

Women's Liberation

The Only Path is Revolution

Dena Clamage

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Joyce recently had a baby. She had tried to obtain birth control pills, but couldn't because of rules which said she had to be married to get a prescription from Planned Parenthood. After discovering that she was pregnant, she attempted to get an abortion, but strict Michigan abortion laws prevented this. Ultimately she married the father of the baby and had a little girl.

She is 19 years old. She is torn by feelings of ambivalence and confusion. She loves her baby and wants to give her a healthy and secure life. But she also can't completely suppress her feelings of resentment at being saddled with a husband and child when she could be on her own, traveling, enjoying an independent life.

Linda in a similar situation went to one of the abortion butchers who abound in almost every major city in the country. For \$600 she was able to get rid of her baby. The operation took place in unsanitary conditions without any anesthetic. Linda bled for a month and a half. Ultimately, her body healed, but the psychic scars of her experience have persisted. She was lucky; every year thousands of women die of pelvic infections caused by abortion butchers or abortions with knitting needles and coat hangers.

These are examples of the most blatant kinds of pain which women endure in a society which does not allow them to control even their own bodies. There is also the pain of losing out on jobs because you had the misfortune to be born female. There is the pain of being told day after day, year after year, in a thousand different ways that you are unfit for any but the most menial types of work in the home or for a biological sex function.

At one time there may have been some biomaterial base for this role differentiation. Some anthropologists suggest that in an early hunting society, women were handicapped vis-a-vis mobility because of the need to keep their infants with them for breast-feeding. Others suggest that weakness after pregnancy made it difficult for women to participate in heavy work and also necessitated that some provision be made for taking care of women and infants.

Whatever the particular biomaterial base, the system led to two consequences: an ideology developed which placed women in an inherently inferior role. This ideology is prevalent throughout the literature of almost all cultures in almost all times. Also, on the basis of this ideology, women became objectified into possessions, commodities which served as a sign of wealth.

This objectification and commoditization of women has certainly extended into the present. In a society where everyone is commoditized because of the work/income nexus, women serve the role of commodities of the commodities; they endure a special form of oppression within the general oppression and exploitation which exist under capitalism.

In a situation like the present where the biomaterial base no longer exists, we must go beyond the level of biology to understand the oppression of women. This is no longer a hunting or agrarian society. There are alternate methods of raising children, as experiences in Cuba and on Israeli kibbutzim indicate.

Yet the oppression of women is being maintained throughout the institutions of the society. This oppression takes two basic forms: male supremacy and male chauvinism: Male supremacy refers to the fact that objectively

men generally occupy higher positions than women in terms of both specific occupational areas and general occupational distribution. Also, men often receive higher salaries than women of similar training and experience. Male chauvinism refers to the ideology and cultural myths which have arisen to justify the subordination of women.

Both chauvinism and supremacy are maintained by American social and economic institutions. In terms of supremacy, oppression begins in the school system where channeling of women takes place. Textbooks present pictures of women in "appropriate" roles. Women are discouraged from entering into areas of science, mathematics, chemistry, and engineering and encouraged to study English, languages, home economics, nursing and secretarial subjects.

After school, women know they will have difficulty getting jobs in certain areas, and this knowledge itself discourages them from entering these fields. Finally, there is the culture myth of the "career woman," a frigid, emasculating bitch who must give up her femininity and become like a man in order to succeed.

The ideology of female inferiority is perpetuated throughout the cultural media of the society. Advertisements often display women objects standing in passive admiration of some product. Doris Day is a movie queen; the Playboy philosophy is accepted social etiquette for American males.

And who controls these institutions, the school system, the occupational distribution, advertisements, and other media? If the ruling class of this country, those who own the means of production and hold disproportionate political power, wished to eradicate male chauvinism and male supremacy, it is clear that they could contribute to this end very significantly. But instead, they operate the system to maintain the special oppression of over one half the population of this country.

There are several functions which supremacy and chauvinism play in America. First, they reduce one half of the population to political near-passivity.

From an early age women are told that politics is "man's business," that they are not equipped to comprehend the complexities of modern politics.

The more women come to believe this (and it is almost inevitable that they will come to believe this) the less likely are they to struggle against their oppression and those who are responsible for it.

Second, as long as men feel that they enjoy privileges vis-a-vis women, they can rationalize their own oppression by the realization that their situation could be worse. The sense of being privileged makes them loath to jeopardize their situation by struggling for the betterment of women's positions, and, indeed, the betterment of their own. Thus, the force which must unite to change this country is kept divided and impotent. It is interesting that racism is also used to divide people who must unite to revolutionize the society.

Third, women as wives provide many services for men in the form of housekeeping, etc. Their services would cost far more if they had to be paid for on a regular basis. All of us have read articles detailing the services which women provide and the wages which women would earn in their various capacities. It totals up to a sizable amount, which would have to come out of higher wages for male workers.

Finally one of the greatest needs of a capitalist system is expanding markets. The amount of advertising directed specifically at women, for example, for cosmetics and other "beauty" aids, clothing, household goods and housework products, attests to the importance of women as a market. Both men and women in our society are taught to define themselves by what they own. For women, the emphasis on the necessity of sex appeal in trapping a husband and the association of sex appeal with various types of products produces a special type of commoditization. Not only do women define themselves by what they own, their possessions maintain their self-definition as an object and as a subordinate.

It is not enough to say that women's liberation depends on being able to get an equal piece of the American pie. That pie is inedible. Almost no one in our society is "liberated." The nature of work, the quality of American education, the quality of culture all enslave almost everyone in one way or another. But women face not only this general oppression and exploitation; they suffer a special oppression which results from arbitrary sex discrimination.

It would be possible to have a revolution which would leave untouched this special form of oppression. But a revolution is necessary in order to lay the basis for the eradication of chauvinism and supremacy. This means eliminating the need for the functions which these forms of oppression play and transferring power from those who benefit from such dehumanization.

The problems which women face must not be ignored during this or any other phase of the struggle. But women must see their struggle as only a part of the total struggle for the liberation of all people.

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