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Towards Emancipation

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MYTHILY SHIVARAMAN

Towards Emancipation

THIS ARTICLE deals with three related questions concerning the status of women. Is the woman (majority of world's women) a free agent or an enslaved being? Does she have an identity of her own or is she a mere appendage of the male—a commodity he possesses, whose sole rationale for existence is to make his own living more comfortable—with no relevance outside of his life? Secondly, if the latter is true, was this so from the beginning of human history? Was woman ordained by nature to be the “second sex”? If she was once free and man's equal how did her “fall” come about? In other words, what happened to the female in history? Thirdly how can she liberate herself and become once again a human being and not a just a “woman”?

It would suffice to answer the first question briefly as there seems to be a worldwide consensus, at least at the official and formal level, that women constitute the most deprived majority community. Hardly much serious research or work has gone into the question of women's uplift even in the richer countries, reflecting an indifference to the problem. Yet, even the most hidebound male chauvinist must admit, if he would care to look at the abundant data put out by the United Nations on the condition of women in most parts of the world, that the female lags behind the man, to varying extent in different countries, in everything that lends dignity

to human life. This is not a recent development but the historic legacy of the woman. August Bebel has depicted in meticulous detail the supercilious treatment meted out to women from the beginning of the Christian era down the middle ages to modern capitalism.¹ He called the woman "the first human being to come into bondage. She was a slave before the male slave existed."²

The woman is unfree in the sense that what she is today is what she was made out to be by the man over thousands of years of history. The only identity she has of herself is that given by the man to suit the needs of his ever-inflating ego. The values that she has internalized and upholds most vigorously—uncritical obedience to the man, faith in his superiority, chastity, devotion to the family to the exclusion of every other interest—are those created by the man to buttress his familial and social dominance. Her supreme virtue lies in being a total nonentity, in completely denying herself a life of her own and in totally identifying herself with the hopes, frustrations, likes and dislikes of her family.

Impact of Images

A woman is wife to a man and a household, and mother. A man is rarely ever defined as a husband or a father. He is always perceived as an engineer, a doctor, an artist, a machinist and so on. He is defined in terms of the role he plays in the productive process or the service he renders to the community. Not so the woman. As Simone de Beauvoir says, "Man is defined as a human being and woman is defined as a female. Whenever she tries to behave as a human being she is accused of trying to emulate the male".³

The man-made "feminine culture", applicable mostly to the upper classes and to a lesser degree to the lower classes made out the ideal woman to be a frail creature solely of decorative worth. Much was made of her feebleness and dependence. The woman was the eternal "damsel in distress" and the man became the knight errant, her benefactor. Many a dictator, it should be recalled, began his career as a benevolent protector of his people.

A reflection of woman's dependence is the fact that her contribution to humanity's advance (scientific discoveries for instance) has been negligible. While her physical labour has built many an empire, she has rarely had a share in real political power. All this implies that for some reason or the other, the woman has not had the opportunity to develop her creative potential. She has not asserted herself as a human being who is engaged in the perennial struggle with nature to comprehend and change and in the process undergo changes herself. The effect has been disastrous for the development of the woman's personality which has been traditionally identified with timidity, caution irrationality and emotionalism.

This is true not only for the women of the Third World but for those in the "West", the industrially advanced capitalist world, as well.

In the west two main images of women are projected in the mass media. One is of the "silly and scatterbrained" housewife for ever looking for sales and cut-price bargains and mindlessly acquiring things that she could well do without. The other is of the woman as sex object—the glamorous nude selling an after-shave lotion or displaying an automobile with little on, apart from a vacuous smile. Says Juliet Mitchell: "Women do literally sell their bodies—if not as prostitutes, then to the publicity industries, modelling and so on—much as men and women sell their labour power. As a worker finds himself alienated in his own product, so (roughly speaking) a woman finds herself alienated in her own commercialized body."⁴ The woman is never shown as a person having anything to do with producing the products she helps to sell. The woman is the consumer and the man is the producer. The American housewife who under the spell of the "feminine mystique"⁵ thought herself to be the happiest person, was in for a rude shock when the mystique, shorn of its romantic aura, showed itself up in the glare of the liberation movements of the late sixties, as the man's ruse to keep her out of his way and under his thumb. Her realization that despite having the world's best kitchen gadgets and plumbing system she is a big nothing is expressed so aptly by Meredith Tax:

When I am by myself, I am nothing. I only know that I exist because I am needed by someone who is real, my husband, and by my children. My husband goes out into the real world...I stay in the imaginary world in this house, doing jobs that I largely invent and that no one cares about but myself...I seem to be involved in some sort of mysterious process.⁶

If such is the fate of the average American woman what of her Indian sister? Crushed by unrelieved poverty, obscurantism, tyrannical social taboos and brutal male authority, she remains even today literally a beast of burden.

FALL OF WOMAN

How did women come to be the "wretched of the earth"? The limited purpose here is only to sum up some major and significant attempts that have been made to situate the woman question in a historical perspective and to see to what extent they help us understand how her "fall" occurred. The work that merits mention first in this respect is the *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, a unique contribution by Engels to an understanding of the history of the female.⁷ The main thrust of Engels's work is to oppose the widely prevalent notion of woman's natural inferiority based either on the simplistic claim that she was made so by the Creator or the more sophisticated attempt to attribute human attitudes and customs to instincts inherited from the apes and not to cultural factors.

Engels was the first to advance a historical explanation of the dialectical relationship between the developments in the means of procuring

food, the rise of private property in them, the evolution of monogamy and the subjugation of woman. Based mainly on the research carried out by Morgan on the American Indian communities, Engels traced the development of the means of production and the consequent evolution of the family through the epochs of savagery, barbarism and civilization. In the infancy of humanity—savagery—man lived mostly in trees subsisting initially on nuts, roots and fruits and later, on fish and wild game. In this he was aided by the club and spear and the bow and arrow. This period when *gentes* or tribes procured and ate in common was characterized by group marriage: “whole groups of men and whole groups of women belonged to one another”. Sexual intercourse between parents and children, brothers and sisters was normal. Jealousy, incest and possessiveness were unknown. In marked contrast to the civilized society of today, where it is in effect polygamy for the man and monogamy for the woman, there was then no discrimination in sexual freedom and no double standards favouring the man. Private property in the means used to procure food was unknown. Neither the woman nor the implements belonged to any man. “Division of labour was a pure and simple outgrowth of nature; it existed only between the two sexes.”* The woman did household work and looked after children but still enjoyed high status.

Leading Role in Primitive Agriculture

The discovery of pottery marks the second epoch of barbarism. Domestication and breeding of cattle and cultivation of plants began. The weaving loom and several metal implements began to be used. By the end of this period smelting of iron ore was in vogue, leading to the use of iron ploughshare drawn by cattle. Meat and milk became plentiful. Land came to be cultivated on a wide scale. Forests were cleared and population increased rapidly. For the first time, surplus—production of more than what is necessary for maintaining the producers—became possible. Labour power assumed a new dimension when it began to yield noticeable surplus. New social relationships emerged. Women acquired exchange value and “wives came to be bought”. The developments in the techniques of production set off a chain reaction of surplus, division of labour and social classes. As for man-woman relationship, the pair marriage (one man living with one woman in an easily dissoluble tie, with the children still belonging to the mother) came to replace the earlier group marriage, which faded away with the increasing prohibitions on marriage between generations and among brothers and sisters. In the pair marriage, polygamy and occasional infidelity already became man’s privilege, says Engels, although they were rarely used for economic reasons. Still the matriarchal family continued and paternity was yet to appear. The increased productivity of labour drastically altered the man-woman equation in the household. Until then the general pattern was somewhat like this:

The men went to war, hunted, fished, provided the raw material for food and the tools necessary for these pursuits. The women cared

for the house, and prepared food and clothing; they cooked, weaved and sewed. Each was master in his or her own field of activity; the men in the forest, the women in the house. Each owned the tools he or she made and used.⁹

When primitive agriculture (cultivating garden plots nearer home) in which the woman played the leading role and which was hitherto the predominant form of production, gave place to intensive cultivation of vast areas and to cattle breeding, the key position in production passed on to the man.

Rise of Private Property

By the later half of barbarism the herds and flocks had become converted from communal to private property of individual heads of families. How did property, which was owned in common, become private? How and when this occurred, "we do not know to this day", says Engels. The new wealth of humanity created a "revolution" in the family. Since the function of procuring food fell to the man, he tended the cattle and came in due course to own them along with the slaves and commodities secured in exchange for them. It followed logically that the surplus produced by the instruments owned by the man could be consumed by the woman but she could lay no claim to it. This made a radical change in her position which had hitherto been supreme in the house. To her belonged only the household goods and not the cattle or slaves (who had assumed the function of money) downgrading the woman's position considerably. Engels elaborates:

Division of labour in the family had regulated the distribution of property between man and wife. The division remained unchanged and yet it now put the former domestic relationship topsy-turvy simply because the division of labour outside the family had changed. The very cause that had formerly made the woman supreme in the house ... her being confined to domestic work, now assured supremacy in the house for the man: the woman's housework lost its significance compared with the man's work in obtaining a livelihood.¹⁰

Still, the last and decisive *coup de grace* in completing the enslavement of the woman was yet to be delivered. It was to come with the transition of land, cattle and implements into complete private ownership and of pairing marriage to monogamy, and the larger social group into the family built around a single couple as the economic unit of society. Even when the man had become the owner of new wealth his property could not be inherited by his own children for there was still no certainty regarding paternity; it remained largely a matter of speculation. The family still remained matriarchal, descent reckoned through the mother and property inherited by the gentile relatives.

Hence the mother right had to be overthrown. It was not so difficult to achieve this revolution, "the most decisive in human history", says Engels. It was simply decided that the descendants of the male

members should remain in the gens, but those of the female were to be excluded and transferred to that of their father. Bebel mentions that this revolution need not have been so simple and quotes Bachofen who had found some evidence to show that women offered stiff resistance to this social transformation in the legends of the Amazonian kingdoms which have appeared in manifold variations in the folklore of several countries.¹¹ Engels wrote: "The overthrow of the mother right was the world historic defeat of the female sex. The man seized the reins in the house also, the woman was degraded, enthralled, the slave of the man's lust, a mere instrument for breeding children."¹²

Subjugation in Monogamy

To make father right meaningful, paternity had to be assured and thus monogamy came into existence. Engels saw in monogamy not the "reconciliation of man and woman . . . but the subjugation of one sex by the other as the proclamation of a conflict between the sexes entirely unknown hitherto in prehistoric times."¹³ Prostitution and infidelity (of the woman) were the inevitable byproducts of monogamy. The former, Engels wrote, was considered "honourable, or at most, as a slight moral stain that one bears with pleasure and the latter was treated as a crime entailing dire legal and social consequences."¹⁴ Thus emerged the patriarchal family, which Marx noted, "contained in embryo not only slavery but serfdom also, since from the very beginning it is connected with agricultural services. It contains within itself in miniature all the antagonisms which later develop on a wide scale within society and its state."¹⁵

Criticizing the widely prevalent notions of the natural, universal and inherent inferiority of women Engels wrote:

That woman was the slave of man at the commencement of society is one of the most absurd notions that have come down to us from the period of Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Woman occupied not only a free but also a highly respected position among all savages and all barbarians of the lower and middle stages and partly even of the upper stage... The communistic household, in which most of the women... belong to one and the same gens, while the men come from various other gentes, is the material foundation of that predominancy of women which generally obtained in primitive times¹⁶.

There seems to be a tendency, simplistic and misleading, to glorify the period of savagery as the golden age of women and draw on Engels to substantiate it. This, however, is far from Engels's understanding. In talking of the "predominancy of women" he could not have meant that women once held power over men in the same way that men later held power over women.¹⁷ That would be unrealistic, given the then prevalent economic structure. What Engels did mean seems to be that the early non-class societies did not involve the economic and social dependence of women on men. Even when there was sex-based division of labour in the primitive communist society with the woman tending the children and

running the house, she was not really oppressed; on the contrary she enjoyed high social status.

Popular myth rooted in religion has it that marriage, particularly monogamy, associated with romantic love is divinely ordained or at least is a permanent institution. What Engels has to say on the origin of monogamy and its essence will shock many an innocent:

The first class antagonism which appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression with that of the female sex by the male. Monogamy was a great historical step forward; Nevertheless,...it opens the period...in which prosperity and development for some is won through the misery and frustration of others.¹⁸

Monogamy did represent an advance compared to the earlier forms of marriage. Still, it was an oppressive institution in which the woman was confined to home divested of any role outside. The strictest moral code binding the woman even today, chastity, arose out of man's urge to retain property within the family.

Describing the historical evolution of the family as a continual process that excluded relatives until it contained the present form of a molecular family¹⁹ (husband, wife and children) Engels shows that with the growth of private property, the family had become the basic economic unit of society. But the woman's function within it changed more and more from communal to private service which downgraded her social status considerably. The Industrial Revolution destroyed what little dignity or grace had marked the woman's life in the family till then. The long working hours of women and children and the longer hours of men and the use of women as cheap labour or as a reserve army of the unemployed, essential for capitalism, had a disastrous and disintegrating impact on the family, especially the working-class family.

Engels's Contribution

To Engels goes the credit of making historical materialism lay bare not only the evolution of the state as an organ of class oppression but also the family as an organ of sexual oppression in which the man was the bourgeois and the woman the proletariat, and underlining the link between the two. Although—and Engels himself admitted this—the limited anthropological data available to him somewhat hampered his attempt to perceive the woman's social status not as something given and state but as a phenomenon evolving in response to economic compulsions, his contribution towards an understanding of the auxiliary role of the woman is truly great. Even those who contend like Karen Sacs that Engels has committed several ethnographic errors (as shown by recent data repudiating certain findings of Morgan) regard him as the only one providing a materialist theory, one that sees woman's place as varying from society to society, and epoch to epoch according to the prevailing economic and political relations of the society.²⁰ Kathleen Gough who finds

evidence in primitive societies to conclude, unlike Engels, that "from the start women have been subordinate to men in certain key areas of status, mobility, and public leadership" still agrees with the fundamental aspect highlighted by Engels that with the rise of private property the woman's status underwent a qualitative decline.²¹ Even hard core feminists who do not agree with the other aspects of Engels's treatise acknowledge and hail his use of historical data to prove that the woman's social position has not always and everywhere been subordinate to that of man, thus dealing a severe blow to the male chauvinistic notion of the woman as an ignoramus, a petty and puny creature by nature and fit only for domestic chores and child-bearing.

The Second Sex

Another work, considered an important contribution to the subject of women's liberation, is *The Second Sex* written more than half a century after Engels's major treatise, by the existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir.²² Drawing from historical materialism, psychoanalysis and existentialism, Beauvoir seeks to build a theory of the woman's oppression. The first question that she poses is, "Is there anything in the physiology of the woman which has made her the "second sex"? Comparing the relative data on muscular strength, specific gravity of blood and respiratory capacity of the two sexes, she concludes that "instability is strikingly characteristic of woman's organization in general which renders her more prone to an agitated and nervous behaviour. The biological specificity of the woman, she believes, has played a part "of the first rank and constituted an essential element in her situation."²³ The feminists, of course, do take serious objection to this posing of an inherent factor like physiology and not an external, social or man-imposed factor as the important reason for the woman's "fall". Countering the oft-repeated argument that certain hormonal characteristics disqualify women for several highly responsible and risk-taking positions, the feminists rightly argue that female hormones would have to be different in the Soviet Union where a third of the engineers and 75 per cent of the physicians are women. Still, in fairness to Beauvoir, it must be stressed that she did not make physiology the sole determinant. Hers was an attempt to view the facts of biology "in the light of an ontological, economic, social and psychological context."²⁴ The woman's status was determined by an interplay of these factors throughout history.

To understand the ontological context some familiarity with the existential concepts which she frequently uses becomes necessary. A human being according to her is a "subject" who, within an objectively given situation is willing, acting and choosing the self that he always is in the process of becoming. "Transcendence", a term frequently attributed by her to man as opposed to the woman, means reaching beyond oneself and getting involved in consciously chosen "projects". "Transcendence" is part of what defines people as distinct from animals. "Immanence", which

according to Beauvoir, is characteristic of woman, means the negation of transcendence, such as confinement or restriction to a narrow round of uncreative and repetitious duties. But how did it come about that the woman was denied the opportunity to "transcend"? According to her it is the biology factor that restricted or determined the role that the woman could play in procuring sustenance. Conceding that there are proofs of woman's role in wars like the Amazons of Dahomey who fought in wars with "no less ferocity and cruelty than man", she stresses:

but even so, man's strength must have been of tremendous importance in the age of the club and the wild beast. In any case, however strong were the women, the bondage of reproduction was a terrible handicap in the struggle against a hostile world. Pregnancy, child-birth and menstruation reduced their capacity for work and made them at times wholly dependent upon the men for protection and food.²⁵

Cumulative Process

Without discounting the force in this argument one must not fail to consider the possibility that the physiology of the human beings as we know it today has developed over several epochs in response to their socially conditioned physical activities. Exclusion from vigorous physical activities and confinement to certain types of functions alone over thousands of years could have resulted in making the woman less fit for some activities which were later considered to be her natural weaknesses. The point sought to be made here is that whatever might have been the initial biological disadvantages or inadequacies of the woman in relation to the man and to the food-gathering activities of the early times, these weaknesses, it seems logical to assume, have been greatly accentuated through specific social practices. The cumulative process seems to have been both physiological and psychological. For instance there is reason to doubt that child-birth or menstruation was in the early days as painful or debilitating as they are today, as the pain in these cases is considered more psychological than biological. This can be seen in the higher incidence of pain and discomfort associated with pregnancies and child-birth among the upper-class women doing less manual work. Psychologically-induced pain or fear presupposes a certain advance in civilization and hence a later point in history.

However, Beauvoir's stress on the biology factor helps to answer some questions that arise in the course of Engels's treatment of the subject. Statements by Engels like "gaining a livelihood had always been the business of man; he produced and owned the means therefor" raises the question "Why was it the man and not the woman whose business it always was to earn a livelihood"? Why was it that the "original domestication and subsequent tending" of cattle was the work of man and not of women? And what accounts for the fact that in primitive agriculture it was the woman who tended the fields nearer home and that it was the man who roamed the forests in quest of game? Why was the woman keeping house

and not the man? Beauvoir says, "The domestic labour fell to her lot because they were reconcilable with the cares of maternity."²⁶ The biological peculiarities, stressed by Beauvoir and nowhere so explicitly stated by Engels, seems to provide an answer to these questions. Maternity as an element contributing to the woman's social position is also stressed by Gough who sees "the unalterable fact of long child care combined with the exigencies of primitive technology" as the basis on which the inequality of the pre-agricultural societies was based.²⁷

Acquisitive Motive

Beauvoir is most eloquent on the great loss that the woman's exclusion from certain productive activities and consequently from "the conquest of nature", entailed for the development of her personality. To those who claim that giving birth to and rearing a child is an exciting and challenging task in which a woman could find as much fulfilment as would a man in inventing a scientific principle or in making a new tool, Beauvoir's answer is, "giving birth and suckling are not activities, they are natural functions; no project is involved; and that is why woman found in them no reason for a lofty affirmation of her existence—she submitted passively to her biological fate."²⁸ A child "does not take her out of her immanence; she shapes his flesh, she nourishes him, she takes care of him. But she can never do more than create a situation that only the child himself as an independent being can transcend; when she lays a stake on his future, her transcendence through the universe and time is still by proxy."²⁹ Fulfilment of one's human potential cannot be vicarious, through someone else; it has to be through one's own activities and experiences. And it is this opportunity that has been historically denied to the woman. Beauvoir is, however, confident that once the woman becomes active and socially productive, she can regain her transcendence and can affirm her status as a "subject". The rapid development of technology which is continuously devaluing muscular power and the increasing control that the woman is acquiring over her reproductive functions indicate to her that woman's liberation is a definite possibility.

Beauvoir clearly sees and accepts the close relationship between woman's subjection and the advent of private property and with Engels sees in the woman's exclusion from social production the key to her fall. Still she believes one must go beyond historical materialism and delve into existentialism—to discover what motivated man to own property and to oppress the woman. Seeking an "original tendency" in the human nature to which the desire to own property could be attributed, she says, "the existent succeeds in finding himself only in estrangement; in alienation Man finds himself in these (land, crop, implements, etc.) goods which are his because he has previously lost himself in them; and it is therefore understandable that he places upon them a value no less fundamental than upon his very life."³⁰

Having explained man's motivation to possess, she still feels it is

impossible to deduce the oppression of woman from the institution of private property itself. Even if the woman's physical inferiority and the development of production techniques had led to a specific pattern of division of labour, she argues, if the original relationship between man and woman was an exclusively friendly one, it is difficult to account for the woman's enslavement later on. For her, the man's motivation to suppress woman has to be rooted in "the nature of his being" and in another of his "original tendency." She writes:

this phenomenon is a result of the imperialism of the human consciousness, working always to exercise its sovereignty in objective fashion. If the human consciousness had not included the original category of the other and an original aspiration to dominate the other, the invention of the bronze tool could not have caused the oppression of woman.⁸¹

Domineering Tendency

What is one to make of the "original category of the other" and the "original aspiration to dominate"? Does it mean that human tendencies are formed independently of the material base—ways in which society produces and distributes the goods—and exist as given, inherent and true for all times? How does one date the "original" in history? Did the aspiration to dominate exist even in the ancient communist society or did it develop in man only after property had become privately owned and one man began to produce surplus for another? Does being determine consciousness or is it the other way around? The idealist strain of Beauvoir⁸² is revealed in her confusing human nature in general with human nature as modified in each historical epoch. As Marx put it, "human essence is not an abstraction inherent in each single individual" and human nature is a given potential which manifests itself differently at different times⁸³. It is a product of social history.

The practical implications of this particular aspect of Beauvoir's theory for women's liberation seems suicidal even from her own perspective. If the "imperialist consciousness" is an independent factor which is rooted in man's innate fear of freedom and his attempts to escape from making his own decisions, independent of the socio-economic context in which man lives, then it logically follows that oppression would continue whether it is a capitalist or socialist system. The system itself becomes peripheral as a determinant of human nature. And this is far from the position that Beauvoir herself takes when she says that true liberation can come only in a system in which the material basis of exploitation—private ownership of the means of production—has ceased to exist: "I never cherished any illusion of changing woman's condition; it depends on the future of labour in the world; it will change significantly only at the price of a revolution in production. That is why I avoided falling into the trap of feminism"⁸⁴.

It is doubtful that there exists today a comprehensive and wholly

satisfying theory delineating the various processes and stages (and the compulsions behind them) through which the woman lost her once-possessed freedom, equality and social esteem and became man's appendage. Such an explanation will remain difficult to offer unless social anthropology throws more light on all facets of the woman's life in primitive societies. In this field, "the gaps are enormous", says Gough⁸⁵. Eleanor B Leacock writes in her introduction to a recent edition of *Origin of the Family*: "There is real need for studies that reconstruct from extant materials on primitive communal and transitional societies something of women's functioning before the development of the male dominance that accompanied European economic and colonial exploitation."⁸⁶ Whatever may be the shortcoming of the historical materialist interpretation of Engels due to lack of data, it serves to thoroughly expose the scholars who, consciously or unconsciously, "distorted or overinterpreted the evidence to bolster beliefs in the inferiority of women's mental processes"⁸⁷ and claimed that sexual inequality had its origin in man's "primate heritage" or in the "genetic codes" which explained the "ubiquity of the male dominance".⁸⁸

FROM BONDAGE TO LIBERATION

Engels has established beyond doubt that the woman's status evolved along with and in response to the development in the means of procuring subsistence. The interlinked development of the implements of production, of labour productivity, of the social institutions of ownership of property, of inheritance, of the forms of marriage and family and of the woman's position, can certainly not be ignored. Stated simply, men who came to play the principal role in social production also, in course of time, took control of that process and dictated to the woman her role. When the majority of women were excluded from the social production process, "the tradition of the privatized female" the woman's degraded status was firmly established and sealed. Yet, to deny any role to the biological characteristics of the woman in this process for fear that admission of such an inherent specificity would be used to perpetuate her oppressed status, will not help us fully to comprehend her historical relegation to a secondary role in society. Once pushed to the background, her lowliness was fortified by all the weapons at the command of civilization—religion, epics, literature, moral codes, social norms, laws and the coercive organs.

How can the woman be liberated or, to be more exact, how can she liberate herself? The starting point of the discussion can only be our perception of how she came to be enslaved in the first place. Notwithstanding the debate that still goes on regarding the original contributory factors, it can be taken as well established that it is the exclusion from social production, which involves mainly putting oneself and testing one's strength against nature, that has over the centuries warped the woman's personality. Maria Dalla Costa describes the impact of exclusion from

social production on the woman most tellingly:

As it (domestic work) cuts off all her possibilities of creativity so it cuts off the expression of her sexual, psychological and emotional autonomy...never had such a stunting of the physical integrity of woman taken place, affecting everything from the brain to the uterus. Participating with others in the production of a train, a car or an airplane is not the same thing as using in isolation the same broom in the same few square feet of kitchen for centuries.³⁹

It follows then that the woman must cease to be a "domestic slave" in order to find socially productive outlets for her creative energies. Engels pointed out that women can re-enter social production only when "private housekeeping is turned into social industry".⁴⁰

Under Capitalism

No one can deny that today even in the most industrialized societies of the west which abound in labour and time-saving gadgets, housework continues to be, as Lenin described graphically, "barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-racking, stultifying and crushing drudgery."⁴¹ It is much worse in the underdeveloped countries for the masses of poor and middle-class women. Writing of the impact of industrial employment, Lenin said "large scale industry emancipates women and...broadens their outlook, makes them more cultured and independent" and "it creates conditions of life that are incomparably superior to the patriarchal immobility of precapitalist relations."⁴² Marx pointed out how the woman's re-entry into the productive process necessitated by the compulsions of capitalist growth despite the many ill-effects, was essentially progressive in freeing her from the "house arrest". Despite the extra burden that industrial employment imposed on the woman who became a "double slave" it was the contact with the outer world that gave the domesticated woman the urge and the ability to rebel against her oppressed status. To quote Dalla Costa again:

To the extent that women were cut off from direct socialized production...they were deprived of social knowledge and social education. When women are deprived of wide experience of organizing and planning collectively industrial and other mass struggles, they are denied a basic source of education, the experience of social revolt. And this experience is primarily the experience of learning your own capacities, that is, your power, and the capacities, the power, of your class. Thus the isolation from which women have suffered has confirmed to society and to themselves the myth of female incapacity.⁴³

This is precisely the reason why capitalism, which has enough to contend with in a male worker, will not allow women in the labour market unless it needs labour power badly and even then will let them in only on its own terms.

The proposition that a woman can develop her human potential to the utmost and fulfil herself, not merely by performing her "natural" role as mother and housewife but by involving herself in the continuous struggle of man to unravel the mysteries of nature and to tame it in the service of humanity, is not likely to go down well with most people, both men and women, here and elsewhere. Even the liberal reformers who have taken up the cause of improving the lot of Indian women workers have bemoaned the tragedy of the *Grahlakshmi* having to leave her cosy hearth under economic compulsions. The positive impact that work outside the home has on the woman's development is rarely ever recognized. The iron grip of obscurantism (religion, superstition, caste and a host of other irrationalities that set one man against another) which has been the special preserve of women, has begun to loosen up only under the offensive of industrial employment.

"Woman's Place"

Even in the advanced industrialized countries the official idealogues on women are desperately busy building up the "feminine mystique" and decrying the conditions that necessitate her work outside the home. Now that the woman has had considerable experience in industrial and other kinds of work—the two world wars turned hundreds of thousands of "home-makers" into welders and shipbuilders in the western world—and tasted economic freedom, equality and above all the sense of exhilaration that comes from comprehension and creativity, it is becoming increasingly difficult for official propaganda of the glories of motherhood to make much headway.

It is only when the woman once again becomes socially productive that she can gain an identity of her own and learn to define herself in relation to the larger society and not just her own family. The much glorified mother identity especially in feudal societies like India, where the common appellation for a woman is mother, is in fact only a camouflaged device to reinforce the all exclusive mother image imposed on her by man and to deny her any other identity that transcends the four walls of her home. That it is precisely those societies where motherhood is almost deified that let their mothers kill their children by the dozen (to save them the agony of a cruel and slow death by starvation) is a testimony to the cruel contempt in which motherhood is in fact held.

It is largely true that the working women of the lower classes, although not really free from the impact of the ideology of the woman's inferiority, are still held in much greater respect by their men than are the genteel and frail upper-class housewives by their own men. The earning capacity of the former gives them economic independence, the lack of which has in large measure led to the secondary status of women in general. Comparing the "hard-working woman of the barbarian era" with the "lady of civilization, surrounded by sham homage and estranged from all real work", Engels notes that the latter enjoyed much less social status

than the former who was "regarded among her people as a real lady and was as such by the nature of her position."⁴⁴

The lack of economic independence of women in our society is reflected in their much publicized docility, timidity and compliance. The negative base of so much of the chastity, virtue, and the proverbial toleration of the Hindu wife⁴⁵—financial dependence on the man—is bound to be brutally exposed with the mass entry of women into productive work. Although the starvation wages given to women workers today help shore up many a marriage, it does not detract from the general validity of the claim that economic independence will trigger off the woman's rebellion in the family.

Mass Entry into Social Production

For woman to become once again a part of the social production process the first prerequisite is to create adequate job opportunities, a task to which capitalism the world over has proved unfit. Most serious women's liberation movements have focused their attention on this crucial area. Apart from the traditional demands of the right to work and to equal pay, a third most important demand—the right to the same kinds of jobs—must be added. Otherwise, women will remain condemned to the lower rungs of social production. One requirement to make possible the large-scale entry of women into social production is the creation of communal kitchens, washing rooms, creches and kindergartens. These will drastically reduce the time that each mother has to spend on her children in the seclusion of her home by making all members of the community, men and women alike, share the work. Unless child-rearing and house-keeping cease to be individual and maternal burdens and become a social responsibility, the working woman merely becomes a double slave wearing herself out in the process.

The woman can now, more than ever, choose her pregnancies as she wills and can have legal and safe recourse to abortion in cases of unwanted pregnancies at least in some countries. Thanks to the availability of baby food and day-care centres she need not be tied to the baby too long. As a result, maternity need not be an insuperable obstacle to her career ambitions. This is not to deny that all these facilities are available only to the privileged few in most countries today. However, the fact remains that scientific advance (although not yet developed to the extent of creating an "ecological revolution" with test-tube babies which alone, Firestone claims, would free the woman from the "tyranny of reproduction"⁴⁶) has made and can further make maternity and housekeeping less and less time-consuming and arduous. It is a pointer that the women's dilemma—a mother or a mechanic?—need not be an insoluble one. With increasing sophistication in the production techniques such as automation and computerization, the traditional separation of jobs on the basis of sex and the "superior man's strength and motor power" are becoming less relevant. Could it be a mere coincidence that full employment opportunities for

women and socialization of domestic services to a large extent has occurred only in the socialist countries?

A viewpoint from the left which rejects the proposition that women's entry into social production will help liberate themselves is most powerfully expressed by the Italian writer Mariarosa Dalla Costa.⁴⁷ Contradicting the generally held notion that housework is not socially productive and that it is "personal service outside of capital" she argues that capitalism created not only the proletariat but also the housewife (of the working class) as the slave of a wage slave and an integral part of its productive organization. The housewife is productive for the capitalist organization in many ways. First, in bringing forth children, she produces a commodity, labour power, and thus directly contributes to unpaid labour time or surplus value! Secondly she performs a host of "social services which capitalist organization transforms into privatized activity," which in turn frees the man for direct exploitation. The man is "free to earn enough for a woman to reproduce him as labour power." Her social productivity is invisible because only the "product of her labour" the labourer, is visible. Having been taught by the ideology of "the women's place" to be passive and to sublimate her frustrations, the housewife, says Dalla Costa, acts as a safety valve for the social tensions created by the capitalist organization. She keeps the man going, often acting a strike-breaker and providing an "outlet for all the oppressions that men suffer in the world outside the home". Thus, the man's own indignation and frustration caused by the injustices of the capitalist system are contained and softened by the family in which the woman plays the leading role as the pacifier.

Personal Involvement in Class Struggle

While it cannot be denied that capitalism has a vested interest in keeping the woman in the house and that she performs useful labour, it is far-fetched and incorrect to argue that she creates exchange value by the acts of procreation and rearing of children who later become wage earners. What is of direct relevance here, however, is Dalla Costa's claim that the woman's inclusion in direct socialized labour cannot liberate her. "Slavery to an assembly line is not liberation from slavery to a kitchen sink. To deny this is also to deny the slavery of the assembly line itself."⁴⁸

Here Dalla Costa definitely gets carried away. Slavery to the assembly line is the lot of man himself in the capitalist society and to that extent is the ultimate "liberation" that a woman can look for in that society. True liberation, the end of alienated labour, is manifestly not possible under capitalism for either man or woman. The point however is that if the woman's mind has been stunted by exclusion from socially organized production (even if capitalist-organized) as Dalla Costa herself agrees, then, it is only when she gets back into this social production that the objective conditions for the development of her class identity and of her potential for social rebellion would have been laid. The housewife must first become a productive wage slave and not remain an unpaid slave in

order to be able to fight effectively the system that enslaves people. To claim that she is an integral part of the proletariat will not automatically implant in her the characteristics of the working class or give her the experiences that can come only out of personal involvement in organized class struggle. She can learn to perceive her slavery in the family as rooted in the larger class rule that also oppresses her immediate oppressor—the working class—only when she confronts capital directly in production. The moot point that Dalla Costa surprisingly seems to ignore is that there is no way to gain class identity essential for waging the struggle to overthrow capitalism, except by placing oneself in situations of direct class oppression. This cannot be obtained proxy or by listening to any number of “consciousness-raising” lectures.

Another question frequently asked by some of the liberationists is whether the woman can become fully liberated within the special instruments of oppression, monogamy and the patriarchal family as we know them today; Or, do they need to be destroyed? Zaretski deals at length with the changes that occurred in the family under capitalism and the peculiar alienation experienced by women under it.⁴⁹ In the precapitalist stage the family, despite the division of labour which had already occurred making the woman primarily responsible for house work, remained the basic economic unit of production and hence the woman’s work was still integral to production. In the “primary activity of life”, production, women did not feel they were outsiders. The division between the family and the economy was not rigid. Capitalism destroyed this unit by concentrating production away from home in a factory. This radical disjuncture between life and work, between an “inner” world of personal feeling and an outer world of alienated labour, distinguishes social life in developed capitalist society.⁵⁰

Future of the Family

A strong criticism of socialists made by the radical feminists has been that the former, failing to see in the family “the primary institution through which women participate in society” and “the backbone of women’s oppression” have not subjected it to a deep analysis, especially the characteristics it assumed under capitalism, with the perspective of women’s emancipation. For the radical feminists, the key to liberation is the daily struggle of personal life within the family for which women have to be prepared by raising their consciousness. Zaretski sums up their position:

Radical feminism tended to accept the idea that society was divided between an outer world of politics and economics dominated by men, and an inner world of psychological, which they believed would produce a revolution in the outer, social and historical. Socialism, focused on the economy, ignored the family: it was therefore irrelevant to women’s liberation.⁵¹

Here the feminists ignore the crucial fact that in seeking to demolish the

Chinese Wall between the "outer world" and the "inner world" by destroying the material basis for such a segregation (exclusion of women from the productive process) the socialists are in effect altering the very face of the family as it exists today.

The question that remains to be answered is, what of the future of monogamy and family? Engels saw that monogamy which arose from certain economic causes (concentration of wealth in the hands of the man who wanted to bequeath it to his children) will certainly undergo changes under a system of social property when the question of inheritance will lose its relevance. And when women will no longer have to tolerate the man's infidelity due to economic reasons, monogamy, Engels thought, will actually begin to be realized, for it will become monogamy for the man also. The reason why Engels believed that it will not completely disappear was the fuller development under socialist society of "individual sex love" which existed in embryo at the time when monogamy developed.

Working-class Family

In a socialist system where men and women will not be influenced by economic considerations the only motive for marriage remains mutual affection. This will further strengthen the monogamous marriage which will lose its two main characteristics: dominance of man and indissolubility; and become one based on mutual affection and respect. Male dominance will lose considerable ground when the women become economically independent and gain the right to divorce (without having to incur a huge expenditure, wait for several difficult years and submit to many an indignity to satisfy the law). As for the restrictive social code of morality which has hitherto been brutal to the women who had dared to stray, Engels foresaw a radical liberalization. When a new generation arises in which human relations, especially between man and woman, have not been polluted by economic considerations, those people "will not care a rap about what we today think they should do. They will establish their own practice and their own public opinion, conformable therewith, on the practice of each individual—and that's the end of it."⁵² As to what might happen in the distant future, Engels makes no predictions:

As the monogamous family improved greatly since the commencement of civilization—it is at least supposable that it is capable of still further improvement until the equality of the sexes is attained. Should the monogamous family in the distant future fail to answer the requirements of society it is impossible to predict the nature of its successor.⁵³

Thus, the feminists' call to "destroy the family" and its counter "defend the family" seem diversionary to the liberation movement. Dalla Costa's call to the working-class women, for instance, to "fight the family", can only succeed in dividing the already eroded unity of the working class by setting the woman against the man.⁵⁴ It is one thing to

make the woman conscious of how capitalism has degraded human relationships, turned the family into an organ of sexual oppression and to bring her out of "house arrest" to fight the system (in this process to encourage her to assert her equal right to social protest) and quite another to encourage direct confrontation with a part of her own class, which can only add to the capitalist glory. The necessary task is to enable her to see beyond her immediate oppressor—father, husband or son—and to identify the root cause of social slavery and to fight it along with all those enslaved by it. The answer to "destroy the family" cannot be "defence of the family" as it operates in the existing class societies. As a publication of the Communist Party of Great Britain says:

Surely our correct aim is to fight to make the family disentangle from capitalism and shed its reactionary aspects. The family can then become a weapon against capitalism. Many a working-class family, where there is a common acceptance of a working-class outlook and a deep solidarity, has already become a partial bulwark of struggle against reaction.⁵⁵

Women under Socialism

No one can accurately predict the future forms of marriage or family. Engels refused to do so. All that can be safely said is that socialism lays the material conditions which alone can convert them from organs that contain and stifle women, into relations of creative solidarity of the two sexes and between parents and children. We need shed no tears should these, in some distant future, cease to exist in their present form and evolve into forms which may seem undesirable, judged from our existing social norms and values. As Gough put it, "There is no need to legislate personal relations out of existence. But neither need we fear a social life in which the family is no more."⁵⁶

We now come to the final and most important aspect of the question of women's liberation: the proposition that her entry into social production en masse, the consequent changes in the institutions of marriage and family and in the social attitudes to women, are possible only in a socialist system. Unlike capitalism, it has no vested interest in keeping a reserve army of unemployed women or in using them as strike breakers and rate busters. Only where the objective conditions of exploitation, whether of man by man or woman by woman, have been removed by socializing the means of production does it become meaningful to talk of women's emancipation. We have irrefutable proof of this in history.

It is only the socialist economy that affords full employment to its people, men or women. Although American women constitute 38 per cent of the labour force, as against 50 per cent in the Soviet Union, the inherent threat of unemployment in the American economy has led to the government using all available devices to discourage women from working. Apart from the ideological offensive against working women, which tries to discourage them from seeing themselves in career roles,

several negative incentives are used. Non-provision of adequate child-care facilities has been a deliberate policy of the United States government to keep unemployment figures down. The policy-makers are well aware of the tremendous pressures that women would otherwise exert on the employment market. Lack of creche facilities, lower pay and discriminatory employment practices keep women confined to low-paying, manual and unskilled jobs. An overwhelming majority of women are confined to the traditionally 'feminine' jobs like teachers, nurses, office secretaries, waitresses, beauticians and sales girls with low salaries and low social esteem. In times of economic crises like the present, women along with the racial and ethnic minorities are the first to lose the job.⁵⁷

In the Soviet Union

The USSR presents a glaring contrast to this dismal picture of the supposedly most pampered and privileged women of the world's mightiest nation. One of the very first actions of the young socialist state was to end, by one stroke of the pen, the extremely unfavourable position the Russian women had in marriage, divorce, adoption, inheritance, education and job opportunities. A system of production based mainly on private profit necessarily sees the employment of women as a wasteful and non-productive expenditure because of statutory provisions like maternity benefits and restrictions of nightwork and higher absenteeism due to the working woman's care of children. Women are employed only in the event of real manpower shortage or with a desire to have a tame, "disciplined" workforce. Not so in the socialist system which by definition produces not for the aggrandisement of a few but for the satisfaction of genuine human needs.

It is only a socialist country that does not condemn women to be part-time workers for most of their lives; it provides inexpensive and quality community services for child care and for other domestic chores on a massive scale. The American government was so embarrassed by the enormous number of day-care centers run by the Soviet government that it had to offer its own women a malicious explanation describing them as "sadder Soviet devices to extract labour from mothers at the expense of their little children."⁵⁸ The resolution of the conflict between the demands of motherhood and professionalism is not left to the individual mother to be worked out as best as she could, but the mother is actively helped in many ways by the community. That the varied benefits accorded to women have resulted not in formal but real equality can be seen in the fact that the Soviet woman is far ahead of her sisters in the capitalist nations on several fronts. Seventy-three per cent of Soviet doctors are women as against seven in the United States. Thirty per cent of engineers and one-third of all judges are women.⁵⁹ More striking is the fact that it is very common for a Soviet woman to be seen as a railway engine driver, a heavy-vehicle operator, a miner, a machinist or a host of other things that men usually are in the capitalist world. Sexual segregation by job

categories has long since broken up.

In People's China

The status of Chinese women today, compared to what it was three decades ago, is a dramatic testimony to the ability of the socialist system to pull women out of their centuries-old servility. Old Chinese sayings like "noodles are not rice and women are not human beings" and "a wife married is like a pony bought; I'll ride her and whip her as I like" are today replaced by slogans such as "What the man can do, the woman can do" and "Women hold up half the sky."⁶⁰

Women's liberation was adopted by the Chinese Communist Party as an integral part of the national liberation movement in old China. Jack Belden wrote:

An all out attempt to free women could only result in the upheaval of the whole social pyramid and a tremendous change in the correlation of the forces struggling for power. That is why the Communists fought so hard for equality of women and why the more feudal-minded moralists of the Kuomintang never lost an opportunity to inveigh against the Communist destruction of the Chinese family. In the first case, the freeing of women was a means of breaking the old power; in the second case, shackling of women was a means of preserving the power.⁶¹

Since the revolution, concerted efforts have gone into raising the status of women by encouraging their active participation in production, revolution, politics and culture. The little women with bound feet of whom it was once said, "potatoes women plant won't sprout" have turned into 'iron girls' the title that a group of young girls in Tachai earned in praise of their incredibly hard work in a fiercely hostile natural environment.

The Chinese women have not merely entered social production in a big way—the word 'housewife' is becoming an anomaly as more and more housewives take to setting up neighbourhood factories—but more importantly are breaking traditional barriers against women in heavy and skilled jobs. Women in New China are oil extractors and airline pilots. They clear forests, build bridges and go deep-sea fishing. "What the man can do the woman can do" is no more a mere saying.

To free the women from household drudgery, chores like laundry, sewing and mending are collectivized. Common canteens provide cheap and quality food everywhere. Creches are run by factories, communes, offices and neighbourhood committees which help give a communal identity to children from infancy. This has a liberating impact on the mother and child by reducing the

prolonged interdependence between the children and their natural mothers...Socialized virtually from infancy, they do not often display pathological fears of outsiders; adults are simply all 'aunts and uncles'. In this context, western insistence on the exclusive commitment of the

mother to the emotional development of her child appears as simply another justification for keeping women at home.⁶²

The problems that women workers face as women are given special consideration by trade unions which concern themselves not merely with working conditions but also with the family problems. Women representatives of the union visit the workers' homes and help solve problems like care of children and old people, and uncooperative husbands who do not share housework, health or financial difficulties. Such communal approach to the working women's problems help "undercut potential feelings of loneliness or inadequacy faced by individual women in their homes which is so characteristic of housewives in capitalist societies."⁶³

The Chinese awareness that only the correct ideological understanding of the masses ensure that old Confucian ideas about women will not reassert themselves, has led to the emphasis placed on the participation of all women, young and old, illiterate and educated, in political study classes. This seems the most important aspect of women's liberation movement in China.

Criticism and Self-criticism

The radical feminists and other non-socialist groups within the western women's movement, who hold that women are oppressed because they are women and that theirs is a struggle of the entire female sex against the male sex, deny that women are being liberated in the socialist countries. Two arguments are usually advanced. First, although the percentage of women in professional jobs is the highest in the USSR, within these professions their job pattern is still traditionally determined. Health and education, traditionally acceptable women's professions, continue to attract the largest number of women as against industrial professions. Even within these professions women are rarely decision-makers, holding only lower positions. Political power, it is claimed, is still the monopoly of the male. Susan Sontag, arguing that liberation is a matter not of mere equality but of power, says: "All women live in an 'imperialist' situation in which men are colonialists and women are natives. In the... Third World... the situation... is tyrannically, brutally colonialist. In economically advanced countries (both capitalist and socialist) the situation of women is neo-colonialist. The segregation of women has been liberalized."⁶⁴

It is not only the anti-communists who level these charges against the socialist countries. The struggle for women's emancipation is a self-critical process in several socialist countries where a long distance has to be travelled before the full liberation of women can be said to be an actual reality. It is well recognized and frankly admitted. A speech by Fidel Castro at the second session of the Federation of Cuban Women a year ago is illustrative of this self-critical attitude.⁶⁵ Fidel noted ruefully that the number of women holding leading posts in the administration was only 15 per cent and that feminine membership of the party was

only 13 per cent. The fact that seems to have brought home to Fidel that 16 years of the revolutionary regime is too brief a period for revolutionary changes in man's thinking was that in the elections held for people's power in the province of Matanzas only 7.6 per cent of women were selected as candidates and that the number of women elected was only 3 per cent. Fidel admitted to his people that it showed the "reality that after more than 15 years of revolution, we are still politically and culturally behind in this area."⁶ Assuring the Cuban men that there was nothing to fear in the battle for women's equality, he added, "what should really frighten us as revolutionaries is that we have to admit the reality that women still do not have absolute equality in Cuban society."⁶⁷

Cultural Revolution

Another criticism flung at the socialist countries is that the woman there plan very much the traditional role of the housekeeper even while she is employed outside. Male ideas about housework being the woman's exclusive preserve remain. The Chinese at any rate seem to face such hangovers from the past squarely by turning them into the national process of criticism, struggle and transformation. An article in the *People's Daily*, a year ago, described such survivals from the past:

In the aspect of family life, the remnant influence of husband authority...is also in existence. Some couples take part in collective production, work together and yet do not share housework. There is still the phenomenon that 'women go home to cook meals, feed the pigs and shut up chicken, whilst men go home to smoke their pipes and wait for food and drink'. In the aspect of social convention and custom even more pernicious Confucian ideas linger on...For example ...sayings like 'a family with only daughters is a dead-end family.'⁶⁸ The significant point is not that such ideas persist but that they are faced candidly and serious attempts are made at every level—factory, commune, neighbourhood committee, study groups—to initiate discussions on them in order to educate the people to help transform their false consciousness. Viewed against the significant strides made by the Chinese women since the Revolution, certain shortcomings that have been pointed out or the survival of some archaic thoughts pale into insignificance.

To admit that there might be some validity in the allegations levelled against socialist countries is neither to deny that Marxism is a liberating ideology nor to concede that the socialist system has not created the objective conditions which alone can break all barriers to women's equality. The relevant fact to remember is that what the socialist countries are seeking to do is to destroy an established reality—woman as the lowly, as the 'other,' as the blind one—deliberately nurtured over thousands of years. And the oldest socialist state has had but sixty years to do it. Further, a fact that tends to be lost sight of, even within the socialist countries and sometimes with grave consequences to the liberation process, is that the setting up of a socialist structure in itself is not a guarantee

that the liberation of women will be achieved automatically.

A conscious and sustained struggle in the realm of the superstructure—values, ideas, beliefs and perceptions—has to be carried on for a long time as vestiges of old social habits and thoughts long survive the changes in the economic base. It has not proved easy to make a man accept wholeheartedly what a Russian woman said, “the kitchen will belong to anyone who wants to eat”. The *People's Daily* wrote on Women's Day in 1973:

China was under feudal rule for 2000 years and the exploiting classes left behind deep-rooted ideas discriminating against women and looking upon them as slaves and appendages. Today, class and class struggle still exist in our society and it is still impossible to eliminate completely the remnants of the old ideas of looking down upon women. Neglecting to train more women cadres, giving men and women unequal pay for equal work in rural areas, showing unwillingness to accept women as workers in some factories, and the remaining feudal influences in marriage—all these are a reflection of such old ideas. It is necessary to wage a protracted struggle against them so as to overcome the idea of looking upon woman as inferior.⁶⁹

A series of cultural revolutions alone can rout what Lenin termed the “most deep-rooted, inveterate, hide-bound and rigid order”.⁷⁰

Separate but Not Autonomous

The liberation of women in socialist countries is still a continuing movement. While no one can claim that the woman has become the man's equal in any contemporary society, it must still be recognized that the “ubiquity of male dominance” has been seriously eroded only in socialist countries and can be ultimately broken only in a socialist society. Then it follows that in non-socialist societies, a meaningful movement of women's liberation can only be an integral part of the wider movement of revolutionary struggle for socialism. This is in fact an objective necessity. To the extent that women's movement, focusing attention only on the personal aspects of male domination, builds autonomous organizations that stand outside of the democratic or socialist movement, they are likely to end up as opportunist, diversionary, or at best, utopian. Women do need an organization of their own, “separate but not autonomous” as the Chinese stress, to fight for demands that have immediate and direct relevance to them as women and as workers. They need this organization even in a socialist country until complete equality is achieved. But isolation of such a movement from the struggles of other oppressed sections of society can only be self-defeating.

The experience of all countries where women fought in revolutionary struggles show that such an experience is the most potent liberator of women. Religious fanaticism, traditionalism, caste and other irrationalities which have had a special grip on women have been known to disappear in the face of revolutionary upheavals. It is the revolutionary experience which emancipates women ideologically without which their

infinite source of power will remain bottled up. We have seen in the heroism of the Vietnamese women fighters how invincible that power could be once it found an outlet. The war in Vietnam made no distinction between man and woman. Both took to guns and both died of bullets. The undernourished Vietnamese peasant women made dramatic inroads into what was historically considered the man's exclusive prerogative, the armed forces. The Vietnamese woman who was not merely an army nurse but an armed fighter shattered and put to ridicule not only the white man's image of the puny Asiatics, the eternal coolies, but the male view of the female as a born weakling who can survive only by his benevolence.

The experience of the Vietnamese holds out the hope that the liberation of the much oppressed women steeped in feudal values, like the Indian women, need not necessarily be a tortuously long process. For the Indian woman the path to liberation is the path of struggle. And that is the struggle of all the Indian working people for the right to live, to be educated, to be productively occupied and to live as human beings in freedom and dignity.

Liberation is Indivisible

The intent in this article as noted earlier, was not to research in depth the past of the woman or to pronounce on every aspect and phase of the historical process that continually denuded her of power and social prestige. A review of some of the major works on this subject have brought to light some basic features of her social evolution. The woman, we find, has not always been the "second sex". The gradual erosion of her authority was concomitant with changes in the economy and the division of labour within it. With the rise of class society, where some owned the means of production and the others worked for them, the woman's subordination in the family and in society was well established. The earlier freedom and equality in sexual relations had yielded place to monogamy which strictly enforced the woman's, but not the man's, chastity. The process of the woman's exclusion from social labour seems to have been, to some extent, aided by her biological specificity. Once she was pushed to the background she was restrained there by religious sanction and, when necessary, by brute force.

The story of the woman's past is a pointer that since the woman's subjection was socially conditioned, it can also be socially altered. As Gough says:

The sexual division of labour, until recently universal, need not, and ...should not, survive in industrial society. Prolonged child care ceased to be a basis for female subordination when artificial birth-control, spaced birth, small families, patent feeding, and communal nurseries allow it to be shared by men. Automation and cybernation remove most of the heavy work for which women are not as well equipped as men. The exploitation of women that came with the rise

of the state and of class society will presumably disappear in post-state, classless society—for which the technological and scientific basis already exists.^{7 1}

What is needed is the socialist revolution which alone can ensure that the great strides made in science will not remain chained to the whims and fancies of an exploiting few but will be consciously utilized to further human liberation. In the ultimate sense, the woman's liberation is inseparable from that of the man.

¹ August Bebel, *Woman under Socialism*. Schocken Books, New York 1971.

² *Ibid.*, p 9.

³ Quoted in *Monthly Review*, September 1973, New York, p 52.

⁴ Juliet Mitchell, *Woman's Estate*, Penguin Books, 1971, p 55.

⁵ Title of a book by Betty Frieden, published in the USA in 1963, which was a source of great inspiration to the Women's Liberation movement.

⁶ Quoted in Eli Zaretski, "Socialist Politics and the Family" in *Socialist Revolution*, January-March, 1974, p 92.

⁷ Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1968.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p 155.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p 49.

¹⁰ For an elaboration of this comment see Rosemary Small, *Marxism and the Family*, Pamphlet of the Communist Party, London 1974.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p 155.

¹² *Ibid.*, p 158.

¹³ Bebel, *op. cit.*, p 30.

¹⁴ Engels, *op. cit.*, p 57.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p 65.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p 66.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p 75

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p 58.

¹⁹ Small, *op. cit.*, explains why she prefers the term "molecular" to the widely used "nuclear": "How can the family be a nucleus (something around which other things accumulate?) It is a molecule (a stable combination of simple atoms) and Engels himself uses this word to describe it."

²⁰ Karen Sacks, "Engels Revisited: Women, the Organization of Production and Private Property" in Rayna R Raites (ed), *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, Monthly Review Press, 1975, p 211.

²¹ Kathleen Gough, "The Origin of the Family", *Toward an Anthropology of Women, of cit.* Attributing the woman's subordination to a combination of the needs of prolonged child care in primitive technology, she elaborates: "in any case it was largely a matter of survival... than of man-made cultural imposition. Hence the impressions we receive of dignity, freedom and mutual respect between men and women in primitive hunting and horticultural societies." (p 75.) See also Gough, "An Anthropologist Looks at Engels," in Nona Glazer-Malbin and Helen Youngelson Waehrer (eds), *Woman In A Man-made World*, Rand Mc Nally, Chicago 1972.

²² Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Penguin Books, 1974.

²³ *Ibid.*, p 65.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p 69.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p 94.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p 94.

²⁷ Gough, "The Origin of the Family", *op. cit.*, p 74.

²⁸ Beauvoir, *op. cit.*, p 94.

- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p 539.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p 88.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p 89.
- ³² Beauvoir herself seems to have been critical, in a later work of her earlier criticism: "I should take a more materialist position today... I should base the notion of woman as *other* and the Manichean argument it entails not on an idealistic and a priori struggle of consciences, but on the facts of supply and demand", Quoted in Juliet Mitchell, *op. cit.*, p 81.
- ³³ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *German Ideology*, International Publishers, New York p 198.
- ³⁴ Quoted in Juliet Mitchell, *op. cit.*, p 65.
- ³⁵ Gough, "The Origin of the Family", *op. cit.*, p 51.
- ³⁶ Quoted in Rosemary Small, *op. cit.*
- ³⁷ Gough, "The Origin of the Family", *op. cit.*, p 75.
- ³⁸ For an elaboration of such a view see Lionel Tiger, "The Possible Biological Origins on Sexual Discrimination", in Cynthia Fuchs and Epstein Goods(eds), *The Other Half Roads to Women's Equality*, Prentice Hall Inc.
- ³⁹ Mariarosa Dalla Costa, "Women and the Subversion of the Community", *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, Falling Wall Press, England 1973.
- ⁴⁰ Engels, *op. cit.*,
- ⁴¹ V I Lenin, "Women and Society", *The Woman Question*, International Publishers, New York 1973, p 56.
- ⁴² V I Lenin, *On the Emancipation of Women*, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1965, p 18.
- ⁴³ Dalla Costa, *op. cit.*, pp 27-28.
- ⁴⁴ Engels, *op. cit.*, p 50.
- ⁴⁵ The nauseating extent to which the *Pathivrita* concept was developed in the Hindu epics is reflected in the story of Nalayini, who willingly carried her leprous husband on her shoulders to the house of his mistress.
- ⁴⁶ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, Paladin, 1970. Firestone who believes that nature produced the fundamental inequality, makes the "revolutionary demand" that woman be freed from the "tyranny of reproduction by every means possible and the diffusion of the child rearing role to the society as a whole, men as well as women." p 193.
- ⁴⁷ Dalla Costa, *op. cit.*, pp 33-49.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p 33.
- ⁴⁹ Zaretski, *op. cit.*
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p 91.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p 83.
- ⁵² Engels, *op. cit.*, p 83.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, p 83.
- ⁵⁴ Dalla Costa, *op. cit.* Elaborating on the need to fight the family, she says that it is "the support of the worker, but as worker, and for that reason the support of capital. On this family depends the support of the class, the survival of the class but at the woman's expense against the class itself." p 39.
- ⁵⁵ Peter Pink, *Marxism and the Family*, *op. cit.*
- ⁵⁶ Gough, "The Origin of the Family" *op. cit.*, p 76.
- ⁵⁷ Renee Blakkan, "1974: Women's Place in Labour," *Guardian*, Labour Supplement, Fall 1974, New York, provides some revealing facts: "In 1973 the official unemployment rate for women was 6% compared to 4% for men. For black women over 20, the official rate was 8.2%. But the actual jobless rate for women is much higher. Lost in the shuffle of statistics are all those women who would like to work but cannot due to child care and other responsibilities in the home."
- ⁵⁸ Quoted in Judith Hole and Ellen Lavine, *Rebirth of Feminism*. Quadrangle Books ANYT Co., 1971.

- 59 *Women in the Soviet Union*, Progress Publishers, 1970.
- 60 For a good insight on the problem of Chinese women, see Elisabeth Croll, *The Women's Movement in China, A Selection of Readings 1949-1973*, Anglo-Chinese Educational Institute, London 1974.
- 61 Rosalind Delmar, "Fighting Traditions," *China Now*, March 1975, London.
- 62 Ellen Leopold, "The Anomaly of the Housewife", *China Now, op. cit.*, p 4.
- 63 *Ibid.*, p 4
- 64 For such criticisms, see Jennifer Seymour Whitaker, "Woman of the World: Report from Mexico City", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol 54, No 1, October 1975. She writes that although women in the Soviet Union "constitute a majority of the specialized labour force, their participation decreases sharply as they reach upper levels. Only 6% of the heads of industrial enterprises are women. Their representation in the Communist Party...is...about 22%. The number reaching the Party's Central Committee has never been higher than 4% and only one woman has ever been a member of the Presidium." p 179.
- 65 Susan Sontag, "The Third World of Women," *Partisan Review*, No 2, 1973, p 184.
- 66 Fidel Castro, *The Revolution Has in Cuban Women Today an Impressive Political Force*, a pamphlet of the Instituto Cubano del Libro, Habana, 1974.
- 67 *Ibid.*, p 12.
- 68 *Ibid.*, pp 15-16.
- 69 Delmar, *op. cit.*, p 4.
- 70 Quoted in Elisabeth Croll, *op. cit.*, p 88.
- 71 V I Lenin, *On the Emancipation of Women, op. cit.*, p 84.
- 72 Gough, "The Origin of the Family", *op. cit.*, p 75.