

ON IMPROVING THE PARTY'S WORK AMONG WOMEN*

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ONE OF THE GRAVEST weaknesses of the Communist movement in the various capitalist countries, including our own, is its relative failure to win the active support of decisive masses of women. It is a fact which we dare not ignore that the forces of reaction still have a strong hold on womankind, including proletarian women. This was again graphically demonstrated during the recent crucial elections in France and Italy, when an undue preponderance of women voted with the reactionary parties, especially those dominated by the Roman Catholic Church.

This shortcoming of the Communist parties becomes even more manifest today in view of the huge and increasing part that women are taking in all walks of life. This shortcoming must be quickly overcome inasmuch as the parties and organizations spearheading the drive to fascism and war hold the affiliation of very large masses of women. Ob-

viously, therefore, a drastic improvement in their work among women is very much on the order of business for the Communist parties of the capitalist world, especially our Party here in the United States.

The basic cause of the more or less general weakness of the Communist parties' work among women in capitalist countries is due to an underestimation and general neglect of this vital work. Clearly, for Marxists, inadequacy in practical work implies inadequate grasp of theory. It is to this aspect of the question, the theoretical side, that this article especially addresses itself.

There has been a woeful theoretical neglect on the woman question, which, in turn, greatly hampers all practical educational and organizational work. This neglect is illustrated by the fact that we have had no detailed presentation of this most important matter since Engels wrote his fundamental work, *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, 65 years ago and Bebel his *Woman and Socialism*, a generation later. This paucity of theoretical work is all the more deplorable because the role of woman is one of the most complex theoretical problems we have to deal with, and also because her position on a world scale has changed vastly since these famous books were written.

Only under Socialism can woman become truly free. Naturally, therefore, in the Soviet Union a revolutionary advance has been made in

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the whole status of women, economically, politically, socially, culturally. But the trouble is that, so far, little of the underlying scientific conclusions that have been drawn from all this advance of woman in the U.S.S.R. has reached the Communist Parties in the capitalist world. We have no contemporary work on the question of women, whether under Socialism or under capitalism, anywhere nearly satisfactory in scope. The Communist Parties are, therefore, literally starved theoretically on this vital matter. This dearth of theoretical material constitutes a challenge which should not go unanswered from Marxist-Leninist theoreticians. It is in order to make whatever contribution we can in this vital field that our Party has set up a theoretical sub-commission on the woman question.

THEORIES OF MALE SUPERIORITY

One of the many aspects of the woman question where theoretical work is very necessary has to do with the "master idea," the widely current theories alleging the superiority of man over woman. These false notions, assiduously cultivated by all the forces of reaction, are widespread among the masses of the people. Obviously, our Party also is not free from the infection of these widely prevalent male superiority ideas. Such prejudices are extremely complex in character; they have roots

dating back thousands of years, and they constitute serious obstacles to woman in her age-long fight for equality as a worker, a citizen, a home-builder, and in her marital relations. In this article, it will be observed, I am only indicating the theoretical tasks involved in combating male superiority prejudices, rather than working out solutions.

It is a favorite trick, and a very effective one, for reactionary propagandists to base their anti-social arguments of all kinds upon pseudo-scientific assumptions, particularly in the field of biology. To uninformed people this gives the so-called theories an air of finality. In the same way, reactionary propagandists argue that "Socialism is contrary to human nature"; that war is caused by "man's naturally combative character." They rationalize capitalist exploitation as an inevitable result of "man's acquisitive nature," and the like. Fascists especially go in for reactionary "biological" arguments on a big scale. Their theories of the "master-race," of the "elite" among the "Aryans," of the "inferiority" of Jews, Negroes, etc., are all clothed with false and preposterous biological conceptions. It is not surprising, therefore, that reactionaries throughout the ages have sought to justify the subjugation of woman with the aid of similar fake biological "theories." Such theories, alleging the biological inferiority of woman, have, of course, greatly facilitated the economic exploitation and political op-

pression of women under systems of society that have succeeded each other, from chattel slavery to capitalism.

For one thing, the male supremacists boldly claim that woman is, by her very make-up, intellectually inferior to man. Her brain is said to average somewhat less in weight than the man's and, therefore, the reactionaries argue that she cannot think as well as he does. They put woman's thinking capacity somewhere between the animal's and man's. That is, the animal is guided by its instincts, the woman thinks "intuitively," while the man reasons objectively. Such false arguments, contrary to science and experience, but widely current, have done and continue to do grave damage not only to woman's fight for equality, but to society as a whole.

There are, of course, physical differences between men and women. As Engels states, the first division of labor is that of men and women in procreation.

From these functional differences, bourgeois ideologists develop false conceptions. They seize upon the apparent greater muscular strength of man as the basis for the pseudo-scientific theory that woman is generally physically inferior to man. They equate sameness with strength and difference with weakness. Thus they brush aside her greater ability to resist pain, her greater immunity to certain diseases, her greater longev-

ity, etc. Such notions of woman's physical inferiority, cultivated by reactionaries for centuries, make for great handicaps to women, especially in industry.

The advocates of male superiority also claim that because of the far greater role played by the woman in child bearing and rearing, she is thereby constitutionally unfitted to enter into the hurly-burly competition of intellectual, economic, political, and social life. They claim that by her very nature her inevitable place is in the home. Not only is woman physically and mentally unfit for an active "career" and for participation in the social struggle, they argue, but it would also destroy her femininity and charm. All such contentions place high barriers in the way of women in many walks of life.

Then these reactionaries contend, by inference if not frankly, that since man plays the more positive and aggressive role sexually, he also should dominate the woman in her social life. They assert, in substance, that nature has made man the master and woman his slave. This reactionary notion, which is far more prevalent than most of us realize, hangs like a millstone about woman's neck in her fight for freedom; it flourishes and does immeasurable damage to women in innumerable respects. We must show that this whole conception is belied both by the findings of science and by the great struggle of woman for equality with the man.

Finally, to mention only one more aspect of the hydra-headed notion of male superiority, there is the reactionary contention that "nature has made man essentially polygamous and woman monogamous." This is the theory of the double standard of bourgeois morals, which seeks to justify the sexual exploitation of woman. We must show both from science and experience how such standards wrought incalculable harm (and continue to do so) to woman's happiness and to her position in society.

Equally insidious is the new twist being given to these reactionary male superiority notions by the bourgeois, pro-fascist, and Social-Democratic ideologists, who provide "scientific" garb for the myth of woman's inferiority by proclaiming that she is psychologically inferior. Thus, we witness a steady stream of such reactionary works as *Modern Woman—A Lost Sex*, by Dr. Marynia F. Fernham and Ferdinand Lundberg, which attempt to justify every anti-woman prejudice by psychological claptrap, in order to divert woman from progressive struggle and to reduce her to the fascist *Kinder-Küche-Kirche* level.

On the other hand, bourgeois feminism, which places the blame on men and not on the social system, for the oppression of women, can exert its influence in the absence of a sound theoretical position on the woman question. The bourgeois feminist

would counterpose to the male superiority "theory" the equally unscientific notion of female superiority, which leads only into the blind alley of the "battle of the sexes."

The capitalists, in order to exploit the woman more effectively, make wide use of the male superiority theories in all their complexities and subtle ramifications. In this the capitalists are aided by reactionary church dogma. The general result is that harmful male supremacy notions have penetrated widely in all classes. Men especially readily absorb male superiority "theories"—little understanding that such noxious ideas injure them as well as they do women. Many women also accept the general notion that the man is the superior of the two sexes. Woman's painful struggle upward through the centuries, reaching heroic heights with the advent of the revolutionary struggle against feudalism and ever since, has been carried on in the face of the most savage interpretations and applications of male superiority theories.

IDEOLOGICAL SHORTCOMINGS IN OUR WORK AMONG WOMEN

From an ideological standpoint (particularly in relation to the male superiority notions) there are at least three major shortcomings in our Party's work among women, and also, it may be added, of the Communist

Parties of many other capitalist countries. The first of these weaknesses is a deep-seated underestimation of the need for a persistent struggle ideologically against all manifestations of masculine superiority. Of course, all the Communist Parties in the capitalist world have elaborate programs of economic, political, and social demands for women, and they back up this program with mass struggle. But such demands and struggles, vital as they may be, are in themselves not enough. They must be reinforced by an energetic ideological struggle against all conceptions of male superiority. But this is just what is lacking. Obviously our Party could not make any serious headway on the Negro question if it limited itself simply to economic, political and social demands and failed to carry on an ideological struggle against white chauvinism. And so it is in the case of the Party's work among women. An ideological attack must be made against the whole system of male-superiority ideas which continue to play such an important part in woman's subjugation. And such an ideological campaign must be based on sound theoretical work.

The second weakness is to be found in a pronounced reticence in dealing with questions of sex. Indeed, in our propaganda and agitational material we hardly deal with the subject at all. Some comrades try to justify such a hands-off attitude by reference to the famous interview between Lenin and

Clara Zetkin on the woman question, in which Lenin discouraged the idea of "poking around" in matters of sex. But in these remarks Lenin was stressing the need for concentrating the main attention, at that historic moment of revolutionary crisis, upon the question of winning political power. He was also polemizing against certain loose tendencies that had developed among the youth in the early days of the Russian revolution. Lenin was a great scientist and no subject was beyond analysis for him, especially one playing such a vital role in social life as that of sex. In that same interview with Zetkin Lenin, therefore, strongly favored making analyses of "questions of sex and marriage from the standpoint of a mature, living, historical materialism," but, he added, "deep and many-sided knowledge is necessary for that, the clearest Marxist mastery of a great amount of material." In such a spirit of scientific investigation, therefore, it is our Party's task to include this aspect in furthering its theoretical work on the women's question. Without this it is impossible for us to combat the male supremacy "theory" and to discuss fundamentally the relationship of woman to man and to society.

The third weakness in our work among women is a certain narrowness in treating this question from a scientific standpoint. That is, we tend in analyses to reduce women's status in society simply to a question of eco-

nomics and politics and we largely ignore its many other aspects, anthropological, biological, etc. (This is a narrowness which we also exhibit in other aspects of our Party's theoretical work.) It is not in the tradition of the great Communist thinkers. Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin, recognizing the unity of all scientific truth, fared forth boldly into all the sciences. Theirs was a revolutionary approach to the sciences as a whole. In developing a better theoretical grasp of the complexities of the woman question, accordingly, a wide use of the sciences generally is especially necessary. This is particularly true of the science of biology. The facts of biology will support our economic, political and social programs for women and enhance our ideological struggle against bourgeois male superiority conceptions based on pseudo-scientific arguments. In pushing forward theoretical work on this whole question, therefore, comrades with a sound Marxian training in biology will have a large share of the responsibility.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

The basic purpose of all our theoretical studies is to clarify, deepen, and strengthen our practical programs of struggle and work. This is true in the question of women's work, as well as in other branches of our Party's activities. Hence, a

sharpening up of our theoretical analysis of, and ideological struggle against, male supremacy will help all our day-to-day work among women. I have barely indicated the outlines of the subject in this article. Besides the question of male superiority, necessary also are theoretical studies of other phases of this generally complex aspect of Party work, including articles on the potentialities of women in modern industry, the record of women as political and intellectual leaders, the role of housewives in the class struggle, the disintegration of family life under capitalism, the many problems of family and marital relations, and many other subjects.

The Party theoretical sub-commission on women's work has a number of projects in mind to work on. First, it wants to secure a number of well-thought-out articles along the foregoing lines from competent comrades, to serve as a basis for a deeper consideration of the whole question of women's work by our Party. Second, it plans to issue, in the not too distant future, a pamphlet outlining the Party's program on work among women in the light of the theoretical discussions on the question that are now beginning. And third, the sub-commission hopes eventually to produce a book by a well-qualified writer that will state the Party's position and program on every phase of the question of women in all its scientific aspects.

The foregoing program of theoretical work, planned by the sub-commission, is an ambitious one. But it is achievable. Our Party has competent, trained forces to perform the proposed task. As this work goes ahead, it should never be forgotten that the progress we make in improv-

ing our theoretical analysis and in sharpening the ideological struggle will register itself in the general improvement of our practical work to win a stronger Party base and a wider mass following among the strategically situated masses of toiling women.

“So few men—even among the proletariat—realize how much effort and trouble they could save women, even quite do away with, if they were to lend a hand in ‘woman’s work.’ But no, that is contrary to the ‘right and dignity of man.’ They want their peace and comfort. The home life of the woman is a daily sacrifice to a thousand unimportant trivialities. The old master right of the man still lives in secret. His slave takes her revenge, also secretly. The backwardness of women, their lack of understanding for the revolutionary ideals of the man decrease his joy and determination in fighting. They are like little worms which, unseen, slowly but surely rot and corrode. I know the life of the worker, and not only from books. Our Communist work among the women, our political work, embraces a great deal of educational work among men. We must root out the old ‘master’ idea to its last and smallest root, in the Party and among the masses. That is one of our political tasks, just as is the urgently necessary task of forming a staff of men and women comrades, well trained in theory and practice, to carry on Party activity among working women.”

V. I. Lenin, as quoted in Clara Zetkin,
Lenin on the Woman Question, p. 19.