

Women

the Road to Equality and Socialism
by Rosemary Small

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The world we live in today is a world of contrasts and contradictions, especially where women are concerned. We are much freer than our grandmothers were, in the home or outside it; and yet most of us find we don't have much freedom of choice when it comes to taking a job, nor much freedom to use our leisure — if we get any leisure. We are much more equal; and yet we are still second-class people when it comes to getting training or finding jobs or being paid. Science has given us the means to control the size and timing of our families; and yet many women are still faced with unwanted pregnancies. Living standards are higher; and yet we have to struggle to keep up with rising costs and prices, while many families have to live on or below the poverty line.

There is a great debate going on about women and the place they occupy in our society, and it arises principally from the contradictions mentioned — women have achieved just enough to make them realise it isn't nearly enough! This booklet is the Communist contribution to the debate and to ideas about the kinds of action we can take to change things. Communist women believe that socialism will bring them and their families a fuller, richer life, as well as providing the basis for women to achieve true freedom and equality. As well as seeing the inequalities in women's lives, the Communist Party sees the glaring inequality in the whole of our society today: the fact that a small number of people can make huge profits out of the rest of us at every step of the way — out of our need for houses, for jobs, for food and clothing.

For women, this system of society brings special problems. For the younger woman, (say, the girl leaving school) it brings few chances of interesting work: shop work, factory work, perhaps a hairdressing apprenticeship. For the about-to-be-married, it brings the enormous problems of finding a home — not enough council houses, and the alternative of high rents or mortgage repayments take half a salary, so that starting a family would be a disaster. If there is a young family, then the problem is one of two kinds. Some women would like to go out to work because the round-the-clock domestic routine gives them no opportunity to develop

their own interests, but there are big obstacles in the way: few facilities for the children to be properly cared for, few jobs which are suitable or convenient or paid at more than a pittance. Some women have to go out to work because of the difficulty of managing on one wage-pocket, and they have the same obstacles to overcome, plus the extra effort of having to cram housework, shopping, cooking, washing, etc., into their evenings and weekends.

The older woman, perhaps with a family in their teens or off her hands, is likely to be out at work anyway; but what sort of job can she get without any chance of training after spending time at home with the family? Canteen work, cleaning, packaging, shop work, unskilled factory or office work? Some choice! — and all of them paid at “women’s rates”, far less than a man would get. In the present set-up, some women do not want promotion or training for a more responsible job because they have all the responsibility they can cope with in the home; but those who would like promotion or training will be lucky if they get it, through lack of opportunity or sheer prejudice.

Immigrant women and their families face even bigger obstacles. Because of the colour of their skin they face additional discrimination in the fields of housing and employment. In order to get a roof over their heads they pay exorbitant rent for one room in the worst slum areas, take the worst paid jobs in the local sweat-shops, and tramp the streets searching for someone to look after their children — usually the unregistered childminder.

There is something very wrong with a society which faces women with all these and many more problems. Communists believe that we must change this society, that working people must get together to change the kind of government we have and the kind of society we have. Women, of course, must take part in helping to bring this change about, and they have a special interest in doing this because of the better life that a new society can bring them. But before we can look at the brighter future which socialism will bring us, we must first of all take a look into the past.

IT HAPPENED A LONG TIME AGO

There is a myth that has been around for a very long time, and it’s called the “natural inferiority” of women. Most religions have accepted it or positively taught it. Science and psychology have reinforced it with explanations of women’s “biological handicaps” (which means that because women menstruate and have children, they can never be equal to men) or of women’s “biological role” (which means that because women menstruate and have children, they are automatically the ones who should scrub the floors and do the cooking). And then there are those who say that it’s always been this way, right back to pre-historic times when men were the hunters and women did the cooking and looked after the children, so it’ll never change.

Those who talk in this way are standing arguments on their head. Yes, indeed, men were the hunters in pre-historic times, and they did the fishing and made the tools for their work. But the work women did was just as important to the community.

In fact, women usually furnished a large share, often the major share, of the food. Many hunting societies depend on the vegetable foods gathered by women as the staples to be augmented by meat; and in the early stages of the development of agriculture, women as the former gatherers of vegetable food, and therefore in all likelihood responsible for finding out how to cultivate crops, generally did most of the farming.

Women were also skilled workers, tanning leather, making clothing, administering herbal medicines, managing in a thousand and one ways the domestic life of the primitive household, which virtually meant the entire community *at home*, since, unlike the separate private households of today, to all intents and purposes the primitive household *was* the community.

In primitive society, decisions were mainly made by those who would be carrying them out, and so, since women had in fact such wide social responsibilities, they actually had a big say in the decision-making process of the community.

The point is that everyone's work in their own particular sphere was valuable, important and done directly for the benefit of the whole community. So everyone, men and women, had equal rights and equal respect. Family life was quite different from today. It was a communal life, englobing the whole of society, and in fact, because of this, children traced their descent through their mother.

Things began to change when the tribes learned how to tame and use animals for food and clothing. The men had charge of this — now the most valuable source of livelihood — and found it also a basis for trade. More and more the herds were entrusted to individual families within the tribe and eventually became the property of that family.

This was the beginning of the break-up of the primitive household into private, separated households. With it, the domestic work done by women, instead of being done for the whole tribe, began to change to a sort of private service within a family.

At the same time, men used the prisoners they captured in war as slaves to look after the family's herds, and to tend the cultivation of crops.

Hence private wealth or property began to develop from a sphere of social activity in the hands of men, whilst women's work became less and less public work for the community at large, and more and more the task of managing the domestic affairs of individual men.

As a result of all this men became the heads of households, with descent and therefore inheritance of the family's private property traced through the father.

So, with the growth of private property, out of which came class society, came also the enslavement of women.

Later forms of class society (slavery, feudalism and capitalism) have exploited both men and women. But within that exploitation is a further oppression of women through the idea and the practice of male superiority.

Through all the later forms of society the ruling class has fostered this idea and practice with good reason. Male supremacy has been sanctified by religion, written into the law, explained by science, ingrained into our culture.

Yet it is not men who are the enemy of women's freedom. It is the

ruling class which reserves women for the ill-paid unskilled jobs and uses them as a force to threaten the employment and wages levels of the men; which uses women in this way to create extra profit for themselves; which tries to divide the working class by this myth of women's inferiority. It is the ruling class which has to be fought as the main enemy of women's freedom.

With the industrial revolution, women became part of the industrial working class; they began to take part in social production, a process which today means that one in three workers is a woman and that the economy of the country would collapse if it were not for the contribution women make to it.

During this whole period of time women have struggled to achieve their rights as human beings. They fought to have the right to education and to train for a profession; they fought to have some legal rights of their own and not to be (as they were until a century ago) a possession of their husband's. The suffragettes fought for political rights for women. More recently the struggle has been concentrated on social rights, for a woman to decide if and when she should bear children, for reform of the abortion and divorce laws.

The status of women has changed over the centuries because of changes in economic conditions and the ways in which people think and act in these different conditions. The rate of change has speeded up considerably in the past 100 years — our life is very different from that of our grandmothers, and some people would even claim that we have achieved equality. Far from this being so, the time has come for a further change, as the ferment of present-day discussion and feminist activity shows. We can now challenge and change the whole structure of the society which condemns us to second-class status.

A QUESTION OF OPPORTUNITY

Second-class status begins early — at school and even before school-days. From the earliest moment, social convention (the way we have been taught to think for generations and generations) influences the way girls are brought up and the way they think. Their toys are baby dolls to look after like a mother, or dress-up dolls to interest them in fashion, or toy washing-machines, cleaning sets, sewing boxes, or pastry-makers "just like Mummy's". Boys, on the other hand, as the future workers, get Meccano, carpentry tools, chemistry sets, mechanical bulldozers, and so on.

In fact, boys love dolls — many of them sneak off to bed clutching ancient Teddies, and Action Man has proved a super-successful boys' doll. Many boys enjoy cooking and sewing in schools where they are allowed to do this. Girls, equally, enjoy woodwork, model-making and construction, scientific toys, yet it is very rare for them to be allowed to do such courses in school. We still use stupid words like "tomboy" to describe a girl who is interested in what we think ought to be boys' pursuits, and "cissy" to describe a boy interested in so-called girls' occupations. These words ought really to be compliments — they are describing children who are trying to develop essential sides of their nature, instead of being restricted to what adults think they ought to do.

The percentage of passes in "O" and "A" level subjects is about the

same for boys and girls, but the subjects for girls are still very limited. More girls than boys take "O" level social science or vocational subjects, but only one girl takes "O" level maths or science for every two or three boys. The numbers of girls who stay on at school is increasing, but they are still in a minority, and the same applies to further education: one woman to every five men doing any kind of course leading to recognised qualifications at a polytechnic, for example.

At work, about 10 per cent of girls get day release, whereas nearly 40 per cent of boys do so. These figures have hardly changed in the past 15 years. The Industrial Training Act was supposed to improve the opportunities for girls and women to get training at work, but in practice very little has been done.

In the professions, though women have made a good deal of progress, there is still open discrimination and prejudice. Most medical schools have a quota system which ensures that the proportion of women doctors is kept at a steady 25 per cent. Two-thirds of the law chambers in England and Wales are closed to women barristers. There are few women at management level in industry; one woman judge; one or two women bank managers; no woman newspaper editor; only 500 qualified women engineers; and so on—a fantastic situation for a supposedly civilised and advanced country!

Though the numbers of women at work have been steadily rising over the past 20 years (there are now over 9 million working women, two-thirds of them married), there is some evidence to suggest that the proportion in skilled, supervisory and managerial jobs is actually declining. More and more jobs today need extended training or qualifications in technical subjects. Women, as has already been shown, are at a disadvantage when it comes to getting this kind of training; so they don't get the jobs. This trend is going to increase over the next 20-30 years, so there is a real danger that large numbers of women will become unemployed and unemployable for the disgraceful reason that they just haven't been given the chance to gain the new skills and knowledge required of workers.

Women and trade unions

Related to this whole question is the proportion of women who play a part in political life at various levels. Women's membership of trade unions will be discussed in a later chapter, but for the moment consider the industries which have a high proportion of women workers. In clothing, professional services, shops, insurance, banking, more than half the workers are women. In textiles, food, drink and tobacco, leather or metal goods, paper, printing and publishing, public administration, instrument engineering, one-third to half of the workforce are women. Yet how many women in these industries are trade union officials or on union executives? To take a few examples: USDAW, with over half its membership women, has only three women out of 150 full-time officials; the General & Municipal Workers' Union, with nearly a third of its members women, has four women out of 162 full-time officials; there is one woman full-time official out of 600 in the Transport & General Workers' Union, though 14 per cent of its members are women.

In local politics, women play a part on rent tribunals, council committees, and so on; but only about 12 per cent of local councillors are

women. There are very few women town clerks or borough officials. In national politics; there are only 26 women M.Ps and it is openly admitted by the Conservative and Labour parties that a woman has less chance of being selected for safe seats or even winnable seats.

Nobody suggests that any of this is because women are not up to such jobs, or because they do not know the principles of political organisation. It would be difficult to take such a view because of the enormous number of women's organisations efficiently run by women for women. British women have a long tradition of taking part in political life and social organisation — as members of the Co-operative movement, as the backbone of Parent-Teacher Associations, running the play-ground movement, in the long-established women's organisations and the many newer ones which have sprung up over the last ten years. Their part is played at grass-roots level, and their talents and organising abilities are too little recognised or used in a wider field.

Many reasons are put forward for the various aspects of women's inequality; male prejudice and discrimination, women's unwillingness to take responsibility, social pressures arising both from family responsibilities and the way our society thinks about women, women's inexperience and lack of confidence. All these reasons have some degree of truth, but none of them will do on its own as an explanation. We have to examine the whole situation of women in detail to arrive at some of the basic reasons why their status is still so second-class.

COUNTING UP THE PAY-PACKET

Millions of British women are grossly underpaid so that their bosses can be grossly overpaid. All working people are robbed under capitalism, but women are doubly robbed by the vicious system of sex discrimination which gives employers an extra £1,200 million a year profit. Capitalism — the system which runs our country — needs women, not only because it would collapse without the work women do, but also because the women provide super-profits. With the constant development of technical processes in industry, it is easy for employers to split up these processes into smaller operations which are done by women, classified as "women's work", and paid at lower rates.

Working women are faced with ever-increasing prices for food, household goods, clothing, rents, fares, gas and electricity, prescription charges, etc. They have to pay for all these things with the knowledge that they are already underpaid even before they start paying out. The employers who pay their women employees half-rates would be horrified if it were suggested that women should be able to buy the goods they make or pack at half-price!

Of course we have made progress towards equal pay since the T.U.C. first demanded it in 1888 — some progress, anyway. During the last war, London Transport employees won equal pay for women, and in the 50s women teachers and Civil Servants won equal pay. There is equal pay in the professions provided (and it's a big proviso) that women can find and take the opportunities. There are about 2 million women out of the 9 million at work who get equal pay. Here it is important to remember two things; first, that the more women take initiatives in the struggle for

equal pay, the more they will develop their own potential as well as achieving successes; and secondly, that we must win men to understand that the struggle for equal pay is their struggle as well as ours, that the underpayment of women is a threat to the wages and jobs of all workers (the campaigns which achieved equal pay in London Transport and for teachers and Civil Servants were united trade union struggles of men and women).

Now we have an Equal Pay Act. The main drawback to this is that it only deals with types of work which are the same or very similar to the work done by men, and because employers have split off manufacturing processes into different types of work, some done only by women and some done only by men, only a minority of women will benefit from the Equal Pay Act. What is more, it is taking so long for the Act to come into operation that employers are managing to separate some jobs where men and women previously did similar work. There is another danger in the Act: some parts of it might make it possible for employers to say, in effect, "All right, you can have equal pay, but only if you give up your protective legislation"—that is, the special rights which women have, not to do night work, heavy work or shift work, for example. This would obviously be very unfair. Women have the babies, so they need maternity leave and the right to re-employment. As long as they have the main responsibility for the care of children (and there are more than 1½ million working women who have children under 10), then they should certainly not have to do night work or be forced to do shift work. These questions should have nothing to do with equal pay, which is a simple matter of human justice.

The Industrial Relations Act introduced by the Tory Government has not only put trade unionists in prison, it also provides penalties for taking action to get equal pay. This is only one of the many-sided attacks the Tories have made on working class people—raising rents and prices, cutting school milk, increasing health charges, creating a high level of unemployment. Women in many parts of the country are finding it increasingly difficult to get jobs in their own right. When husbands are laid off, it means a constant struggle to eke out unemployment benefit in face of rising prices, and going through humiliating means tests and investigations to get any extra social security or grants for the children.

Is equal pay important? It is sometimes said that if we got equal pay tomorrow, it would not affect our status. It is certainly true that it would not bring immediate equality—even where equal pay is supposed to exist, women are often doing work far below their capabilities, or find prejudice against them if they try to get promotion, so that they actually take home smaller wage-packets. There cannot possibly be any equality while a man and a woman are doing a full week's work but the woman is bringing home a pay-packet worth up to 50 per cent less. It is almost impossible to live on the average earnings of a woman—and that makes it very difficult for a woman to lead an independent life, should she want to or need to.

This is why the struggle for equal pay is important. In that struggle, women's thinking about themselves and their work begins to change: they understand the true value of their work to the community in manufacturing, distribution, the education, health and social services. And as

their self-respect and their valuation of themselves rises, so also does the way in which they and their work are valued by society and by men. On this foundation we can begin to build further equality—in opportunity, in law, and in that nameless, hard-to-pin-down realm of thinking about the so-called inferiority of women. The fight for equal pay will not only change the climate of thought in our society, it can change the kinds of action men and women take to achieve equality.

THERE'S MORE TO A PAY-PACKET THAN MONEY

If you add together a husband who does overtime and maybe a spare-time job, and a wife who goes out to work, you might as a result get the somewhat blown-up image of a T.V. family surrounded by electric gadgets and a car. The average family today is certainly better off in these terms than their parents or grandparents were—but how much better off in real terms? In many jobs it is only the overtime which brings earnings up to a level it is possible to live on, and it is the contribution of wives to the family pay-packet which has made possible the higher living standards of today. Even so, with the soaring cost of living, we are all having to run harder to stay in the same place; and with the spread of unemployment the future is uncertain.

It is the impossibility or near-impossibility of living on a single wage-packet which drives so many women into near-impossible work situations. For those with children under school age, because of the difficulty of ensuring that they are properly looked after during the day, there are only a couple of ways to earn a little money: homework or the twilight shift. One is deadly monotony and sweated labour (envelope-addressing, sewing hems and buttons, at appallingly low rates of pay), the other means handing over to Dad as he sets foot on the doorstep around 6 o'clock and Mum rushing out to the factory, from which she returns exhausted in time for bed. Even when the children are at school, women must take what they can get in the way of jobs which fit in with their domestic responsibilities, and that usually means cleaning, canteen or school dinner work, or unskilled factory or office work.

One of the key issues in the whole question of women's wages and the jobs they can get is the issue of trade union involvement. Here we must look at both sides of the picture. Only about one in every four working women is a member of a trade union. This must obviously be taken into account when considering the inadequate progress made on pay, training, opportunities and working conditions; if more women joined their union (whether they are working full-time or part-time, day work or evening shift) and took an active part in fighting on issues important to them as women, the whole situation could be transformed.

The usual reasons for not joining are either "I haven't time" or "They don't do anything for me". Both reasons, unfortunately, have a good deal of truth in them. Is it reasonable to ask women who are already burdened with a double job to give some time to a trade union? Well, the answer might be that it could be made reasonable, provided the unions are willing to make some efforts towards helping women to take part. The unions will have to discuss what form such efforts should take: trade union education for women, help in encouraging and training women for union responsibilities, meetings at a time and place which is possible for women to

attend (instead of after work in the pub), are some suggestions which come to mind.

With regard to the "They don't do anything for me" objection, of course unions have fought on questions affecting women and are doing so today. Several unions have recently made some substantial gains towards achieving equal pay. Some industries or firms have reached agreement on equal pay, either now or in stages up to 1975, and in others, though there is no equal pay agreement, women are now receiving equal or higher increases than men, so that the pay differential is being reduced.

But these are a minority. There are a number of industries whose most recent increases have been smaller for women than for men — agriculture, engineering, the Health Services, motor vehicle repair are among them — and the overall picture of women's wages still shows a wide gap from those of men.

In manufacturing industries this gap has not been reduced at all; it has remained at around 50 per cent for years and years, and the latest figures (October 1971) show that women's wages are still almost exactly half those of men — £15.80 against £31.37 in manufacturing — though it is true that women, on average, work six hours less per week (*Department of Employment Gazette*, July 1972).

Another question in the current situation is that from December 1973, under the Equal Pay Act, the Government could introduce regulations to raise women's rates to at least 90 per cent those of men, but this will not happen without a widespread campaign by the trade union and labour movement.

It is necessary for the unions to examine their own attitudes and policies on questions affecting women, to see if they fully understand the challenge of the new part women are playing in society, and to ask themselves what action they are prepared to take to achieve women's demands and women's rights. It is not only a question of pay, though this is the most important issue: education and training for women, the jobs and opportunities available to them, the use of union strength to compel local authorities to provide day nurseries, nursery schools, facilities for after school and holiday times for children — all these are issues which the trade union movement can and must take up.

HOME — PRISON OR WORKHOUSE?

There are some women who would still agree with what Bernard Shaw said half a century ago of the home — it is the girl's prison and the woman's workhouse. The workhouse element is a good deal less; housework is far easier for us than it was for our mothers or grandmothers. We have machines which save our time and energy at home; we have laundrettes, easier shopping, convenience foods. There has also been a significant change in men's attitudes towards sharing the work of the home, particularly among the younger generations of husbands and sons. Where real drudgery still exists for women, it is mainly due to bad housing and poverty.

Is it not a cause for boiling anger, that one in seven families today have to live in a slum dwelling? That there are 4 million homes in Britain without a bathroom or an inside lavatory? That 200,000 more homes become unfit every year, which at the present rate of house-building

means that the slums will still be with us in 200 years' time? And that out of this situation, out of people's desperate need for a decent home, property speculators, land-owners and money-lenders can make millions of pounds profit?

The home today could hardly be called the girls' prison (though parents tend to be more restrictive with daughters than with sons), but there is an element of solitary confinement in it for many young wives and mothers.

Women still bear the brunt of the responsibility for the home, house-work and child care; and, even with the sharing of chores undertaken by husbands today, it is still the wife who is often isolated by this responsibility. Families move around more, away from grandparents, relatives and old friends, which increases the problem; in some cases, such as on new housing estates or in New Towns, it can create a real threat to mental health.

The wife and mother who goes out to work has a different, but related, problem. Even if she puts in an eight-hour day in shop, office or factory, she is still expected to act as a full-time mother and home-maker. For all the advances in sharing the chores and in labour-saving devices, women are hardly better off in this respect than they were a generation or two ago. Playing in the streets is too dangerous today, so women and children are isolated in high flats or in little boxes on housing estates. Far more women go out to work today, so more and more do two jobs, and they do them with less help in the way of child-care than 25 years ago.

Pre-school facilities

At the end of the last war there were over 1,300 local authority day nurseries, and places were free. Today there are 440, fees are charged according to earnings, and the places are almost all for children with special health problems or for fatherless children. There has, naturally, been a corresponding increase in private child-care facilities: there are now over 10,000 private nurseries and over 25,000 registered child minders — plus an unknown number of unregistered ones.

For nursery schools (the difference between these and day nurseries is important: nursery schools have an educational function, keep school hours, and are free) the picture is a little brighter — after a period of stagnation, the numbers of places are beginning to rise slightly and now number about 260,000. The Pre-School Playgroup movement, which started 10 years ago because of the lack of nursery schools, has developed rapidly, and caters for about another 200,000. There are also private nursery schools and other playgroups.

It is only very recently that the climate of opinion about child care has begun to change, mainly thanks to the work of the National Campaign for Nursery Education. The rights of the child to freedom to play in proper surroundings, to experiment with messy materials, to the company of children his own age (all almost impossible in an individual family) have now been recognised. Yet, even if we put all the private facilities together with the local authority ones, it is doubtful if more than one in ten children get any form of pre-school education (as distinct from merely being minded). Therefore nine out of ten children are being denied

experiences which are essential if children are to develop their full abilities.

Bound up with the development of the child is the question of the mother's freedom to choose whether to take up employment, further education or training for the development of her own talents and abilities. The present child-care provisions simply do not meet the needs of working-class women: either there are waiting lists, or their hours are not suitable, or they just cost too much. What is needed is a variety of facilities to cater for different requirements, centred in each locality, and free of charge. There are one or two experimental developments which combine a nursery and nursery school, and these are a step in the right direction; but we need planned centres all over the country which would combine the facilities of day nursery, nursery school, play group and play centre for after school or holidays.

Such facilities would allow both mother and child to develop. Many women's abilities are being wasted in monotonous dead-end jobs, because (apart from the lack of training or re-training facilities when they wish to go back to work) they are affected by the need to make proper provision for their children. Such facilities would also remove the nagging sense of guilt which affects so many working women, and the worry about their children's well-being while they are at work. The Communist Party believes that such facilities must be provided by society: they are part of society's responsibility towards its next generation.

THE GREAT DEBATE ON THE FAMILY

There has hardly ever been a time when there has been more discussion about the family than there is today — and included in that are such subjects as divorce, abortion, sex, morality, the law relating to wives, etc., as well as the relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children. The family has changed and ideas about it have changed all through history: in pre-historic times there were group families; in the Middle Ages marriage was a strictly economic matter, and today we have marriage for love. Even in our own times, ideas have changed. It is a far cry from three generations ago, when the husband was the supreme authority and overlord, owning his wife and children like so many parcels, to the much more equal relationship of today's young couples and their children.

However, with the gains in opportunity, education and status which women have won, they are becoming more and more conscious of just how much exploitation and oppression they still suffer. They see it in a practical sense, in the questions of jobs and wages which have already been discussed, and in the kind of ideas which are put forward in our society about women. Women are consumers, shoppers, fashion-plates, pictures of beauty or sexual attraction, housewives and mothers — but never people!

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the ideas put forward by women's magazines, television and advertising about women in the family. A visitor from another planet who had never met any real women but gained ideas about women only from these mass media, might well wonder about the strange creatures called "women" — who spend half their time using all the latest beauty products which will make them more attractive

to men and the other half using all the food products and cleaning products which will make them better housewives and domestic workers, who live only for and through home, husband and children, with no lives of their own.

Very few people actually say these days that "women's place is in the home". But this is the basic idea behind the presentation of women in the mass media: that they are either domestic workers or sex symbols, that their sphere is kitchen, bedroom and nursery, that they are wives and mothers before and above being citizens or workers. And because these ideas have been so constantly and consistently dinned into us, they affect us all in some degree, creating ideas about the superiority of men and the inferiority of women — a sex division which is useful to capitalism because it helps to keep things the way they are.

Women today have a new sense of their own capabilities and a new sense of the possibilities life can offer them. But every day they come up against the harsh reality that capitalism creates for them, a sort of brick wall that limits them in every way. And the brick wall is specially high and thick for women in the family.

A brick wall

There is a brick wall limiting wives under the law, for example — or, where the law is not the villain, it's "custom and practice", which is just as bad. A husband is the legal guardian of the children, and in order to become a guardian of her own children the wife has to legally adopt them. A wife's income is considered to be the property of her husband for income tax purposes (with the result that the husband receives the child tax allowances, mortgage allowances and even a wife's rebates). It is usual for the signature of a husband to be demanded if a wife takes on a hire purchase agreement or a tenancy agreement, if a wife wants to have her children added to her passport, or — most insulting of all — if a wife has to have a hysterectomy or have an internal contraceptive device fitted.

There is a brick wall limiting all women in respect of jobs and wages, but there is an extra layer of bricks on it for women in the family. Women with young children have no real choice between staying at home with their children or going out to work: many are forced out to work because their husband's wages are too low, others forced to stay at home because of the lack of nurseries. Women whose families are older are restricted in opportunity because of lack of training or re-training facilities and because of their need to take jobs which will fit in with their domestic responsibilities.

And there is a brick wall of ideas which creates the situation where women are oppressed within the family: where they bear the main responsibility for the day-in, day-out running of the home without financial independence; where they are the ones who are expected to stop at home with children of an evening, where they are cut off from the world of work outside the home, where they begin to feel inferior as whatever previous skills they had begin to rust away.

People in authority — politicians, planners, churchmen, some sociologists — often talk about the "sanctity of family life". Yet they accept or support a system which is imposing tremendous physical and mental

stress on the family, creating divisions in it, attacking it from all sides.

There are a million families whose lives are blighted by unemployment. Two million families struggle on or below the poverty line. More than a million families live in slums; hundreds of thousands more struggle to pay rents they cannot afford. Families are burdened by the cuts in social services — the cutting of school milk, the increased cost of school meals, the increases in Health Service charges. They are stretched almost to breaking point by the lack of provision for young children and the elderly, by the inadequacies of the Health Service, maternity services and family planning services. This total burden on the family affects every member — but particularly the woman in it, making her even more aware of her oppressed and unequal status in life.

The family, as we have seen, has changed in the past. It is changing now, under pressure of events, and it will change in the future, in a new kind of society. The policies of the Communist Party are those which would remove the pressures and strains from the family and would ensure a fuller, richer life for every member of it. The family today reflects the stresses and inequalities of our society, and the majority of the pressures on it are not private matters — they are the responsibility of society. Housing, health, facilities for pre-school children, education, the care of old people, are all a social responsibility, and a socialist society accepts and establishes this responsibility.

In the present situation, Communists fight against the attacks made on the family by the Tory Government; they defend the family against the stresses which capitalist society imposes on it; and they campaign to achieve the social services which will improve the quality of life for all members of the family. These are issues which are important to all of us and on which we can all take action — and action is what we need.

THE MORE WE ARE TOGETHER

From the first stirrings of what is generally called the women's movement, there are plenty of examples of women who have fought for equality and human rights. From the fight for education, through the days of the suffragette movement and the fight for political rights, to the '30s and the fight against unemployment, women have been active in struggle. But it is doubtful whether any period has seen quite such an upsurge of action by women as our own times.

In 1968 the women workers at Fords fought for and won equal grading. Since then, the list of women workers who have taken part in industrial action is a long one: it includes among others women Post Office workers and telephonists, nurses, teachers, bank clerks, clerical workers, textile workers, workers in the steel industry, in the boot and shoe trade, weavers, cleaners, etc. Their action has not been only on the wages question; it has been for trade union recognition and against the Industrial Relations Act. On social questions, they have been active against rent increases and on housing campaigns such as rehousing families situated near new motorways or in squatters' movements. As well as campaigning for nursery education, they have taken part in campaigns for new schools, against 11-plus selection and for comprehensive education; they have been active in protest against the raising of school bus fares and achieved

some victories in persuading local authorities to get round the Government abolition of free school milk. And there are plenty of other issues women have taken up: fostering and adoption, apartheid, pollution, are just a few.

A welcome development is that women have recently been taking part in political action which is a step removed from their immediate needs, so to speak. Wives of workers on the upper Clyde, for example, marched in support of their husbands' work-in because they saw in this the means of keeping the shipyards going and preserving jobs. Miners' wives came out, not just in support of their pay claim, but on picket lines to support their action in blacking power stations. Women in Northern Ireland have not been frightened by the repression there, but have fought bravely for civil rights and freedom.

For several generations women have come together as women to discuss and take action on their problems. Britain is very rich in women's organisations, and even the most "non-political" ones have made contributions to social questions. But here too there is a difference in attitudes and a new readiness to take action. For example, a few years ago it would have been impossible, under the rules of the Women's Institutes, for them even to discuss family planning; it would have been unthinkable for them to demand a comprehensive family planning service from local authorities, as they did at their recent conference.

Self-help

Even more significant is the number of "self-help" organisations which have sprung up in the last ten years or so — with participation and direct action by people personally involved in a particular situation. This is how the very successful campaigns for nursery education and the play-groups movement began; other such organisations concerning children include campaigns on state education, children's toys and books, holiday facilities. On the medical side, there are dozens of organisations to help handicapped children or adults; there are campaigns on pre-natal training and maternity services, on facilities for visiting children in hospital, and a particularly widespread and successful one to publicise and pressurise for cancer screening for women. Many peace groups among women started in this way — in someone's kitchen, with the postage paid out of housekeeping money. Other organisations concern themselves with social questions such as widows and widows' pensions, single women looking after elderly parents, the problems of one-parent families, the divorced and separated.

These organisations concern themselves with reforms to certain parts of our society. There are, however, organisations which attack the kind of society we have; amongst them, the various groupings of the Women's Liberation Movement present a strong challenge to accepted ideas of womanhood and women's role in society. Among these groups, some are principally concerned with nursery facilities, some with unsupported mothers, some with women's wages, some with the "image" of women presented in newspapers and on television; some concentrate on discussing women's situation, others on political action. What they have in common is a determination to raise the ideas and discussion about

women, women's role, women's abilities, the way ideas about women are presented, and so on.

The reasons for this new upsurge of activity among women have already been touched on: the greater numbers of women who are out at work for a large period of their lives, their somewhat increased opportunity for higher education, the general widening of their horizons and a more realistic sense of their own value to society — and the consequent frustration because they are still second-class citizens, under-valued, oppressed, often isolated.

How do we attempt to tackle these problems? Is it by separate approaches to women, separate action on "women's questions"? Is it by persuading women to join the struggle for socialism, since only in a new society will we achieve equality? Is the priority to make women conscious of their oppression? These are questions which are being hotly discussed in the women's movement. There is no simple answer, but there are certain principles which must be borne in mind.

One of these is that there are no "women's questions" as such. Equality of pay, education, opportunity, as well as other campaigns which affect women, such as nurseries, housing, prices, etc., are all questions which must be taken up by the whole labour movement, men and women together. On the other hand, because of the centuries of oppression suffered by women, because of the resulting very deep-rooted ideas held by both men and women about superiority and inferiority, there is a need for special approaches and special campaigns for women to involve them in action which will improve the standard of their life and help to bring about changes in society.

But it is also important to recognise the class basis of oppression. Women can be brought to realise that they are a specially oppressed group ("the slave of a slave", as it has been put) — but that the oppressors are not all men but capitalist society. It is also important that men, too, should realise this, that the whole labour movement should take new initiatives on equality for women, in action, in discussion, and in fighting against attitudes and ideas about women which only help the divide-and-rule tactics of the capitalist class. The more men and women unite in this way, the more women who can be brought into action on the issues which affect them, the more understanding will be built among the working class as to what is necessary to change the situation, and the better the chance of building a new society which will create true freedom for both men and women.

A NEW KIND OF LIFE

Under capitalism, the most important question is always "Will it make a profit?", whereas under socialism the most important question is always "Will it make life better?" For example, one of the main reasons for the shortage of housing and its high cost is the amount of profit that has to go to the people who own the land and who lend out money for building.

Every time any sort of building goes up, every time that building is equipped and furnished, at every single step of the way somebody is collecting a profit. When industries are no longer privately owned, but

belong to the people who work in them and produce the goods, then all the services needed can be provided at lower costs. As things are, the more we produce, the more profit we make for the people who own land, banks, or factories; but under socialism, the more we produce, the more money there is for us, either in wages or to be spent on the services and facilities we need.

In the change to socialism, difficulties and problems are bound to arise. Centuries of oppression, generations of thinking, cannot be altered in a few years. Nobody would claim that socialism immediately creates equality for women, but what it will do is to create the basis for equality, and in the process it will transform the lives of women. In the countries which are already socialist, such as the Soviet Union, women have not yet achieved complete equality, but like all Soviet citizens they have made tremendous gains compared to what life was like for them a generation or two ago.

Imagine what life could be like in Britain if we had the opportunity to build this new kind of society:

One of the first tasks of a socialist Government with a socialist policy for peace would be to end our country's support for the shameful U.S. war in Vietnam, to close down British military bases abroad and bring our troops home. Their skills and labour would be needed to help us build our new system of society.

All the resources of our country — the manpower, skills, scientific and technical advances, money, would be used to provide for the needs of everyone.

Democratic involvement

On housing — one of the top priorities — every family would be provided with a decent modern home at a low rent. Included in the rent would be the cost of heating and lighting. Rates would be paid according to income via a local income tax. No longer would we have the scandalous situation of skilled building workers on the dole or building luxury hotels, out of which the private owners of the tourist industry make a rich living, or building huge office blocks for property tycoons like Harry Hyams who, because of spiralling rents, can amass millions by letting them stand empty for years. Instead our skilled workers would be building the new homes to end the present situation of homelessness, overcrowding and slums which today cause so much human misery, ill-health and family problems. There would be no Tory Housing Finance Act.

The ordinary people in each locality would discuss and decide the best position for the leisure facilities and community services needed by the local people.

For education they would discuss such things as a day nursery, a nursery school (or a combination of both), a primary school and a comprehensive school to ensure that every child was given the very best education. A socialist Government would see that we had smaller classes by training more new teachers, allocating sufficient money for books and materials. Parents and children would no longer be engaged in argument and protest about which school their child should attend — no longer would the wealthy minority be able to obtain a better education for their children by paying huge fees for private nursery schools, prep schools and

public schools. Every member of the local community would have an interest in seeing that the schools provided the best possible opportunity for every child to develop its talents and abilities to the full, to get the further education and training needed to enable them to obtain a satisfying, skilled and worthwhile job when they are ready.

For health services the local people would help plan a health centre providing all the services needed to maintain health and happiness—ante-natal clinic, dental clinic, eye clinic, family planning clinic, local doctor's surgery, special screening clinic where every member of the family would get a regular health check. If not included with the nursery school, a day nursery would be planned. All these services, plus medicine, spectacles, etc., would be free. The emphasis would be on preventing disease, and a local health centre like this would provide most of the treatment needed instead of patients having to travel long distances to hospital out-patients departments and consultant clinics.

Should a stay in hospital be necessary for any reason (operation, childbirth, etc.) a socialist Government would ensure that modern buildings were planned and built to meet the needs of patients referred to it by local health centres. They would also see to it that the hospital was properly staffed with sufficient doctors, nurses and other workers, and contained the best medical equipment available.

Again the wealthy minority would not be able to obtain better medical treatment by paying for private hospital beds or paying huge fees to Harley Street consultants. The drugs industry would not be able to cripple the N.H.S. by charging exorbitant prices for drugs needed by the sick—it too would be owned by the people.

Leisure

For leisure time, the facilities of the local schools mentioned earlier would be open in the evenings, at weekends, and during school holidays to cater for the hobbies and interests of the local children. Local clubs and societies would meet here, and adults as well as children would be encouraged to take part in them. In addition, there would be the local community hall, theatre/cinema, sports ground to cater for every age group from children to pensioners.

Other community services would include low-priced family restaurants and laundries—initially it would perhaps be necessary to use the school dining halls as family restaurants. This would mean that the working women no longer need to rush home from work to cook and wash, because they can afford to eat out and send the washing to the laundry. Shopping would no longer be a nightmare for working class women, who today hunt for the cut-price bargains in the various supermarkets. A socialist Government would peg prices by law and ensure that ready cooked meals and prepared foods were available for those families who prefer to eat at home rather than use the family restaurant.

Instead of the chaos of the rush-hour traffic, with higher and higher fares for a worsening service, public transport would be regarded as a social service needed by the people to make daily life easier, with frequent services and low fares.

Is all this possible? We Communists believe it is when our country's

money and resources are used differently for the benefit of all our families and people.

Of course, none of these changes can come overnight — there will have to be priorities — but with ordinary people planning and working to provide the homes, hospitals, schools and other services needed, we can build a bright future for our country.

All these things would improve life for everyone under socialism, but women have a special interest in socialism because it would bring to them the chance of true human rights and equality. For a start, their lives would be transformed by all the services mentioned — a load of work and worry would be lifted from their shoulders because they would be liberated from many of the chores they now have to do. Add to this the new laws which ensure they get equal pay, more opportunity for training and a wider choice of jobs, laws which make it an offence to discriminate against them as women. These things would give them the opportunity to use their talents in whatever way they chose, whether in a particular kind of job or in service to the community, so that their lives become fuller and richer.

As a result of all this people's attitudes will change: women will no longer be presented or thought of as inferior beings, and both men and women will change their ideas about superiority and inferiority. Thus socialism will help to bring true equality for women as well as legal equality.

WE CAN GET THERE

We certainly do not have to wait for socialism to win people to take action which will begin to change things now. Part of the struggle to get better social services and win a peaceful future is to reduce military expenditure. It is possible now to save more than half of the over £2,000 million we spend every year on weapons of war and preparations for war. This would go a very long way towards providing all the houses, schools, hospitals, nurses, doctors, teachers and everything else we need.

One of the ways of doing this is to end the Tory Government's support for the U.S. war against the people of Vietnam — a war designed to turn back the clock and use Vietnam and Indochina as a source of cheap raw materials and labour and as a base for further military aggression. The Vietnamese people want the same things from life as we do — the opportunity to live in peace and build a new kind of society. In North Vietnam they had already started to do this and the people saw how this would improve their lives. The women particularly recognised the opportunities it would provide for them to achieve human rights and equality. This is why they fight so courageously alongside the men to rid their country of the American aggressors. Our Tory Government supports the Americans in this war because they too would like to turn the clock back and impose greater burdens on our British working class. Hence their Industrial Relations Act to limit the power of the organised workers. So the fight to reduce military expenditure and end Tory support for the U.S. war in Vietnam is part and parcel of our struggle to defeat and bring down this Tory Government, so that we can elect a new Government with socialist policies.

Nor do we have to wait for socialism before we begin to change people's attitudes to women. The more we fight for equality now, under capitalism, the more people's thinking will change. Time and time again it has been proved that when we get together with other people who feel as we do, and act with them, we can get things done. We can see this happening every day around us, on small things like a local road safety campaign to bigger issues such as struggles on rents, increased wages or to keep jobs open. If we work together, we can make an end, not only of the present Tory Government which is constantly attacking our wages, social services and trade unions, but of capitalism itself. And we can help bring about a new kind of society, a truly democratic society where everybody takes part in planning how things should be done and in helping to carry out the plan.

There are many lies told about Communists in the press, on radio and television, because the ruling class is afraid of socialism and afraid of people learning the truth about it. The truth is that the Communist Party challenges the whole way our society is run; it challenges the system which produces so much poverty, insecurity and unhappiness, and which subjects women to particular deprivation and inequality. It has always fought for nursery schools, comprehensive education, real facilities for health and leisure, low rents, higher wages, equal pay, and all the other priorities of life which have been discussed here. It has always worked to improve the status of women and has challenged the incorrect ideas about women which capitalist society produces.

Communists believe that the best way to bring about socialism in Britain is for the millions of men and women who make up the labour movement to join together, to win improvements in our lives here and now, and to work for a change in society. Women have a special interest in bringing this about, since it is only under socialism that they will be able to enjoy the happiness, security and equality denied them by capitalism. More and more of us can and must join together to fight on the issues we feel most strongly about, and to win a system of government in Britain which will end capitalism for ever and begin a new life for all of us.

Communist policies which are of immediate interest to women are printed at the end of this chapter; our full programme and policy will be found in *The British Road to Socialism*. And if you want to read the truth about Socialism, about the Communist Party, and about the equality of women, you will find it in the *Morning Star* every day, not in the newspapers run by and for the people who control capitalist society.

There are thousands of women in the Communist Party because they believe that socialism will bring them a fuller, richer life, and because they believe that ours is the only political party which understands how to work for and build socialism. We extend a warm invitation to all who read this pamphlet to join our ranks and help build a socialist future for Britain.

A PROGRAMME FOR ACTION

As an immediate programme around which women and men can be united for struggle we propose :

1. Equal pay for work of equal value, with a minimum weekly basic wage of £20.
2. Equal opportunities for education and the removal of all barriers to working people of both sexes enjoying full educational opportunity.
3. Equal opportunity for training and jobs with improvement of protective legislation.
4. Modern houses at low rents, measures to control prices and an end to cuts and charges in the social services.
5. The removal of all legal inequalities, including those in social security provision, taxation, inheritance, tenancies and mortgage.
6. Free advice on family planning and free contraception and abortion under the National Health Service, in order to ensure the right of women to decide if and when they will become mothers.
7. Recognition of society's obligation to mothers by the provision of adequate standards of medical care and attention for mothers and their children, with social insurance coverage for mothers. At least three months maternity leave on full pay and the guarantee of a return to one's job without loss of seniority or pension rights. Family allowances of £1.75 a week for each child.
8. Nursery education to be available for all children and day nurseries for all children whose parents wish it, with an extension of hours where possible to meet need.

HAVE YOU READ?

9.06

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