Britain; today it is seen as an exclusively male domain.

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.

³ Some useful material that refutes biologically determinist arguments may be found in S. Coontz and P. Henderson, (eds.), (1986), *Women’s Work, Men’s Property: the Origins of Gender and Class*. Verso; N. Chevillard and S. Leconte, (1986), “*The Dawn of Lineage Societies: the Roots of Women’s Oppression*”, in Coontz and Henderson (eds.), above; F. Dahlberg, (ed.), (1981), *Woman the Gatherer*. Yale University Press. New Haven and London; E. Friedl, (1975), *Women and Men: an Anthropologist’s View*. Waveland Press. Illinois; L. Liebowitz, (1986), “*In the Beginning... The Origins of the Sexual Division of Labour and the Development of the First Human Societies*”, in S. Coontz and P. Henderson (eds.), above; A.L. Zihlman, (1981), “*Women as Shapers of the Human Adaptation*”, in F. Dahlberg (ed.), above.

THE ORIGINS OF WOMEN'S OPPRESSION⁴

Women's oppression emerged with the division of society into classes about 10,000 years ago. Since this time, women's oppression has existed in many different types of class society because it was in the interests of the ruling class.

Ancient times

In the pre-agricultural age, there were no class divisions and real oppression; women were seen as valuable members of the wandering bands of hunting/ gathering humanity, and were equal to men. In fact, many gods were women. There was a sexual division of labour (men and women did different work) but this did not lead to inequalities between the sexes.

The Agricultural revolution

The Agricultural Revolution was that time when people began to cultivate crops and domesticate animals, and it took place about 12,000 years ago. This was one of the most decisive developments in human history and had a profound impact on the way in which people organised themselves.

In agricultural societies, people were no longer dependant on the daily search for food and societies started to settle in one place. For the first time societies were able to produce surplus food (i.e. more food than is needed for survival). This surplus marked the first real form of wealth. Surplus food was stored to eat during dry seasons and traded for other goods. The key to this wealth was land, which could be "owned" in a way that, for example, wild animals pursued by the hunter-gatherer could not.

In a number of societies, a ruling class gained control of the surplus, and lived off the labour of those who produced the surplus: the kings, chiefs etc. of old. The state was established at this time to defend the ruling class of kings, chiefs etc. from the exploited labourers. Religion acted to justify the new divisions, for example claiming that the exploiters were "chosen" by the "gods".

How did women's oppression arise in this situation?

Firstly, we need to look at some of the customs that were inherited from the pre-agricultural period. Because of the sexual division of labour, women tended to do much of the actual farming. At the same time, life was still in initially organised around the kin group (large family-type units in which people were "related" to each other). The wealth that was produced by farming (the

⁴ See, for this section, the extremely important essays in S. Coontz and P. Henderson, (eds.), (1986), *Women's Work, Men's Property: the Origins of Gender and Class*. Verso; the essays in R. Bridenthal, C. Koontz and S. Stuard (eds.), (1977, 1987), *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*. Houghton Mifflin Co. [Please note that there are two different editions of this book, with different essays; one must also take exception with Kaplan's treatment of *Mujeres Libres* in the 1977 edition as it is hostile, inaccurate, and misrepresentative – see articles in earlier note for more accurate views]; series on "Women's Oppression", in *New Nation* newspaper, *Learning Nation* supplement, April 5 1991 to 24 May 1991; the materials in C. Walker, (ed.), (1990), *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*. David Philip. Cape Town. James Currey. London; A. O'Carroll, (Autumn 1992), "The Not Very 'Natural' Oppression of Women", in *Workers Solidarity: Magazine of the Workers Solidarity Movement*. No. 36. Dublin. Ireland; A. O'Carroll, (Autumn 1992), "Sex, Class and the Queen of England", in *Workers Solidarity: Magazine of the Workers Solidarity Movement*. No. 36. Dublin. Ireland.

surplus) was not owned by individuals but by the kin group. Those who married into the family were had no real rights over the kin's property. In some societies, the kin group was structured around "patrilocality" (this means that women married into the group, and that kinship/relations were traced down through men; the daughters of the group married out into other patrilocal groups); in others the principle was matrilocality (it was men who married into the group; descent was traced through the women; sons married out).

Thus, in each set of groups (patrilocal and matrilocal), there was one sex that was propertyless). For a number of complex reasons, the patrilocal groups tended to be more successful than the matrilocal ones, dominating resources in given areas. As a result, more and more groups became patrilocal. The effect was that groups structured around women's oppression became common. At the same time, *within* the patrilocal groups, some men's households within the kin group became more powerful than others, meaning that some men became more powerful than others, constituting a parasitic ruling class over the actual producers. The propertyless men were dependent on, and exploited by, the ruling men's households.

In this situation, women became central to the continuation of the class system. Firstly, women provided (male) children to the ruling class that allowed property to be inherited. This implied that women were tied for life to a particular man. Secondly, the number of women in a household became the key to its success, and men who could get as many wives as possible who could work the land, and have children (who could provide more labour and wealth, and, if daughters, be married off in return for bride price (surplus paid to the father by the other household for permission to marry the daughter). As a rule, the richer men had more wives than the poor men, who were usually monogamous (had one wife); in turn, the poorer men typically had to borrow productive goods from the rich in order to get married (and pay the bride price) and set up productive households; in return they had to work for the ruling men and pay material tribute and obedience. In this way, the special oppression of women and the origins of the class system were bound up with one another.

From these early beginnings, class societies developed in different directions. Some became what we call "tributary modes of production" (the Zulu and Swazi kingdoms), others "Ancient modes" (Ancient Rome), others "feudal" (medieval Europe and Japan, parts of India and Africa), and others capitalist.

In each of these societies, the basic principles of women's special oppression remained, although it took drastically different forms, and although upper class women often had opportunities, wealth and power that lower class women lacked (their class modified their sex position). Where these different forms of class society came into contact, they interacted in complex ways to produce new forms of women's oppression. The systems of women's oppression also interacted with other specific oppressions like racism. And many of these oppressions were themselves linked in complex ways to the systems of capitalism, the state, imperialism etc.

Thus, in Southern Africa, the contact between capitalism (brought by colonialism) and indigenous class systems (such as the lineage mode) helped lay the basis for the migrant labour system- it was precisely because the ruling chiefs could control the labour of young, poor men that they could send them to work for a period on the mines and farms of colonial and later Apartheid South Africa; it was precisely because of women's subordinate position that they could be forced to stay on the land for the years while their husbands were gone, to raise the children and crops, and care for the old; it was precisely because of the sexual division of labour that women (not

men) were the one's kept on the land to work the increasing longer hours required to maintain production at previous levels in the face of the absence of men and the shortage of land.

Under capitalism

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

By giving women the worst work, with no job security, the bosses create a flexible workforce that they can hire or fire at will. By paying women lower wages than men, the bosses are able to increase their overall profits. Because women have no real job security they are often fired when they get pregnant, meaning the bosses do not have to pay extra benefits or maternity leave. That is to say, women are potentially more expensive workers than men, because they can demand maternity leave and so on; the bosses meet this problem by hiring women as part-time and casual staff. In these ways, the bosses use women's oppression to create a cheap, right-less workforce that receives no non-wage benefits.

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. The bosses say that women's low wages are justified because men are the "breadwinners" in the family. But most working-class women do the housework as well as join the workforce. In this way, they work a "double shift" at great personal cost.

The bosses' media promotes women's oppression and sexist ideas by providing hateful and exploitative images of women, ideas that say that women are inferior and exist to be used and abused. The point of this propaganda is to "justify" women's oppression and to divide men and women workers and poor people from one another.

Women's oppression and the sexist ideas that try to "justify" it divide the working class and poor. By using the threat of replacement by cheap women workers, the bosses are able to undermine the conditions of male workers, and thus reduce the overall wage bill. By promoting hostility between men and women, the bosses and rulers weaken workers organisation and resistance. This increases the power of the ruling class.

Some men believe the sexist lies of the ruling class. One reason is that the media is very powerful. Another key reason is the frustrations that men feel with undemocratic and often racist work situations, feelings of inadequacy due to unemployment etc. This leads them to take out their resentment on their families and women. (Of course, this does not make such behaviour acceptable, as such actions are intolerable). But these factors show that sexist behaviour by men is rooted in conditions under capitalism, not in men's hormones or biological nature, as the ruling class claims. The point is that while ordinary men may play a role in women's oppression, they are not the primary cause of the problem.

Clearly, it follows that it is not just sexist attitudes that keep women in a situation of being second class citizens. Low wages, no job security etc. all keep women relatively powerless and isolated in society. Bosses' propaganda, underpinned by the hellish conditions of the state/capitalist system is the primary cause of sexist ideas.

DO WORKING CLASS MEN GAIN FROM WOMEN'S OPPRESSION?

We do not deny that ordinary men may gain from women's oppression in the in the sense that may have a feeling of "superiority" to women, or have a slightly lower rate of unemployment or better-paid jobs.

But at the same time, **women's oppression has disastrous results for working class and poor men.** It divides workers struggles. It results in lower overall family incomes and lower job security for all. It creates personal unhappiness.

Therefore, it is not in the real interests of men to have women oppressed. On the contrary, women's freedom is a prerequisite for men's freedom because only if women's oppression is challenged will men themselves be in a position to improve their own lives, to fight for better conditions and more control over their own lives.

WOMEN'S LIBERATION THROUGH WORKING CLASS REVOLUTION⁵

We recognise that all women suffer oppression. **We oppose sexism wherever it exists.**

However, **class differentiates the experience of sexism.** Wealthy women have access to maids, lawyers etc. which enables them to "buy" their way out of a lot of the misery that ordinary working class women face. Conversely, it is working and poor women who face the brunt of women's oppression.

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.

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

Only the working class and poor can defeat capitalism and the State because only these classes do not exploit (we are productive), only these classes have no vested interests in the current system, and because only these classes have the power and organising ability to do so (we 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 and poor people in any case (these systems exploit, impoverish, dominate and humiliate them), women have an *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.

⁵ See, for example, A. O'Carroll, (Autumn 1992), "The Not Very 'Natural' Oppression of Women", in *Workers Solidarity: Magazine of the Workers Solidarity Movement*, no. 36. Dublin. Ireland; A. O'Carroll, (Autumn 1992), "Sex, Class and the Queen of England", in *Workers Solidarity: Magazine of the Workers Solidarity Movement*. No. 36. Dublin. Ireland.

It follows from the above that the real allies of working class and poor women in the fight against sexism are working class and poor men, and not women of the upper class. These men do not have an interest in the perpetuation of women's oppression- it is in fact directly against their interests. Working class and poor 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.

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 and poor people without raising issues that are relevant to *all sections* of the workers and the poor, 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 and the poor 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.

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

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.

Capitalism, State, Sexism: one Enemy, one Fight!

Workers of the World – Unite!

For Anti-Authoritarian, Stateless Socialism!

ANARCHIST ACTIVITY AGAINST WOMEN'S OPPRESSION

General Perspectives

The priorities of the women's movement have reflected the fact that it largely dominated by middle- class women. We believe that it must become more relevant to working class women. 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 thousands of working class women.

Guidelines for day-to-day activities

We fight for equal pay for equal work, for women's access to jobs that are traditionally denied to them, for job security for women, for free 24 childcare funded by the bosses and the State where women demand it, for paid maternity leave and guaranteed re-employment.

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

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

Women to have an equal right to all positions of “leadership” in mass organisations.

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. Thus we support free safe abortion on demand. Women should be free to leave relationships that they no longer find satisfying.

Sexist attitudes must be challenged in the here and now. Comrades who exhibit such attitudes must be challenged.

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