

Feminism Against Capitalism

BY

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Ultimately the goals of a radical feminism and socialism are the same — justice and equality for all people.

Socialism and feminism have a long, and at times fraught, relationship.

Socialists are often accused of overemphasizing class — of placing the structural divide between those who must work for a wage to survive and those who own the means of production at the center of every analysis.

Even worse they ignore or underplay how central other factors — like sexism, racism, or homophobia — are in shaping hierarchies of power. Or they admit the importance of these negative norms and practices, but argue that they can be rooted out only after we get rid of capitalism.

Meanwhile, socialists accuse mainstream feminists of focusing too much on individual rights rather than collective struggle and ignoring the structural divides between women. They accuse mainstream feminists of aligning themselves with bourgeois political projects that diminish the agency of working women or pushing middle-class demands that ignore the needs and desires of poor women, both in the Global North and South.

These are old debates that date back to the mid-nineteenth century and the First International, and revolve around deeply political questions of power and the contradictions of capitalist society.

Muddying the waters further is how the politics of feminism is complicated by the historical nature of capitalism — the way sexism is integrated into both processes of profit-making and the reproduction of the capitalist system as a whole is dynamic.

This dynamism is very apparent today when a female presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton, is the top choice among US millionaires. But the divide between socialism and feminism is ultimately an unnecessary one.

Why Socialists Should Be Feminists

The oppression of women, both in US society and globally, is multi-dimensional — gender divides in the political, economic, and social spheres underscore why, to free ourselves from the tyranny of capital, socialists must also be feminists.

The possibility of a woman finally becoming US president highlights the stark lack of female leadership, both in the US and around the world. Despite powerful women like Angela Merkel, Christine LeGarde, Janet Yellen, and Dilma Rousseff, the gender balance in politics and the corporate world remains highly skewed. Only 4 percent of CEOs at Fortune 500 firms are women and most corporate boards have few if any female members.

Globally, 90 percent of heads of state are men, and at the 2015 World Economic Forum only 17 percent of the 2,500 representatives present were women, while 2013 marked the first time women held twenty seats in the US Senate.

Unlike many countries, women in the United States have, roughly speaking, equal rights and legal protection, as well as access to similar education, nutrition, and health care as men. But gender divides are apparent across society.

Women outperform men in higher education, but they don't achieve comparable levels of success or wealth and remain stereotyped and underrepresented in the popular media. Attacks on women's reproductive rights continue unabated, and after a long, steady decline through the 1990s, rates of violence against women haven't budged since 2005.

At the same time, decisions about balancing home life and work life, in the face of ever-increasing housing and child care costs, are as difficult as ever. In the fifty years since the passage of the 1963 Equal Pay Act, women have entered the workforce en masse; today 60 percent of women work outside the home. Single and married mothers are even more likely to work, including 57 percent of mothers with children under the age of one.

But women who work full time still earn only 81 percent of what men do — a number inflated by faster declines in men's wages (aside from the college-educated) in recent years.

Pay gaps are matched by a gendered division of labor. The retail, service, and food sectors — the center of new job growth — are dominated by women, and the feminization of "care" work is even more pronounced. Despite recent gains, like the extension of the Fair Labor Standards Act to domestic workers, care work is still seen as women's work and undervalued. Disproportionate numbers of caring jobs are low-paying, contingent gigs in which humiliation, harassment, assault, and wage theft are common.

In addition to these clear differences between the experiences of men and women in the US there are more insidious, long-range effects of sexism. Feminists like bell hooks argue that sexism and racism pervade all corners of society and that dominant narratives of power glorify white, heteronormative visions of life.

From birth, boys and girls are treated differently, and gender stereotypes introduced in the home, school, and everyday life are perpetuated throughout women's lives, shaping their identities and life choices.

Sexism also plays a less obvious, but critical, role in profit-making. From the beginning, capitalism has relied on unpaid labor outside the labor market (mainly in the home) that provides the essential ingredient for capital accumulation: workers — who must be created, clothed, fed, socialized, and loved.

This unpaid labor is highly gendered. While more men take part in household chores and child-rearing than in the past, social reproduction still falls primarily on women, who are expected to shoulder the heaviest burden of household tasks.

Most women also perform paid labor outside the home turning their work in the home into a “second shift.” In this way, women are doubly oppressed — exploited in the workplace and unrecognized as workers in the social reproduction of labor.

Why Feminists Should Be Socialists

These persistent, cross-class gender divides — in the political, economic, and social spheres — fuel the dominant feminist viewpoint that sexism is a thing apart from capitalism, something that must be tackled separately.

Throughout numerous waves of feminist struggle, activists have pursued a variety of strategies for combating sexism and gender divides. Today, mainstream feminists gravitate toward a focus on putting women in power — both in the political and economic sphere — as a way to solve the range of problems women face, such as wage inequality, violence, work-life balance, and sexist socialization.

Prominent spokeswomen like Sheryl Sandberg, Hillary Clinton, Anne-Marie Slaughter, and many others advocate this “take-power” feminist strategy. Sandberg — one of the most influential proponents of this strategy — argues that women need to stop being afraid and start “disrupting the status quo.” If they do, she believes this generation can close the leadership gap and in doing so make the world a better place for all women.

The thrust of the take-power argument is that if women were in power they, unlike men, would take care to implement policies that benefit women and that cross-class gender divides in economic, political, and

cultural spheres will only be eliminated if women hold an equal number of leadership positions to men.

The emphasis on individual advancement as the path to achieving the goals of feminism is not new, and has been critiqued by numerous feminists including Charlotte Bunch and Susan Faludi, who question the notion of sisterly solidarity as a remedy for deep-seated gender divides. As Faludi says, “You can’t change the world for women by simply inserting female faces at the top of an unchanged system of social and economic power.”

Socialist feminists like Johanna Brenner also point to how mainstream feminism glosses over deep tensions among women:

We can generously characterize as ambivalent the relationships between working-class women/poor women and the middle-class professional women whose jobs it is to uplift and regulate those who come to be defined as problematic — the poor, the unhealthy, the culturally unfit, the sexually deviant, the ill-educated. These class tensions bleed into feminist politics, as middle-class feminist advocates claim to represent working-class women.

So while it is certainly necessary to recognize how gendered contemporary society remains, it is also necessary to be clear-eyed about how to overcome these divides and, equally important, to recognize the limitations of a feminism that doesn’t challenge capitalism.

Capital feeds on existing norms of sexism, compounding the exploitative nature of wage work. When women’s ambitions and desires are silenced or undervalued, they are easier to take advantage of. Sexism is part of the company toolkit, enabling firms to pay women less — particularly women of color — and otherwise discriminate against them.

But even if we root out sexism, the inherent contradictions of capitalism will persist. It is important and necessary that women step into positions of power, but this won’t change the fundamental divide between workers and owners — between women at the top and women at the bottom.

It won’t change the fact that most women find themselves in precarious, low-wage jobs that present a far greater barrier to advancement and a comfortable life than sexism in the economic or political sphere. It won’t change the power of the profit motive and the compulsion of companies to give workers as little as economic, social, and cultural norms will allow.

Of course, society is not reducible to the wage relation, and gender divides are real and persistent. Taking class seriously means anchoring the oppression of women within the material conditions in which they live and work while recognizing the role of sexism in shaping both women’s work life and their home life.

The feminist movement — both its “social-welfare” incarnation and its radical contemporary — has made significant gains. The challenge now is twofold: to defend these hard-won victories and make it possible for

all women to actually enjoy them, and to push forward with new, concrete demands that address the complex relationship between sexism and profit-making.

There is no simple answer to how to accomplish these twin goals. In the past, women have made the biggest gains by fighting for both women's rights and workers' rights simultaneously — linking the fight against sexism to the fight against capital.

As Eileen Boris and Anelise Orleck argue, during the 1970s and '80s, “trade union feminists helped launch a revitalized women's movement that sparked new demands for women's rights at home, on the job, and within unions.” Airline stewardesses, garment workers, clericals, and domestic workers challenged the male-dominated trade union movement (a woman didn't sit on the AFL-CIO executive board until 1980) and in the process forged a new, more expansive feminism.

Trade union women created a new field of possibility by demanding not only higher wages and equal opportunity but also child care, flexible work schedules, pregnancy leave, and other gains usually overlooked or undervalued by their union brothers.

This is the direction that both socialists and feminists should be orienting themselves — toward struggles and demands that challenge both the drives of capital and the ingrained norms of sexism that are so deeply rooted under capitalism.

Struggles and demands that achieve this are concrete and are currently being fought for. For example, the struggle for single-payer healthcare — which would provide healthcare as a right to every person from cradle to grave regardless of their ability to pay — is a demand that undermines both sexism and the power of capital to control and repress worker agency. There are many other concrete short-term demands that blend the goals of feminism and socialism as well, including free higher education, free child care, and a universal basic income combined with a robust social safety net.

These reforms would lay the groundwork for more radical goals that would go far in rooting out sexism, exploitation, and the commodification of social life. For example, projects to increase collective, democratic control over institutions central to our home, school, and work lives — schools, banks, workplaces, city governments, and state and local agencies — would give all women and men more power, autonomy, and the possibility for a better life.

This anticapitalist strategy is one that contains the possibility for the radical change that women need.

Ultimately the goals of a radical feminism and socialism are the same — justice and equality for all people, not simply equal opportunity for women or equal participation by women in an unjust system.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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