

Socialist Woman

A JOURNAL OF THE INTERNATIONAL MARXIST GROUP

October 1978 Vol. 6 No. 4



WOMEN AND
THE LABOUR
MOVEMENT

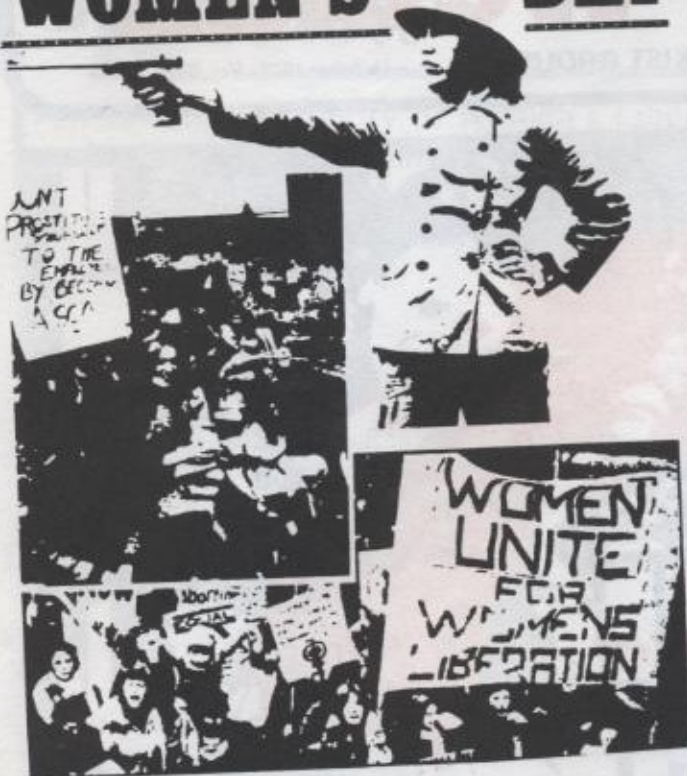
SOCIALISM,
POLITICS AND
PERSONAL LIFE
DEBATE CONTD.

INTERNATIONAL
REPORTS

ELECTIONS: WHAT
WE SHOULD DO

WOMEN AND THE
REVOLUTIONARY
PARTY

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY



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Published by Relgocrest Ltd.,
328/9 Upper Street
London N1 2XQ

Printed by Spider Web Offset,
9 Rosemont Rd.,
London NW3

Design and Camerawork by F.I.Litho,
328/9 Upper St., N1.

EDITORIAL

The debate is heating up! Do the demands of the women's movement have any value? What demands should we adopt on violence against women? How should feminists relate to the growing anti-racist struggles and work in the trade unions? What role do we see the Women's Movement having in the fight for liberation? Can Marxism and Leninism offer anything to feminists? What is the relationship of the women's movement to "traditional politics"—from elections to political parties.

1979 will see major discussion of these important areas of strategy and perspectives for the Women's Liberation Movement first at the Socialist Feminist Conference and then at the National Women's Liberation Conference. In this, and the forthcoming issues of SOCIALIST WOMAN we hope to carry reports and discussion which can contribute to these debates.

AN APOLOGY

So what happened to the Summer issue? A good question, and we'll make no excuses. We simply ran into financial problems and delay with copy. It's sorted itself out now, but financial donations would not go amiss. To make amends we are planning a bumper Christmas issue. We've already been promised a major article by Alex Holt who edited a recent book of Kollantai writings. She explains "I am writing about why I decided to research on Kollantai, the problems involved in this research, both those that are common to all women's studies and those peculiar to Soviet studies and why I think her ideas are important. I have particularly focused on the relation of women to the party, Kollantai's ideas on this and her difficulty in functioning efficiently in politics".

WE WELCOME YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS! You may have been enthused, disappointed or angry about articles in this issue. Why not write and tell us? Or start a new debate in the pages of Socialist Woman.

Editorial Address: Socialist Woman, P.O. Box 50, London N1.

FEMINISTS IN ACTION

United Black Women's Action Group

The United Black Women's Action Groups (UBWAG) was formed by women who met through activity in their North London tenants association.

They wanted to do something to help their children. One of their first activities was to make some short video films showing how important it is for parents to support their children in clashes with the authorities—whether they were at the school, the police, or the courts. They have held meetings on various subjects, shown films, and initiated a major campaign against the 'SUS'

INTERVIEW WITH KATYA FRISCHAUER AND MARTHA O SAMOR from the United Black Women's Action Group (UBWAG)

Q—Have you had much contact with the women's liberation movement eg. Women against Racism and Fascism groups?

K—I haven't. The group hasn't.

Q—You've never been involved in any consciousness raising group or other women's group?

K—No. But I've read about it and . . . I once used to go to drumming lessons at the Women's Arts Alliance and that was the first time I met any feminist women.

M—The thing is a lot of black women have already changed—in a way/some of the things a women's group are talking about. . . Especially black women in Britain because of the historical background where in the West Indies under slavery you are not used to that type of family structure—you know you are the property of somebody else, not your husband—so that sort of set up, husband and wife is a new



Martha Osamor

thing which came after slavery was abolished. But a lot of it's still left over where a lot of black women still have to bring up the family and they're the breadwinner too.

Q—What about the men?

M—Well you know it takes years before the damage that has been done is sorted out. The men still feel that attitude, that you're owned by your master, until lately, so you're not sort of responsible for your family and your woman and your children. But the women can have babies for you and then bring them up—and you come in and do your bit when you want to. But the women don't any more see that as a problem because they've managed to cope, bring up their kids—even though the system here never stops reminding them that they shouldn't be on their own—you know, 'where's father?' reminding their kids that they need a mother and a father.

Q—So are you saying that they're less dependent on men because they've had to be?

M—Yes. Even including in African society where a man can marry

more than one wife—so the women have to fend for themselves and look after themselves and their children. So that question of 'man and woman' is no big thing. But if you're living in a place like England then you're reminded of it, but you don't have to toe the line. I don't think a lot of black women are worried about it, whether the man is living with them or not.

Q—What about the way a man actually treats his woman when he is around?

M—Well it depends on the type of relationship doesn't it? If you expect it to be a certain pattern and it's not fitting into that pattern then you complain about it don't you?

Q—But even though the women might be more independent, the men are just as sexist?

M—Oh yes, chauvinist|yes.

Q—They still treat women as inferior even though they've proved they're not?

M—Yeah. All that is there, that is the sort of area where all the women's groups, the women's liberation movement will have to lead, when it comes to that sort of chauvinism in men—not the protection of the family set up or your right to decide what you're going to do with your life, say after your marriage breaks up. Because a high percentage of black women are not married, they're not living with a man—and they manage.

Q—If we're talking about the women's movement, so far it's been mainly white, middle class, young, single women who realise they're oppressed by men, and it's involved a process of consciousness raising.

K—What's that?

M—Who's consciousness?

Q—Ours, It's when very small groups meet and start talking about their personal problems and what happens is that women who've been isolated who go around thinking that it's all their fault that their lives are shitty—they meet other women and discover that everyone has the same problems and that those problems are caused by the structures of society so they begin to see that they don't have to be dependent on men, that they can develop as human beings—and some of them begin to think that it's worth struggling to change society. Would you think that black women would be in a similar situation to that?

M—Yes, but that wouldn't be their priority because they've got growing kids.

K—And they are already going out, having both family responsibilities and a job without a man—so that problem that they won't have confidence to go out and do things, I don't think they have that.

Q—And there's a general difference between middle class people and

working class people, who can't afford the luxury of analysing personal relationships and all that in great depth. If you've got kids in trouble then that's obviously a priority. But there are other problems faced by working class women other than their kids—housing for example.

M—But we aren't talking about the whole working class, but about blacks within the working class—who have taken shitty jobs, shitty type of housing, survived in it, and have brought their kids up in it, hoping that the kids will get better jobs, will get out of the ghetto. Maybe at one time they would have gone home, ~~re~~ home. But to any black woman who has brought up her kids on her own, in a society which sees family structure as the most important thing—you really want to get up and do something when things get heavy on them, when their future is being destroyed.

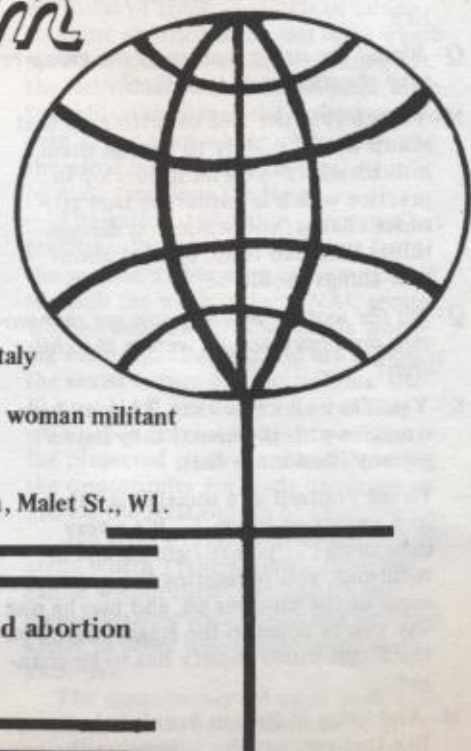
Q—They put their hopes in their kids rather than in their own lives?

M—Yes. But it's not that they've given up. But the thing is, when the kids are littler, they cannot choose. And you have dreams for them and when you sit back and watch that dream smashed, you've got to do something about it. That doesn't mean that the UBWAG only does things round kids. But that is an area we spend a



Katya Frischauer

International Women's Forum



Friday October 27 Speakers from Ireland, Italy and Puerto Rica

Friday December 4 Speakers include Black woman militant from USA

7.30pm at the University of London Union, Malet St., W1.

A woman's right to contraception and abortion

No forced sterilisation



lot of time on—because that is the area the system is, like, destroy it when it is young and you won't have any problems with them in the future, because they're already destroyed.

Q—Has the group discussed the causes of these problems?

M—The thing is, you discuss things, but there is so much to be done that you don't have as much time as you would like.

Q—Would the other women in the group regard themselves as socialists?

M—I think that the idea of setting up that group wasn't mainly to change them into socialists—you let it develop in practice which is harder, so that attitudes change, and while you discuss things they can think clearer, about how things should be.

Q—Do the women in the group see that women are oppressed, as well as the children?

K—Yes. They all know that. They all have struggles with the men. . . they haven't got any illusions in that.

To see yourself as a socialist is a long step away you know . . . it's a very slow thing . . . you're fighting the institutions, you're fighting the police—some of the illusions go, and maybe one day you're come to the stage where you think this whole society has to be changed.

M—And living in Britain doesn't help groups like that very much . . . because the socialist groups are all split in different

ways, so if you belong to a particular socialist group it's likely you'll want to see groups like ours as part of that socialist group you're a part of and someone else is in another group and you'll have all this sectarian fighting and then that will affect the health of the whole group.

Q—How have the men involved with the women reacted to them being in the group? Do they see it as a threat?

M—Of course it's a threat. As soon as a woman starts leaving home, not finishing cooking and dashing off to get to a meeting or a picket line you're breaking the rules. Maybe some of them will make it a point of duty not to be there for the babysitting so you have to either take your kid with you or organise some other babysitting rota. All that type of problem is there but the women seem to be coping with it.

Q—Are there any conflicts within the group, for example some people being more active than others?

M—That's not a conflict. It just means that some people are more busy or are at a stage of development where they still see themselves as finishing the housework first before anything comes in, or checking the television programmes to see if tonight's a good night to leave home. But those that are active now have been through that stage.

Q—What is your relationship to other black groups, particularly groups which involve men?

M—So far we haven't involved ourselves very much with other black groups, ex-

cept if we're having a meeting on a specific subject. But the only thing that comes out is the meeting point where that type of chauvinism and sexism comes out, and you have to fight it as you go along.

Q—Do a lot of men feel hostile to the idea of women meeting separately?

M—Yes, but I must say they are more the nationalists, who see the black thing as one big thing which you mustn't split. You have a handful of black men whose political level is quite high and they are really deeply involved in black struggle, so you talk politics with them—and these are the ones who get up and say we don't have time to split men here, women there. But I don't see it as a contradiction because these are the ones you meet at conferences where you don't meet a lot of working class people.

Q—What is the specific function of meeting as a women's group?

M—It depends on what you're gearing it at. Our group meets around the issue of kids and it's the woman—they're the ones who are in court, they're the ones who go to the police station, they're the ones who bail the kids, they're the ones who know what's happening.

Q—Would you say it is easier for a black woman to get involved in a women's group first?

M—All we need is to get them together, and once we've got them together you don't need to raise their consciousness or awareness about what is happening because it's already there.

N.A.C. Trade Union Conference

This year the TUC Women's conference passed the following resolution:

"In line with TUC and TUC women's conference policy for a woman's right to choose, and against restrictive legislation on abortion, this conference calls upon the women's advisory committee to press the general council to support campaigns:—

- a—For amending legislation with a view to improving the existing facilities available through the NHS and
- b—For publicity and education to extend contraceptive knowledge; for early pregnancy diagnosis; skilled counselling; and outpatient abortion clinic free on the NHS; and against any further restrictive legislation whether by Government or Private Member's Bills.
- c—Conference calls upon the General Council to organise a national demonstration against any restrictive legislation before a final vote on it is taken in parliament, so that MP's are aware of the weight of feeling in the Labour Movement against such legislation."

In response to the passing of this motion a leading Trade Unionist said 'Women must be made if they think male trade unionists are going to march en mass on the streets to defend abortion rights.' Unfortunately she is right. As feminists we have a choice, we can accept the backwardness of the trade union movement and make do with a deputation of a handful of trade unionists with a letter to 10, Downing St. or we can take the issue of abortion to the base of the trade unions ourselves and fight for this resolution to be implemented.

NAC has decided to do the latter. It is holding a Trade Union Conference on Abortion. The success of this conference will depend on how far we as feminists are prepared to fight within our own unions and the unions in our Towns and Cities for a debate on abortion as a class issue directly affecting the right of women to control their bodies and consequently their lives.

Since the passing of the 1967 abortion

act the ruling class/using it's ideological front the Catholic Church, has set the scene for a legal offensive against women. The capitalist class not only needs to control reproduction as a mechanism to adjust population but more importantly to maintain ideological control over women in the family. At present women are taking the brunt of the crisis through unemployment forcing them back into the home, and social spending cuts resulting in the crisis being unloaded onto women in the family. Attacks to further restrict abortion laws have a central position in this offensive.

The ruling class utilizes any opportunity to organise backward layers of the working class to it's own interest. The issue of abortion gives the capitalist class the opportunity to mount a campaign to divide the working class. They use emotive talk of 'murder' and 'unsocialist behaviour' to confuse workers and to exploit their sexist attitudes. Most working class men see abortion at best as; 'nothing to do with them', at worst as 'castration of the male'. Women isolated in the home lacking collective strength have often been prey to calls to bolster the family and 'the sanctity of life.' And even if sections of the labour movement have resisted the ideological attack from SPUC, as yet they have not put their collective weight behind the fight for FREE ABORTION ON DEMAND.

The strength of SPUC will continue to grow as the economic situation worsens. The success of the ruling class attempts to make women bear the brunt of the crisis depends on their ability to undermine the rising consciousness the labour movement is developing on the nature of women's oppression. The weakest link in the struggle for women's rights and the issue most likely to divide the working class is woman's control of her reproductive capacities. The struggle over who *legally* controls a woman's fertility centers around the abortion law. It is this law that asserts legally and ideologically that women are subject to their biology and therefore second class people in the workforce.

The trade union movement has not

yet reached an understanding of fertility control in the fight for women's emancipation let alone liberation. Under the impact of the growing WLM and the NAC major white collar unions and the 1975 Trade Union Conference voted for Free Abortion on Request. This is a major step forward but the ideological battle is far from won. Major unions and many union branches are actively anti-abortion. This is probably the manifestation of an anti-woman consciousness which can be consolidated around a direct offensive against the abortion law.

Even where union branches endorse the demand for free abortion the majority of the major unions voted at last years Labour Party conference to retain the 'free' vote for MP's on this issue. This vote shows the extreme backwardness of trade unionists in understanding abortion as a class issue which must be voted on along class lines not the individual conscience of male MP's. In reality this means the unions see women as less than whole individuals and therefore believe men the best people to make decisions for them.

The national abortion campaign has traditionally gained it's support from the women's liberation movement and through the work of local NAC groups. Women are now fighting inside working class organisations and are exposing the sexist nature of class politics. Until now NAC has not worked closely with union activists. It is hoped that the projected conference will provide the opportunity for trade unionists to discuss the relationship of abortion to the class struggle and to provide an arena where Trade-Unionists can organise within their own unions and make alliances with sisters and brothers active in other organisations in their localities.

The organisation set up at such a conference will be essential to both counter the right wing mobilisations and to extend the law nationally and

the ties locally. In the long term it will be a base from which to further extend discussion and understanding in unions that have few women to raise the issue of abortion at branch meetings. If the TUC Woman's conference resolution is to be passed at the TUC and implemented by the Trade Union movement as a whole; if the Labour Party Conference is to reject the 'free' vote; if the ruling class are to be halted in their attempt to further restrict abortion and divide the working class; the trade union movement has to follow the example of the Women's Liberation Movement and show united opposition and a determination to decriminalise abortion and extend facilities.

To build this conference on abortion NAC has to gain sponsorship from your union, your trades council and the union branches in your area which have no connection with NAC. To do this NAC needs activists to speak at union meetings other than their own, to talk to activists in their area, to distribute leaflets and delegation material to delegates at National conferences and to rank and file members in their area. Delegates to both the conference and the conference planning meetings are from any level of the union; all are welcome.

Trade Union Conference on Abortion will you be represented?

November 25
Caxton Hall

Further information and delegate forms from:

Conference Organising Committee
374 Grays Inn Road
London WC1

Cheques payable to 'Trade Union Conference Fund'.



Delegates to Women's TUC vote unanimously for abortion rights — will the labour movement as a whole support them?

TAKING STOCK

The Women's movement and Working Class Women

For hundreds of years militant women have fought the oppressive and exploitative conditions of capitalist society. Popular images bring to mind wealthy, Edwardian ladies chained to railings in their quest for the vote; and young, largely middle class, women marching for sexual freedom and independence. Too often ignored have been the tenacious struggles of working class women against the conditions of their oppression.

Feminist historians have done much in the last decade to set the record straight. They have catalogued accounts of working class women struggling for better pay and conditions which stretch far back into the 1800s. These studies show the significant contribution of working class women to the suffrage movement. And feminists have reprinted historical accounts by working class women of their activities.

This long record was rapidly added to be in the late 60s. Then a spate of equal pay strikes culminated in the 1969 equal pay demonstration organised by the National Joint Action Committee for Women's Equal Rights. More recently working class women have fought for nursery facilities; lower prices and rents; against low pay and poor work con-

ditions, most notably at Grunwick, and Trico; and against the closures of the Hounslow and Elizabeth Garrett Anderson hospitals.

NEW SCOPE AND IMPACT

And so the movement of women for liberation from oppression and exploitation has a new scope and impact. The involvement of working class women lays the foundations for extending this fight for liberation to the organised working class as a whole, whose political and economic power must be won to ensure its success.

Much of the left has held up this vital role of the organised working class only to dismiss the women's liberation movement, because its composition is largely limited to white collar and relatively privileged sections of women. For this part of the left, the task is either to transform the WLM into a 'proletarian' movement or to build an alternative.

But this approach flows from fundamentally incorrect conceptions of revolutionary politics. The capitalist system is not simply a set of economic relations, as this section of the left suggests.

It is a complex system of social and political relations which maintains and perpetuates economic exploitation. No challenge to capitalism will be successful unless the ways in which the ruling class legitimates and continues its domination are tackled, particularly where they are at their most cohesive and centralised in the institutions of the state.

A perspective reduced to economic struggles at the workplace ignores the impact of movements which challenge the many facets of capitalist domination. And any strategy based on this is hopelessly inadequate in the fight for a socialist society.

The present women's liberation movement has proved its ability to fight against the social and ideological conditions which perpetuate capitalist productive relations. It's from this *objective* impact on the class struggle that revolutionaries must adopt a positive attitude to the WLM... not from its sociological composition.

HIGHER CONSCIOUSNESS

Indeed, in many ways, the women's liberation movement has developed a *higher* level of consciousness of the ways in which bourgeois ideology plays its role

in the subjugation of women than is to be found in the labour movement, or even among many working class women themselves.

Who, but the women strikers at Grunwick fought harder for the right of women to organise against their conditions of super-exploitation? But their militancy did not extend to a consciousness of the broader questions of women's liberation. For example, when asked "What do you think about women's rights?" Jayaben Desai replied, "I think my feelings are a bit different from yours. Being a mother, it is my duty to stay with my children as long as I can. The father doesn't understand children like a mother. The father's responsibility is to build up his career. He has no time to look after children."

Similar remarks from militant women trades unionists are not uncommon. They reflect a notion that the struggle for women's rights involves creating the conditions for women to combine a commitment to the family with participation in social production rather than a fundamental challenge to women's family position.

Last summer the AUEW produced a special journal on women. In one of the contributions a militant woman trade unionist explained that the double workday was a question of organisation: 'being in the factory and being a shop steward . . . added a new dimension to my life as a housewife and working woman . . . it gives one a different insight into the problems of family life - such as discussing with other workers how they cope with bringing up a family and working for eight hours a day in the plant.'

These positions don't come out of the air! They reflect social democratic and reformist ideas about women's rights. According to reformist ideologies the obstacle to women's liberation is male prejudice not the structures of society. Education and changing ideas so women can participate more fully in existing social, political and economic life are seen as the solution.

THE LINK DISAPPEARS

Furthermore the struggles of women are meticulously catalogued in their own pigeonholes: the economic is separate from the political; the personal from the social. The link disappears between the exploitation of women as workers and their oppression within the family. Indeed for many reformists the family is an unchanging social structure, quite outside class relations. Some even argue the family will continue as a basic unit in a socialist society. The reality of the family as an institution perpetuating class domination and sexual oppression is swept aside and the 'private world' of the family becomes one of the few places one is supposed to find personal happiness to compensate for the harsh realities of work and public life. The power of these idealistic views are so strong that no conflict emerges between the family as we know it and socialism or between the family and women's libera-

tion.

The women's liberation movement is exploding these myths. Feminists are analysing and challenging what society deems is 'natural' for women—dependence on men; self sacrifice to children and the welfare of others; passivity in all relations: sexual, social and political; and the norms of heterosexuality and monogamy. Since the birth of class society these notions have locked women within the family, perpetuating their oppression, and in turn bolstering class domination. The women's movement re-discovered the understanding that women's liberation requires a struggle against all the institutions which perpetuate class domination and oppress women—including the family. Issues arising at the workplace, as well as those considered the 'individual and private'—like abortion, childcare and the right to self-defined sexuality are all part of this approach because oppression in the family and exploitation at work reinforce each other. Any political approach, which is restricted to the concerns of working class women in the workplace and community fails to recognise the crucial role that today's women's liberation movement plays in this fight against oppression.

EXTENDING A STRUGGLE FOR LIBERATION.

A much debated question in the women's liberation movement is how to develop a consciousness throughout society as a whole about what this thoroughgoing struggle for liberation entails. The question is a familiar one to active feminists: can this 'feminist' struggle for liberation be extended to working class women who are today organising but outside the WLM itself.

Many argue the movement's efforts should be to draw working class women into the day to day activity of the WLM. Clearly the participation of working class women in the WLM is very welcome in local groups, national WLM events, and debates in the movement's journals. However to concentrate on this can't be the main, let alone the only, approach to working class women. Whatever the problems involved in the male dominated structures of the British labour movement, activists in the women's movement cannot afford to turn their backs on a consistent approach to the organisations of the working class—particularly the trades unions.

After all, it is through these organisations that the struggles and debates of the working class are structured. And without a serious orientation to these working class organisations the WLM will fail to win behind its demands the political and economic weight vital for their successes. Furthermore, women from different social layers in society experience their oppression differently. They consequently develop many different ways to fight back. This general observation combined with the particular weight of the British trades unions and the Labour Party, lead many

working class women to fight against their oppression through the structure of the labour movement and not the Women's Liberation Movement.

The different forms of radicalization in the last decade bears this out. During the 1960's women in Britain began in their millions to take to the streets demanding liberation and equal rights. They were responding to the changing economic and social conditions confronted by women in late capitalism: the increased demand for female labour, accompanied by continuing low pay and low grades; and increase in the educational opportunities; the development of medical skills in areas of birth control; the mechanisation of domestic tasks and pre-packaged food without any real moves towards collectivised domestic labour; and improvement in social services and increased intervention of the welfare state in areas of family concern.

All women shared the experience of these developments but they had a different impact on women from different social layers. For young, educated women the family was seen to block the increased opportunities and independence offered by higher education. For example, assumptions about women's future motherly role meant many educated women found potential jobs taken by fellow male students.

So, the women's liberation movement which emerged explicitly challenged family relationships and all they implied for women's sexual, cultural and economic existence. The movement also vigorously challenged authority relations throughout society—an approach shared by the student and youth radicalisation with which it was associated. Although many of the women involved in the WLM took jobs in the white collar sector—particularly in teaching, social work and the media—their feminist activities were organised largely through the WLM and not through the labour movement.

The roots of radicalisation for the majority of working class women were experienced differently. The activities of these women were associated with the wave of working class struggles against government economic and anti-trade union policies. They took up the fight for independence and equality offered by the increased demand for female labour, promises of equal pay and developments in the welfare state. And as more working women joined the struggle these issues broadened to include unionisation, nurseries, equal rights in social security and so on.

This development had a certain autonomy from the radical challenge to authority posed by the student and youth movements. The role of the family in the particular oppressive conditions of women was not such a conscious element of this radicalization. And these women did not turn to the WLM to organise their activities and discussions. Indeed traditional ideas about women's 'natural' role in the family often remained intact leaving little point of contact with the WLM.

The problem faced by the WLM in extending the 'feminist' understanding—including the need to tackle the division of labour in the family—are pressing ones.

But surely, the answers can be more readily found if we take the ideas of the WLM to where working class women are themselves organising, and therefore most open to discussion, the trades unions, community groups, labour parties, strike committees.

So where so we start?

We have some experiences of solidarity to draw on: from the 1971 night-cleaners strike to today's support for the EGA and the FDC in Liverpool. Feminists are actively involved in the unions and the Labour Party in organising schools, campaigns and committees in the NUT, NATFE, NALGO, ASTMS and LARC, to name but a few. It's vital

we seriously evaluate campaigns around abortion rights and the demands of the Working Women's Charter.

For these discussions several questions are immediately posed: what contribution can the women's movement make to highlight the specific needs of militants because they are women? What problems face women militants because of isolation, thanks to the nature of male trades unionists? Does the trades union inexperience of women strengthen trade union bureaucrats who try to dampen and defuse their militancy? Would women's causes in unions aid women to confront these barriers? How best can we force trades union and labour leaders to do more than pass paper resolutions on equality and independence? How can we take discussion on the wider issues of women's liberation into struggles launched by working women and win them to the ideas of our movement?

These problems need serious thought and discussion and they won't be solved if we try to bypass the organised structures of the trades unions or counterpose our own organisations of women to these structures. In fact we should make what we can of forums: union journals, women's rights and advisory committees, working parties on women's issues, special schools, women's conferences, trades council sub-committees and so on. Action groups set up to campaign on specific issues within a union or place of work, with broad based and official backing can only help to achieve our goals, for example a campaign for creche facilities, 'nurse for a woman's choice'.

This is what can help force the unions to implement their policy on women. And women's groups and causes to campaign for these measures can also provide a forum for discussion on what women's liberation entails.



Women's rights, a first step in the fight for women's liberation.

Women and Elections

Jude Arkwright and Sarah Roelofs.

An election is one of the few times when the majority of people seem to be able to actively involve themselves in 'political decision making'. Political activity and discussion is legitimised for all too brief a period, and many more people take an interest in political ideas.

Today attention is focused on elections as a political barometer to measure attitudes in the face of vicious attempts by the Labour Government to make the working class pay for the economic crisis. By-elections—like those in High Wycombe, Brixton and Garscadden—and the recent local council elections have had top press coverage. Even low turnouts (44½ per cent in Brixton) expressed a political attitude; a demoralisation with all the major parties. Labour supporters voted with their feet against Labour's sell-out.

Mass abstention, or, at best, critical support for Labour offers a big opportunity for the left to enter the political arena created by the elections. The left is able to argue for a socialist alternative to a far wider audience than is usually possible.

The extreme right certainly understands this. In the local elections the NF fielded 602 candidates. It has used elections to terrorise the black communities, blame black people for poor housing, lack of jobs and so on. The NF isn't alone. SPUC, for instance, has been just as quick to use the opportunity to gain a platform for the anti-abortion campaign. It put abortion into the limelight in the Garscadden by-election, for instance.

To ignore electoral activity and reject it as parliamentarian would be a grave error. Instead, the left should be trying to pose an alternative to 'parliamentarian' politics by campaigning for mass action. Passive voting won't defend living standards, confront racism or fight for women's rights in practice as well as in law!

Furthermore, elections can be a focus to promote and highlight local struggles. In Liverpool, for example, the campaign of women workers fighting the closure of the Fashion Design Centre won wide publicity and support during the election campaign. Many of the women from the factory attended their first political and elections meetings to win support for their campaign.

How can the issues of women's liberation be raised within the political forum created at election times? How do women relate to the elections? Do they regard elections as irrelevant and should we as feminists do the same? What should our attitude be to the different election campaigns?

Voting trends analysed by sex suggest that the female vote is substantially more conservative than the male vote. "In the 1974 election figures showed that either sex left to themselves would have produced a clear majority for one party or another" claimed *The Guardian* in an article on 5 May 1978. And women, it continued, would have voted for the Conservatives.

On most polls women are also more likely than men to be 'Undecided'. But this view is coupled with the strong impression among political organisers that women are increasingly less likely to vote as their husbands direct!

Other studies of recent British elections have brought to light another aspect of the rightward trend in women's voting patterns. Statistically, there are more women in the older age groups in the electorate, and more men in the younger. Part of the apparent bias of women as a sex could be explained by the greater conservatism of older voters, and not by the assumption that women are naturally more conservative.

Women do not vote or take political action in a vacuum. And this is the failing of most sociological voting studies—women are abstracted from their position in society. It is the isolated and atomised situation of women in the home that can cause them to lean towards conservatism. Many women never experience the collective strength that is apparent in the factory situation, and they are outside the main stream of political activity. Anyone isolated from collective discussion and support is liable to want to hold on to the identity they have, and to reject that which appears to challenge it. And what do women have but homes, children, housekeeping, passivity, femininity, and sex appeal? Anything else we have to fight for!

On the other hand, women are playing a vital role in the fightback against the ideological and material attacks on the working class. They have often been more ready to take action and fight it

out than men. Women's self organisation has played an exemplary role in strikes, pickets and demonstrations.

In Harlan County in the United States, during the recent coal miners' strikes, miners' wives organised themselves to help with picket duty, gave out leaflets, and fought the armed thugs the mine owners sent in.

One result of women's inability to become involved in labour movement structures is that they are more likely to escape the bureaucratic grip of social democracy. The trades union leadership, tied to Labour's anti-working class policies, has persistently sold their membership right down the river.

In these situations women fighting for equal pay, against factory closures, and for the democratic right to form unions are less prepared to accept the leadership's proposals for 'compromises'. The catch 22 is that women's interests are ignored by union leaderships in the first place.

The so-called apathy expressed by women in election times is thus not necessarily a reflection of their general response to important political questions—especially those directly hitting them. Women are offered no real solutions to their problems by most parties, and it is no wonder that many women remain deferential.

But with the present extent of the crisis, and the class polarisation accompanying it, we as feminists have an important task in taking the issues concerning us into the elections debates and activities. We can't allow SPUC or any other anti-women organisations to take the carpet from under our feet.

But we do also have to discuss how we as feminists should organise in elections. Should we support particular parties or would this exclude some of the women we are hoping to involve? Should we in that case perhaps stand out our own candidates?

In France the pro-abortion group Choisir stood 100 candidates in the first round of the elections in March this year on a simply pro-abortion platform. Problems emerged from this. The first was that Choisir took no position on the important political issue facing the French working class and oppressed sections of society; the removal of Giscard and the right-wing government. They addressed their demands to the

right and the left, making no distinction between them. Certainly the record of the Socialist and Communist parties is not much better than Giscard, but the electoral victory of the PS and PCF would have fundamentally changed the French political situation, giving women's movement a much more favourable possibility of raising its demands.

The second problem devolving from this is that as feminists and socialists we are attempting to raise the issues of women's oppression in relation to the overall struggle for socialism. During elections where we can begin to pose a socialist alternative platform, we want out demands as women to be taken up as a central part of the wider programme for socialism, not isolated from it, as many of the traditional parties would like to see them.

If we do not stand candidates should we then call for a vote for or even vigorously campaign for particular candidates as organised groups from the WLM or simply as individuals? If we are attempting to build a mass movement of women around demands relating to their specific oppression it would cut across that for the WLM or any organised sections of it, NAC, socialist feminist groups, local women's groups and so on, to align themselves to any particular party, as this could split the movement.

This need not mean however, that individual women inside the WLM or in particular groups should not be involved in a campaign for a particular candidate as individuals and it would be important for them to have the strength of the autonomous movement behind them. In Leeds, Socialist women set up a specific action group to support Socialist Unity. They continued their involvement in SWAG—a socialist feminist women's group including a majority of

non-aligned women as well as IMG, Big Falme, Socialist Workers Party, Communist Party and Labour Party—realising that it would be divisive to try to commit SWAG as a whole to support Socialist Unity. The group met separately from Socialist Unity to which it sent delegates. They saw their tasks as ensuring that the Socialist Unity election programme was genuinely feminist and later on in fighting for women candidates, leaflets on women's liberation, meetings around the specific issues etc. In Brixton Socialist Unity a women's caucus was set up with these tasks in mind and in order to ensure that women played a full role in the campaign itself—large numbers of socialist feminist militants participated in the campaign and the caucus was an important way of preserving autonomy within the campaign.

This formula, however, leaves many questions unanswered. This is what we can do as individual socialist feminists but how should the women's movement participate as an organised force in the elections?

Is there a danger that the women's movement could fall into the trap of the French sisters and find itself isolated from the key political debates facing the working class as a whole by refusing to align itself to one party or the other?

As socialist feminists we are fighting inside the women's movement for it to make links in struggle with sections of the labour movement—in other words for the development of class positions within the women's movement. For some of us this would mean that we were in favour of a return of a Labour Government. For despite the attacks by the present Labour Government on women and on the whole labour movement through wage restraint, unemployment etc, we have to recognise that a

victory for the Tories would mean the green light for further more blatant attacks by the ruling class, i.e. that a Tory victory would represent a defeat for all those fighting the ruling class offensive. Only by arguing for a return of Labour can we place ourselves within the right camp to argue and fight for real socialist policies, as opposed to Labour's sell-outs. But does this mean that we would argue for women's groups and other organisations of the women's movement to adopt a formal position in favour of Labour?

At this stage such a position would in fact be no better than that of the radical feminists who are at present arguing that the women's movement should extend its demands to include a blueprint/strategy for the women's movement. Many socialist feminists have argued correctly against this on the grounds that it would be sectarian to do this because at this stage we have to win broader masses of women around specific demands that they can relate to and not ask them to agree to either a radical feminist or a socialist feminist strategy in order to do this. Asking the women's movement as an organisation to commit itself to Labour does imply a certain strategy—particularly in view of the fact that women are alienated and excluded from the working class organisations and do not have the same attitudes to politics as many working class men.

But whatever the answers to these questions socialist feminists should be arguing for a certain approach to work in elections—an approach which embodies united front tactics but enables the women's movement to raise its demands.

NAC and Elections

NAC has been forced to get involved



Picture from Hackney Flashers Collective

in elections because SPUC launched themselves headlong into an unexpected spate of electoral activity, distributing thousands of leaflets with "Not the NAC, not the State, Foetuses must decide their fate!", holding extremely well attended public meetings and so on.

In many election campaigns, abortion has automatically become a key issue—for example, in the West of Scotland (e.g. Garscadden, Hamilton) with the high Labour Catholic vote, or in abortion black spots such as Birmingham. In other areas, the WLM and NAC will have to raise the issue themselves.

NAC activists explain how the abortion campaign will respond to election campaigns: "Our aim is to totally expose all the candidates positions on the issue, using all the information we can lay our hands on, such as voting records. Depending on the local situation, NAC will have the chance to explain different aspects of its aims. Racism in the Brixton by-election meant it was necessary to highlight our total opposition to forced abortion and sterilisation. In all NAC's activities there is a common emphasis on the right of women to choose.

NAC is not in favour of calling for a vote for, or aligning itself with, any

particular candidate, organisation, or party. As a single issue campaign it can not take a position on all the other issues in candidates manifestos. To do so would cut across the aim of building NAC as a broadly based campaign. Potential supporters could be put off if NAC took a position on any electoral candidates. However, we are very much in favour of speaking at candidates meetings, from the platform if possible! We make it though in our speeches that we are not therefore supporting that or any candidate.

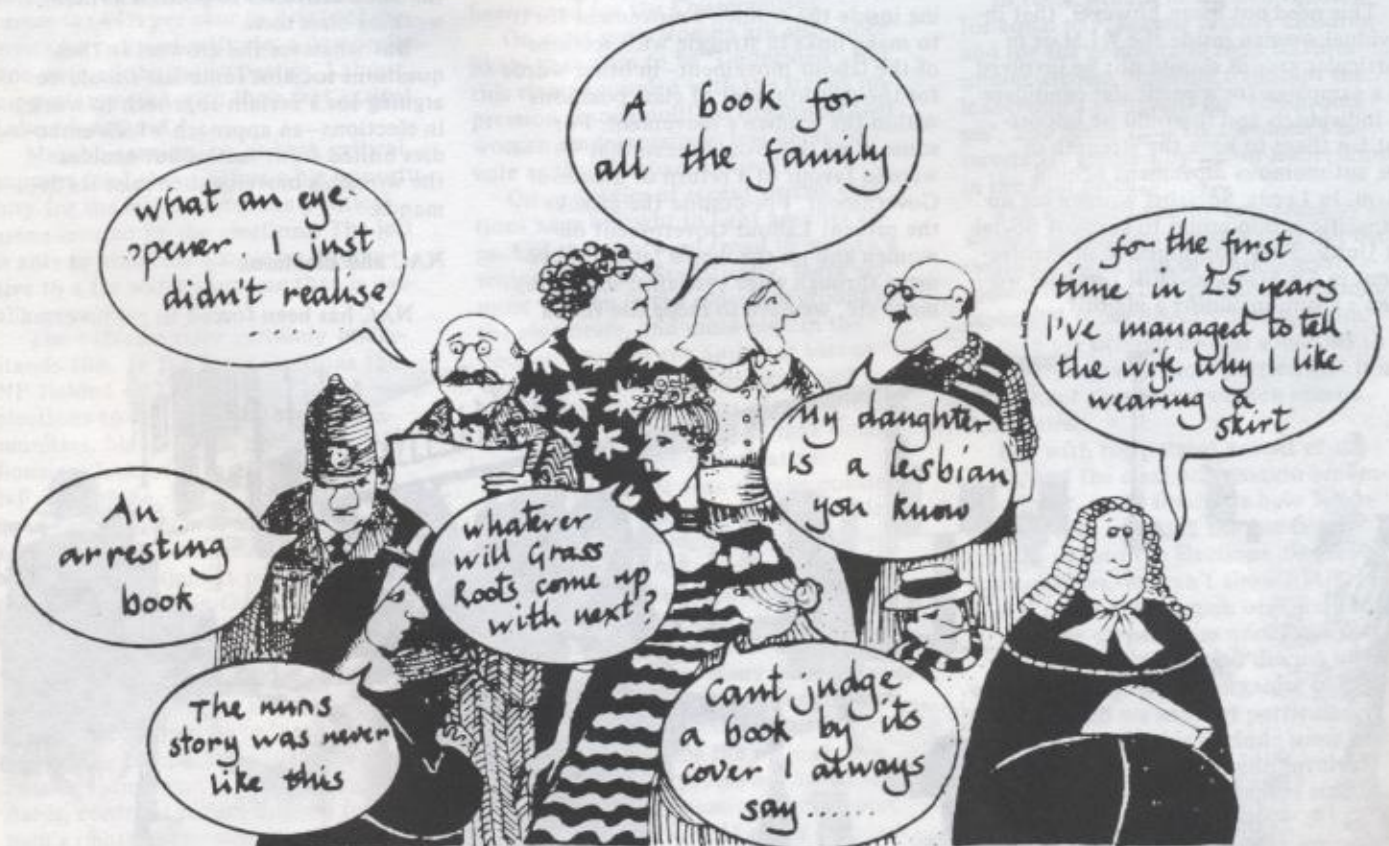
During the Garscadden by-election campaign Glasgow NAC leafletted and petitioned (for an out-patient clinic in the area) in the constituency. We held a public meeting and invited all the candidates. Questions put to the latter particularly exposed the back-peddling of the Labour candidate Donald Dewar. "No one is going to whip me into line!" Dewar replied to a question on his refusal to be bound by Labour Party policy (for free abortion on request).

Sammy Barr the Communist Party candidate ran contortionist circles around his contradictory policy of support for a woman's right to choose but against free abortion on demand.

The Scottish Labour Party candidate Shoonna Farrell, an anti-abortionist argued that she was a great supporter of women's rights, but abortion was not an issue for women's liberation. South West London NAC group in the Brixton by-election leafletted the constituency and held street meetings.

As a campaign around the fourth demand of the women's liberation movement, NAC is particularly interested in linking up with other WLM groups and campaigns in electoral work. One idea for the Brixton by-election was to find out if the local Women Against Racism and Fascism groups were going to hold a public meeting and ask for a speaker on their platform. We also try and involve labour and student movement groups in our activity."

NAC has been forced to confront the question of elections head on. Other activists in the women's movement have not yet done so. Whatever way we do this and whatever political basis it is crucial that the women's movement uses elections to further its campaigns and raise its demands. As socialist feminists we should be arguing strongly for this in the lead up to the general election.



A Guide to your rights

THE LAW AND SEXUALITY

How to cope with the law if you're not 100% conventionally heterosexual. Published by Grass Roots Books and Manchester Law Centre; available from: Grass Roots Books, 1 Norton Street, Piccadilly, Manchester 1 and alternative bookshops. £3.95 cloth bound and £1.00 paperback.

Out of the Rut

Report of the Working Women's Charter Conference.

60 women gathered in Manchester in June to discuss the future of the Working Women's Charter Campaign. The numbers indicated the difficulties facing the Campaign—previous conferences drew 5 times the number. There was a good span of experience and representation from unions like NUT; NATFHE, ASTMA, COHSE, NUPE, CPSA and NALGO. Many of these women had little previous contact with women's liberation movement campaigns and saw the conference as an opportunity to discuss ways of taking up women's oppression in their unions. After a valuable exchange of experiences and an honest assessment of the Charter Campaign most went away confident about the future.

NEGATIVE

It was evident from the conference attendance that women from socialist feminist groups and women's liberation groups have developed a negative cynicism about the campaign and have begun to ignore it. It was felt that this trend had to be reversed. The Campaign needed new life and support rebuilt.

A resolution was adopted which tried to tackle some of the problems. It was agreed that the Charter still raised important issues and laid the basis for a fight around these in the trade unions. Some women pointed out that this was particularly important with the retreat on these issues in the labour movement with speeches about the sanctity and security of family life.

However, it was felt that ideas about the Campaign itself needed a radical overhaul. Local and trade union Charter groups have become redundant as socialist feminist groups, women's action groups and women's campaigns in unions have mushroomed. Groups set up exclusively around the Charter demands are no substitute for these. Any attempt to make them so is

doomed to fail.

Instead the Conference agreed to win existing women's groups in the community, colleges and unions to a fight around the issues raised by the Charter as a compliment to their other activities. This allows women's liberation groups to strengthen their links with women in unions, the workplace and the community. It also provides a basis for wider issues of women's oppression to be raised during struggles on single issues, like equal pay or maternity.

NEW LEASE OF LIFE

The most important decision of the Conference was to re-launch the Charter paper as a link and backup to the diverse struggles of women around these issues. A conference has been called for the Autumn to re-launch the paper. The doors of the conference will be opened wide to allow participants of activists in the unions and women's movement to take feminist issues to a wider audience of women—particularly working class women in the community and workplace.

During the conference, the delegates of Workers Power and the ICL withdrew from the Campaign. But the majority of the Conference felt that we'd at last got ourselves out of a rut. It is hoped that, however negative about the past, socialist feminists will help us build a new future. Come to the Conference—Support a new newspaper aimed at the unions!

Mailings and information about the conference can be obtained from P.O. Box 50—London N.1. (WWCC)

Open planning meetings will be advertised in WIRES.

A Paper for the Unions

The Equal Pay and Sex discrimination Acts promised women equality and independence. Over two years have passed and women's rights are still under attack. Women in unions and women's movements are fighting back. In many unions, women's rights committees, women's groups and women's conferences are discussing how to take up a real fight for equality and independence.

These activities would be strengthened by a national newspaper aimed at the trade unions. The paper would draw together experiences and discussions from different unions and campaigns and mobilise broad support for particular struggles.

At its recent national conference, the Working Women's Charter Campaign agreed to turn over its newspaper to this task.

The newspaper is presently committed to a fight around the 10 demands of the Working Women's Charter drawn up by London Trades Council in 1974. These demands draw together the main aspects of women's struggles for independence and equality. The Charter has been adopted by fourteen national unions, many union branches, trade

councils, community and women's groups.

A newspaper based on a fight for the demands of the Working Women's Charter would tap this support and take up the broader issues raised by the Charter. The paper would provide a forum to fight for coordinated activity on these issues many different unions, labour movement and women's groups.

The Charter Campaign has issued a call for a national conference in the spring to launch this new paper. The conference is open to all members of unions women's groups and campaigns who see the need to coordinate a fight around the demands of the Working Women's Charter.

We hope that your organisation will sponsor the Autumn conference and send representatives to its organising meetings.

Appeal passed by 1978 National conference of Working Women's Charter.

No Revolution in Women's Health

Sharon Carpenter takes a look at Well Woman Clinics and their contribution to solving women's health problems in a run-down National Health Service.

"Period pains? I won't prescribe anything. She'll grow out of it".

"Have you been a naughty girl? Has your boyfriend slept with anyone else?"

"It's the menopause. All women have to go through it".

Those attitudes must ring a bell with many women. They are just examples of the patronising, moralising, let-them-suffer attitude of so many male doctors to women.

Some elements in the NHS hierarchy are aware of the backwardness of many doctors, and are beginning to offer partial solutions to the problem.

One of these is the idea of Well Woman clinics. In the London borough of Islington there are five such clinics, with the capacity to see about ten women every week or fortnight.

The idea grew out of the experience of one of the Nursing Officers in running a cancer-screening clinic in the area. Why treat just one part of a woman's body? was the question she asked. So Well Woman clinics were born in Islington.

The idea of these clinics—entirely preventative medicine, places you can make an appointment with and not tell your own doctor, where you get a complete physical check-up—proved very popular. Locally, there are waiting lists of two weeks for most of the Well Woman clinics. Nationally, the CHC has been inundated with letters from women wanting to know where their nearest clinic is.

Some women would be prepared to travel up to forty miles just for their peace of mind. A woman from Nottingham discovered that her nearest clinic was—guess where—Islington, London.

PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN CURE

The need for preventative health care for women is of pressing urgency. England and Wales come top of the league tables together with Denmark for a high incidence of breast cancer—and a large number of these are late discoveries. One in 18 women gets breast cancer, and only a fifth of these are cured. Yet if caught

early, it can be successfully treated.

Cervical smears too can be a highly effective form of preventative medicine—with regular check-ups, any abnormality can be treated quickly and easily. But many GP's won't do this routine screening for women under 35.

Even the Equal Opportunities Commission recognised the value of clinics like these in their evidence to that august body, the Royal Commission on the National Health Service.

They said: "There is need in the health care of women for a clinic service which will operate side by side with general practice. This clinic service would offer and advertise treatment for contraception, VD, abortion, menopausal problems, psycho-sexual counselling and screening for cervical and breast cancer.

More and more there is an acceptance of Well Woman clinics as part of the Health Service. In January this year, Enfield and Haringey Area Health Authority claimed there were financial restrictions on them as far as establishing Well Woman clinics went. Three months later plans for a Well Woman clinic were included "in the planning cycle for this year" for a new Health Centre in the area. But will we get more of these clinics? It's actually quite on the cards but only as part of the Health Service rationalisation—commonly known as the cuts.

CUT PRICE HEALTH CARE

Over the next ten years Health Service planners aim to reduce the number of hospitals and increase the number of clinics housing doctors' practices. Once you've got the clinics, you've got the basis for a Well Woman's clinic, which doesn't cost much in terms of Health Service budgets.

Of course, they will continue to offer a service well below need. That is, and always has been, the maxim of a fund-starved British Health Service. So an obvious demand from women is for more of the clinics, with enough sessions and at convenient times, where a mother can bring her children and a working woman can come after work.

MORE KNOWLEDGE NEEDED

But is the service offered what we want? Is this sort of medicine going to perpetuate ideas about "women's problems" as things which must be kept hidden at all costs, something to be ashamed of. Or will it help us gain greater control over and pride in our own bodies through understanding them and knowing when to seek medical help and check-ups?

Experience of these clinics so far does not look promising. One clinic sends results of tests straight to the woman's doctor. If the woman herself wants to know she must leave a stamped addressed envelope specially.

What it all adds up to is a reinforcement of old attitudes to women, not a breaking from them. It's a liberal concern with women's problems, not an understanding of women's needs—because the most crying need for women's health is knowledge; and de-mystification of our bodies and the cure for our ills.

Surely this need should be financed by the Health Service we all contribute to, yet have no say in how it is run? Well Woman's clinics as they are now are undoubtedly a step in the right direction, but they leave all the things which lead to that appallingly high figure of women with breast cancer untouched. They leave women just a number on her National Health Service card, filed away in some convenient place.

Obviously if we, as feminists, run a clinic, we do things to break down that ideology and combat its roots in any way we can. We also organise it collectively and democratically so that we can ensure that any faults are corrected—as happens now with self-help groups begun by women from the Women's Movement.

But once we start demanding Health Service money—as we have every right to—bureaucracy and red-tape get in our way. We have no formula for *how* we could exercise real community control over a clinic for women funded by the Health Service, so we remain faced with two inadequate choices: Health Service funding and no control, or do-it-yourself.

INTERNATIONAL REPORTS

International Women's Day

For the first time since the rise of the women's movement ten years ago feminists from different parts of the world co-ordinated activities for International Women's Day. The idea of using March 8 to commemorate women's struggles internationally was first proposed at the Vincennes Conference in 1977.

After the Conference several co-ordinating meetings were organized to discuss the issues of abortion, employment and repression. In these meetings women from Germany, England, Austria, Belgium, Spain, France, Italy, Switzerland, the Basque Country and groups of African and Latin-American women were represented. Furthermore greetings were sent by women from Portugal, Denmark and Sweden. This has been an important step towards better communication among women from different countries, in spite of all the limitations and organizational problems encountered during these meetings.

Some of the events that took place on International Women's Day show us the development of the movement during recent years.

In Canada, 8000 women demonstrated in different cities. The largest march took place in Montreal, with 3,000 women. Different activities about the liberation of women were organized between the 20th of February and the 11th of March.

In Spain, for the first time large demonstrations were organized all over the country. Also for the first time the feminist movement had the support of the worker's movement as was seen from the demonstration in Barcelona. In Madrid 8,000 people demanded amnesty for women, the right to work, legalisation of birth

control and abortion.

In France several thousands of women demonstrated in Paris and other cities on the 4th of March. It is significant that for the first time groups of African, Latin-American and Arab women joined the march which was in fact a real proof of international solidarity.

In Mexico a week of events about the liberation of women was organized. Women from different trade unions, political organizations and other organizations discussed the need to build up alliances with the organized workers and to continue fighting for women's demands through an autonomous women's movement. It was stressed that abortion was not only a women's issue but a class issue, since it is poor women who have to risk their lives at the hands of unskilled butchers.

In Chile, under the most ferocious repression, the Association of Privet Women Employees announced an event in which 25 trade union federations participated. Some of the demands of the Chilean women are: immediate governmental answer about the disappeared, creation of food centres and popular restaurants in each town of the country; the restitution of half a litre of milk for each child from birth until the age of ten, the right to health service and the organization of women's committees for the resistance.

In Great Britain, a demonstration took place on the 4th of March. The Women's Art Alliance organized 3 weeks of events where Malaysian, Ethiopian, Latin-American and British women's groups participated. On the 8th of March there was a rally where women from Africa, the Caribbean, Latin-

America, Iran and Ireland denounced the situation of women in their countries that have to face the sexist, racist and repressive nature of their societies. On the other hand British groups spoke about some aspects of their local struggle.

This brief report gives evidence of the different aspects that the fight for Women's Liberation takes in the different countries and that a major integration of the women's movement into the struggle of the masses is under way.

The Feminist Movement and the International Activities.

Although the feminist movement has basically developed in the advanced capitalist countries, in the last few years women from different colonial and neo-colonial countries have started to organize independently. However, their struggle has a different perspective, as we can see in the platform of the Chilean women for example, because it centers on the super-exploitation, the poverty and the repression in their countries.

Notwithstanding these differences, we must point out that the radicalization of women from these countries and their organization to put forward their own demands independently have been, to a large extent, influenced by the feminist movements in the advanced capitalist countries. Then, in some countries like Brazil and Mexico, groups of women are emerging, convinced that the only way to understand the character of our oppression and to fight against it must be done through an auto-

mous women's movement.

As part of the same process, women from these countries living in advanced capitalist countries as political refugees, students or economic immigrants are developing a greater consciousness about their specific oppression, and they, too, are organizing. In this way, we have witnessed the upsurge of African, Latin-American and Arab women's groups in Paris, the Chicana, Puertorrican and black women's groups in the US and here in Britain we find the Black Women's Group, the Latin-American Women's Group, The Asian Women's Group, the Iranian Women's Group, the Irish Women's Group. This phenomenon is repeated in other European countries.

What is the importance of this phenomenon for the feminist movement? What contribution can European women make to the fight of their sisters in the colonial and neo-colonial countries and how could our struggle be related to it?

We cannot go deeply into these questions here, but we will point out some general considerations based on the experience that the groups had in

the organization of the Rally for the International Women's Day in Britain. We will stress the importance that such an experience had and should have for an international feminist movement.

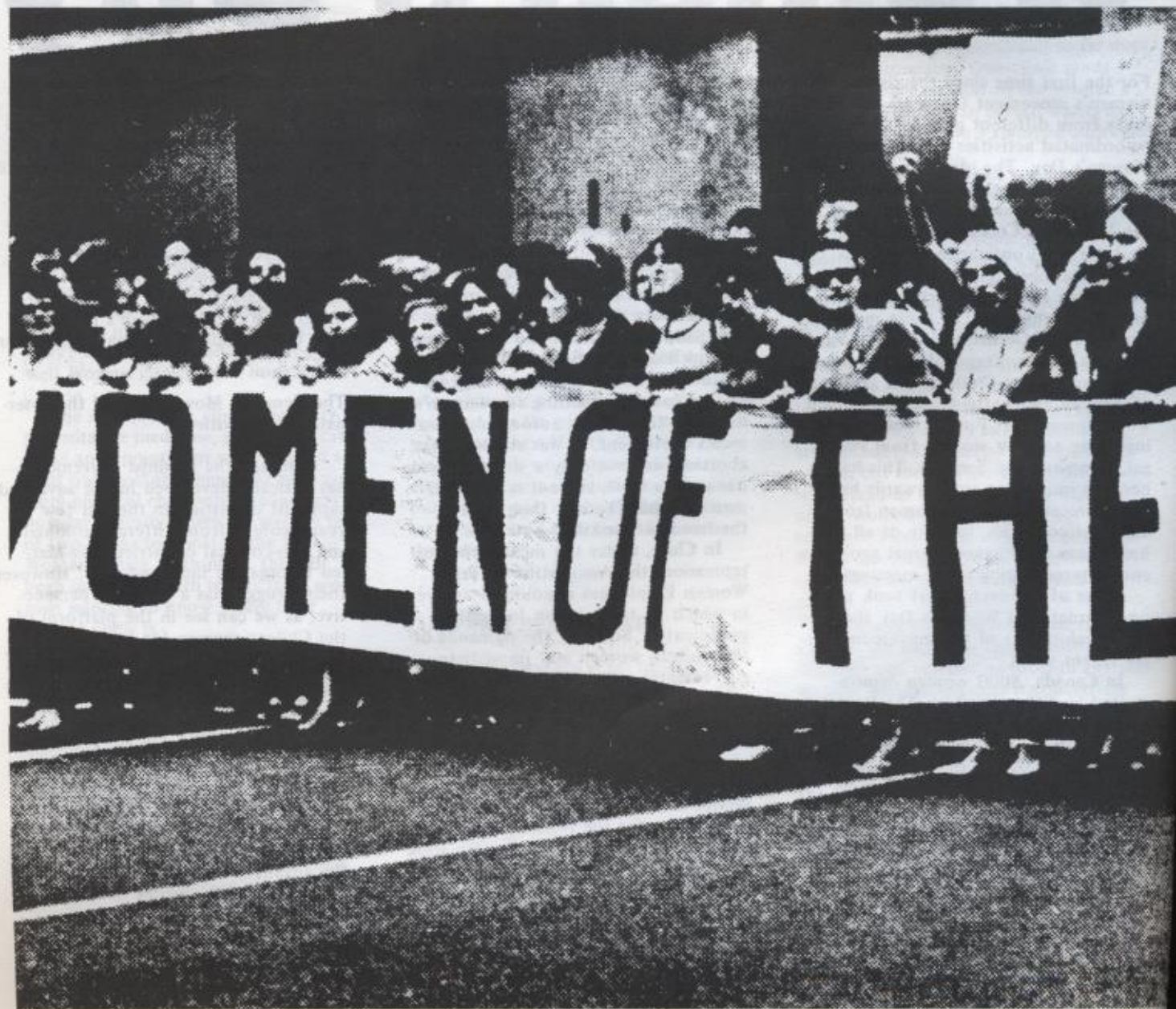
The illustration of the oppressive situation that women experience in Africa, Asia, Latin-America and Ireland, shows us clearly that though women's oppression is common to all women it takes different forms according to the objective situation of those countries. The economic exploitation of women, sexism as an oppressive ideology, the role of the family, the role of imperialism adding new elements to women's oppression, the catholic church and other religious beliefs as social forces are vital questions in the analysis of the character of the oppression and therefore of the radicalization of women in those countries. We must realize that all the elements determining women's oppression in advanced capitalist countries will not necessarily apply in the case of colonial and neo-colonial countries.

British women must develop an awareness of the different factors in-

fluencing feminist consciousness in the colonial and neo-colonial countries.

For example we cannot deal with abortion and contraception without considering the way in which family planning is used by the state in underdeveloped countries (e.g. forced sterilization). It is of great importance that the condemnation of these practices are being incorporated into the demands of some feminists groups in advanced countries! This fact represents a concrete form of solidarity with the sisters of other countries. Rather than being an actively limited to moral support through signing petitions or contributing money, the work of solidarity is taken to be a central part of women's struggle for liberation. Solidarity in many groups has almost exclusively deals with human rights. Although this is an important task, it should not be the only one.

Besides these factors, the feminist movement in the advanced capitalist countries has accumulated experiences that women from other countries should take into account. For example rape and the case of battered women have been the cause of important battles



in USA and Europe. In underdeveloped countries these two phenomena reach violent proportions unknown by the advanced capitalist countries. Demands of this kind could be used as important spearheads for the mobilization of women from the different social classes in these countries. Without any doubt all of them would find a common ground of action around these issues.

Therefore, ongoing work among the different groups and unified mobilizations are necessary to carry out a more active work of solidarity inside the feminist movement and to exchange experiences in a reciprocal way.

The participant groups in the organization of the rally exposed important aspects of the women's struggle that the feminist movement has not considered in depth. For example the Black Women's Group presented a paper about "Women and the anti-imperialist struggle" in which the imperialist penetration is exposed as a source for new contradictions in the life of women. This debate is crucial for the feminist movement and it should go on.

The Latin-American and African

groups, and the 'repression commission' of the French feminist movement, also raised the question of how to develop international work on the repression of women in all forms. Although more discussion is needed some proposals that have already been voiced are: to set up an International Tribunal to judge crimes against women, and to declare an international day against the repression of women with simultaneous activities in different countries. The existence of a French commission on women's repression has been useful in creating a greater awareness of the importance of this kind of work and could be copied by women in other countries.

Although the international co-ordination of the feminist movement has taken important steps, some criticisms have already been made, for example the danger that international co-ordination involves a hierarchial and centralized structure, incompatible with the way the feminist movement ought to work. Furthermore, there have been weaknesses in communication between the different groups; more detailed and up to date information about each country is needed. We should not

overlook these criticisms, but if they are to be affective, they should be made together with proposals of alternative ways of organising co-ordination internationally.

Finally, we consider that the participant groups in the Rally might become the basic nucleus around which international co-ordination could be organized in Britain. There are some British groups already working on different aspects of repression like the women against fascism and racism and the women's group against rape. It is important that these groups could become integrated in these activities. But the nature, functions and form of organization must be the outcome of a discussion between the different groups working in England.

The British Feminist Movement has a particularly rich history of experiences, fights and theoretical analysis about the oppression of women. Therefore, it can not concentrate its struggle around small local groups that tend increasingly to be isolated.



International Campaign Launched for Right to Abortion

by Jacqueline Heinen.

Massive mobilizations for the right to abortion in New Zealand have been organized in the recent period by a united front of women's organizations. In spite of this, at the beginning of April, the government passed a law worded in accordance with a report of the Royal Commission assigned to study the "problem" of abortion.

Apart from the laws passed under fascism, this law is clearly one of the most repressive and inhumane in the world. Even a woman who has been raped does not have the right to abortion. Only cases of incest and mental deficiency are considered "valid" justifications for abortion.

The Auckland Medical Aid Centre, which was responsible for nearly 82 percent of abortions performed in New Zealand, will probably have to close for lack of patients. Only fifteen women have obtained permission to have abortions since the law was passed. We can imagine the despair felt by all the rest.

To be sure, this is an extreme example, and a particularly cruel step backward from a situation that in fact enabled a good number of women to obtain abortions under relatively decent conditions.

But it would be a mistake to see this as a "slipup" on the part of the ruling class in a given country.

FEMININE CRIMES

In most countries in the world, women still do not have the right to abortion. They still do not have the right to freely decide whether or not to have children. And this goes not only for the colonial or semicolonial countries, but also for a country like Spain, where the "democratization" of political life has not yet done away with forty years of Francoism and the omnipotence of the Catholic church where women's social position is concerned. It appears that nearly 80 per cent of the women now in prison in these countries were put there for so-called "feminine crimes", primarily abortion.

In the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, and West Germany—to cite only a few examples of capitalist countries where women have been fighting for this right for years—abortion is still punishable, except under very unusual circumstances.

The extent to which the law is car-

ried out appears to vary according to the country and area, but one thing is certain—the ruling class is doing everything in its power to forestall having to recognize women as individuals in their own right, free to control their bodies and plan their lives. And when it is finally pushed to the wall by a mass movement demanding liberalization of the law, and forced to surrender, it generally manages to do so at the least possible expense, as shown by the Veil law in France. In addition to all the restrictions this law imposes, it does not provide for reimbursing the cost of abortion through Social Security.

EFFECTS OF THE CRISIS

But what comes through most clearly today, in this period of economic and social crisis, is that even in those countries where the law has been liberalized, the governments in office are the first to support the most reactionary wing of the bourgeoisie, which constantly demands the elimination of the meagre rights won. They may do this in an indirect way, through heavy cuts in public spending (which always results,

as if by accident, in reducing funds allotted for abortion in hospitals). Or they may do it openly, by inserting restrictive clauses in the law on the strength of parliamentary debates, often on the pretext of being able to better "protect women against abuses."

In Great Britain, for example, for three years there has been one amendment after another, all alike—whether proposed by Labour Party or Conservative Party members—all equally reactionary, and all with one aim: to prevent women from taking advantage of a law that is already quite hedged with restrictions, and to place the decision back in the hands of doctors, husbands, government, and the courts—everyone, that is, except those who have the most at stake.

We have just seen the appeals by the pope to try to prevent any application of the law recently passed in Italy, a restrictive law that makes abortion dependent on the husband's consent, and puts it practically out of the reach of minors. A law that, according to the latest polls, stands very little chance of being implemented in a country where the majority of hospitals are still run by the church (many of them are owned by religious orders).

The pope's appeals to doctors and hospital staff, issued the very day the law took effect, calling on them, as good Christians, to make use of the conscience clause and the right afforded them by law to refuse to perform abortions, do seem to have been widely heeded. The first survey carried out in the capital shows that 90 to 95 percent of hospital workers—nuns made up a large part of the nurses—refuse to perform legal abortions.

DIVIDING WOMEN

The attempts to divide women—minors and those of age, native-born and immigrants, white and black, rich and poor—appears to be paying off. Witness the American bourgeoisie's support for the Hyde amendment, which eliminated federal funds, designed to help the poorest women obtain abortions in facilities with very high costs (almost 40 percent of Black women are in this situation). This measure had a domino effect, since a number of state governments rushed to follow the example it set by cutting off funds. In several states, this was followed by attempts by district courts to reintroduce provisions in the law requiring the consent of the husband, or parents in the case of minors.

A further amendment has been proposed that would enable employers to refuse to pay wages to women who have taken time off for an abortion. We should not forget to mention the outlandish requirements for abortion clinics in terms of equipment which are aimed at keeping as many of them as possible from opening, and making them impossible to run because of the staggering financial burden involved.

This amendment was clearly an open invitation to the right wing. In

the recent period, this resulted in the use of physical violence by extreme right-wing forces against all those who tried to implement the law. There have been countless attacks on abortion clinics. The arson attack on an abortion clinic in Cleveland, Ohio, is only one example in a long series of crimes committed by groups who make no secret of their racist views.

They are the same ones who, in Puerto Rico and elsewhere, support the population-control policies imposed by the imperialists on ethnic minorities or colonized peoples. Nearly half the female population on the island of Puerto Rico, and almost a third of Indian women in the United States have been forcibly sterilized. There has been talk of a plan by the Agency for International Development, which has CIA ties, to forcibly sterilize no less than 100 million women.

There is no need to explain that such measures are aimed above all at women in the Third World countries. But we should note that in Europe as well, forced sterilization is often imposed on immigrant women who enter hospitals after a self-induced miscarriage owing to the absence of legal abortion. Numerous examples of this can be seen in France particularly.

FIRST INTERNATIONAL MEETING

Therefore, there is an urgent need for a campaign for legal abortion and contraception, and against forced sterilization. This is what was discussed by the women who attended the meeting in London on June 10 and 11 called by the National Abortion Campaign (NAC) in Britain.

Although this first international meeting on abortion was not representative enough, nevertheless, it enabled the delegates and observers present to lay the groundwork for a campaign that aims to be massive and open to all forces in the women's movement and labour movement who can be expected to support such an initiative.

Present were representatives of the National Abortion Campaign, the national abortion coordinating committees in the Netherlands and Belgium, CISAI (Campaign for Information on Abortion) from Bologna, women's abortion and contraception centers from Barcelona and Madrid, groups from the women's movement in Switzerland, Paris-based groups trying to launch a campaign to enforce the Veil law, the Labour Party, and the Fourth International.

A date was set for an international day of action next April, with the understanding that regular meetings would be held between now and then. (The NAC delegates agreed in principle to be responsible for the main coordinating tasks). Right from the start there was a general desire not to restrict such a campaign to a European framework, but to do whatever was necessary to see that it assumed truly international proportions. Hence the importance of paying attention to the special problems

faced by women in the colonial countries, and not focussing the entire campaign on the demands of women in the imperialist capitalist countries alone.

Thus the following central slogan was adopted: 'For abortion, contraception, and women's rights. No to forced sterilization.'

Other demands relative to implementing the law, securing funding, establishing clinics, insuring the availability of sex education and contraceptives, and so on, can be discussed in each country depending on the specific situation, and be included in posters taking the special features more into account. But it was proposed at the meeting that an international poster, translated into several languages, be the overall symbol of the campaign, and that a preliminary version be voted on at the next coordinating meeting to be held in Brussels September 23–24.

Among the topics to be discussed are the text of a call for the day of action, methods of building the campaign and coming up with the necessary funds, and the type of propaganda to use to see that it gets the widest possible response.

The newsletter *Donna* published by the CISAI group has offered to serve as the liaison for this campaign, and the written contributions that have been requested for the September meeting will be the basis for articles that will be submitted for publication in the feminist press in various countries, or perhaps for an information bulletin inside a given country.

The fundamental goal, of course, is to arrive at unitary committees in each country, uniting the largest number of feminist groups, political organizations, and trade unions, ready to launch a vigorous battle for women's inalienable right to control their bodies and decide their own fate.

This article is reprinted from
Intercontinental Press/Inprecor

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DEBATE DEBATE DEBATE

Socialism, Politics and Personal Life

In this issue the debate sparked off by John Ross's article on 'Capitalism, Politics and Personal Life' is continued by Margaret Coulson, an activist in the WLM and on the revolutionary left for many years.

We also open up further debates we hope will be of interest to you. Firstly on how to and how far we can combat sexism within mixed political organisations.

Then Rose Knight and Judy Watson of the National Abortion Campaign explain their position in the debate in the pro-abortion movement on what time limit for abortions, if any.

Socialist Woman has taken Zaretsky's book, *Capitalism, the family and personal life* as a starting point for discussion of the relationship between politics and personal life and of its significance for revolutionary politics and organisation.

I think Zaretsky's book had made two useful contributions to such a discussion. He has outlined quite an interesting historical interpretation of the development of personal life as an area of experience separated off from the rest of social life, a development associated with the impact of capitalism on the family. And he has made some of the concern of the women's and gay movements more accessible to the sections of the left. For what are probably a range of complicated and contradictory reasons male heterosexual members of left groups often find it more difficult or are inhibited about relating directly to the writings from the women's and gay movements.

While acknowledging the validity of his contribution, there are a number of ways in which it is inadequate as a starting point for this discussion: Firstly because the analysis of the relationship between personal and public life within capitalism has already been developed much further and more fully in other writings; for example in the explorations of the relationship between domestic labour and wage labour, in the examination of the relationship between the family and

the state, the position of women and the structuring of the welfare state; in the analysis of sexuality within capitalism and the attempts to identify the processes which construct personal (sexed) identity.¹ It is true that few books bringing all these aspects together in an integrated and developed way although Ann Foreman's *Femininity and Alienation*, is stimulating and sharply critical attempt. But to take this discussion seriously must require a recognition of the range and extent of the work on it which is already begun.

Besides this Zaretsky writes about politics and personal life as an outsider; there is a split between himself and his subject matter of an entirely traditional kind, and so he is able to preface his 'first work' with the usual bourgeois dedication to 'my wife' and 'my daughter' without any apparent recognition that certain contradictions are implied by this. This sort of split has been considerably undermined within the women's and gay movements, and this has been an important (though not new) political development as I'll try to show later.

SIDE-STEPPING NEW CRITIQUES.

If the critiques and contributions of feminism to revolutionary socialism are insufficiently represented in Zaretsky's book, they are even less appreciated by John Ross in his pre-

dominantly defensive response to Zaretsky. John Ross's understanding seems to be limited to a sort of caricature of the issues raised by feminism and sexual politics. Will it be "better" to be homosexual or heretosexual "after the revolution"? John Ross reassures us that the revolutionary party will allow us to decide that for ourselves. As a challenge to the repression of gay people in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, China, Cuba etc. today that point is important. But to imply that in some way it resolves the relationships between personal life and revolutionary politics both evades and trivialises the questions posed by the feminist and gay liberation movements. Ross has written in defense of the revolutionary party and its primacy in political struggle. His article makes one interesting point: that the revolutionary party cannot be and is not the sole revolutionary authority on every important question. But why does Ross side step recent feminist critiques of revolutionary theory and the practice of the left, with its varieties? (To point to the weaknesses of the left as a whole in this respect is not to ignore differences between left organisations on questions of women's liberation and sexual politics, merely to note that the common weaknesses have generally been more impressive; nor is it to deny the potential which marxism may yet have as a tool in overcoming these weaknesses).

Ross sees three distinct areas of struggle in capitalism (and continuing beyond it into socialism): the social which is the sphere of such movements as women's liberation and the gay movement (to movements of black people, oppressed national minorities etc. fit in here too?). The economic, which is the sphere of trade union organisation; and finally the political in which the revolutionary party

The women's movement as a social movement concerned with social questions can therefore be allowed its autonomy from the revolutionary party. But if a social question becomes political because at some time it raises issues relating to the state, what then becomes of feminist autonomy. Presumably, according to John Ross's scheme it becomes irrelevant because at that moment the leadership of the struggle will be assumed by the revolutionary party. But how will this happen?

How will the revolutionary party come to understand the issues raised by the question of abortion, for example. Both a parasitical and elitist model of the party are implied here. The party's interest and wisdom about abortion somehow arrive when it becomes a demand to be placed upon the state; before that, apparently, the issue is not political, a concern for the women's movement not the party.

John Ross's formula blocks us off from understanding the processes involved in the development of politics. For what seems to me to be most fundamentally unacceptable in Ross's article is his method and style. These seem to have more in common with a bourgeois academic obsession with static categories and the compartmentalisation of things than with marxism which I had understood to be an approach which developed and used concepts in terms of relationships and processes. Ross sets up definitions backed up by quotations from the most reversed marxist authorities and appends extraordinarily lengthy footnotes, but whatever the relevance of these they are no substitute for critical discussion and argument (unless we have moved into the realms of religious faith where the word of god (Marx/Lenin/Trotsky . . .) is enough.)

I imagine that Marx was taking his distance from exactly this sort of method and style when he said that he was not a marxist. I don't think everything contained in Ross's article is necessarily wrong but the approach makes it unusable.

I now want to return to some broader implications of the analysis of personal life within capitalism for revolutionary politics, because I think it is within such a framework that any discussion of revolutionary organisation would need to be located.

REVOLUTION FOR OURSELVES

A recognition of the necessary intercourse between personal

life and political involvement has been important within the women's movement.

Because of the way in which the oppression of women is structured through the family into female identity, changing our conceptions of ourselves and or our personal relationships has been an inevitable part of the political development of women. The contemporary women's movement has made that process much more conscious, a process in which we become conscious participants. For white heterosexual men there has not been this same contradiction between masculine identity and revolutionary political commitment. But rather than simply seeing the implications of this as explaining why the autonomous women's movement is necessary and important for the struggle for women's liberation (which of course it is) it is also important to see that it has wider implications for the revolutionary movement as a whole. Socialist feminists have something to teach the organised left, that is important for revolutionary politics as a whole; we insist on a recognition of the autonomy of the women's movement. but not just so that we can be left in our own little corner of struggle to get on with our own things. We are bringing together conceptions which are of general relevance about the concept of revolution, about what political commitment means, about what 'human nature' is and thus about the relationship between personal change and revolutionary social change. It an understanding revolution as a continuing process in which we are engaged now both in our public political activity and in our personal lives; that process must be geared towards challenging and overthrowing the bourgeois state but it cannot be defined solely in relation to that, and it must continue beyond capitalism. It is an understanding that revolutionary politics is *not* something (a programme) which enlightened revolutionary outsiders take to the not yet enlightened exploited and oppressed masses appearing as an act of benevolence: it is a process we engage in because we expect to gain from it ourselves: We expect there to be something for us in revolutionary change and changing; and our political understanding develops through discussion and experience of political activity and through exchanges with others with different backgrounds and experiences; it involves a recognition that there is much to be learnt and understood politically from those who appear to have little conscious political experience as well as from those who have years of political activism and sophisticated political analyses behind them. It involves an understanding that out personal identity is a part of and a product of the social relationships on which we work and which we are trying to transform. Gramsci discusses the concept of humanity that clarifies this point I think. He says: 'So one could say that each one of us changes himself, modifies himself to the extent that he changes and modifies the complex relations of which he is the hub. In this sense the real philosopher is, and cannot be other than, the politician, the active man who modifies the environment, understanding by environment the ensemble of relations.' (p.352) ²

To insist on the importance of the continuity between personal life and political change does not mean that we want an army of revolutionary snoopers catching people out in their imperfections, revolutionary thought police pushing people into an impossible exemplary conformity, mother confessors dispensing absolution to those brave enough to admit their 'sins'. It's not a new moralism that we're after but a more complete revolutionary politics. We want to be more effective revolutionaries; we want revolutionary change to be change for us.

DEFINING SOCIALISM

If patriarchal relations are structured deeply into people at the level of personal—masculine and feminine—identity; then they must be challenged at that level as well as at the level of the state, the economy etc. We won't create non-sexist revolutionary identities for ourselves in the cramped and twisted structures

of a capitalist patriarchal society, but the *struggle* towards that is a valid part of the struggle in which we engage now.

If the ways in which our personal identities are constructed within capitalism continually inhibit and distort and undermine our political effectiveness, then we have to understand personal life as a terrain of struggle of some collective significance. Struggle towards greater personal autonomy and towards personal relationships that strengthen rather than undermine that; towards ways of working politically with others which are resistant to the bourgeois pull towards competitiveness and cults of leading personalities towards styles of collective work which can be more democratic; towards concepts of revolutionary discipline which depend on self discipline and mutual support rather than external authority.

The point is not to counterpose the struggles of personal life to the struggles against the state, nor necessarily to say that they have equal weight, but rather that we should be conscious of both as interdependent parts of a revolutionary process.

Cynthia Cockburn in her study of the local state identifies the relevance of the struggles of personal life in this way: 'Provided that these collective actions are a conscious part of a struggle to escape from an old ideology and to sharpen awareness of our real relation to capital and to the state they can be part of a wider political struggle. They not only strike at capitalism, they define socialism: we have to transform the relations of reproduction as part of the struggle for socialism to ensure that socialism does indeed eradicate patriarchy, at

home and at work.' (p.182-183). I think that these are amongst the issues that have to be faced by the organised left in any attempts to understand the relationships between capitalism, politics and personal life and their implications for revolutionary socialism.

Notes:

1—Here are some highly selective examples:

Elizabeth Wilson: *Women and the Welfare State*.

Cynthia Cockburn: *The Local State*.

How do you Feel? Bristol paper to Socialist Feminist Conference 1977.

Articles on domestic labour in

New Left Review no.83—1974 and no.89—1975

and S. Himmelvert and S. Mohun: *Domestic Labour and Capital*, *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 1—1(1977)

Juliet Mitchell: *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*

and some other examples:

Agnes Smedley: *Daughter of Earth*

Alexandra Kollontai: *Sexual relations and Class struggle*

the Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Woman

Love of Worker Bees.

2—Gramsci: *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Q. Hoare and G.N. Smith.

REVIEWS

"My intention in making this film at this particular time is the result of a number of attempts to make political films and make them politically. Political movements can be precisely read from their effects on the individual. You can identify with a person, you can learn from him or her and understand them. At this time I wanted to restrict the political message of the film to simply portraying—to the Germans—somebody who has great tenderness, who suffers and is tormented by the world in which they live, and who is incredibly brave—still sending money to relations in Turkey despite all hardships to the bitter end." (Helma Sanders, Director).

"*Shirin's Wedding*" is a film which should get much wider circulation than it did—yet I guarantee that anyone who saw it during its brief showing at the ICA in London came out feeling battered, dejected, and totally helpless.

It's a film about a Turkish woman who is an immigrant worker in Germany, shot in black and white with a simple understating commentary from a German woman. The style brings Shirin's life as a woman and an immigrant painfully close. It spares your feelings not for one minute as it unfolds the stark reality of womanhood in her oppressive home culture and of double oppression as a woman in a foreign land.

Shirin leaves Turkey as a refugee from an arranged marriage and travels to Germany in search of Mahmoud, a man from her village who she loves. But this is no romantic love story. In the process Shirin has to find work—first in a factory where the price of their hostel room is automatically deducted from the immigrant women's wages, then in an office where the boss sacks her then rapes her after an office party she has to clean up after.

But the harshness of her situation is deeper even than these hard knocks. As Shirin becomes westernised she exchanges one culture which oppresses women for another. The film shows her utter fear when a man removes her headscarf and reveals her hair—a sin under Moslem law. It shows her being influenced by magazines, dyeing her hair blonde, checking in the mirror that she looks "nice".

And finally it shows her working as a prostitute with a forged passport when she is under risk of deportation for being unemployed. She only half knows what is happening

to her, and has no control over it at all. She finds Mahmoud in this role, and must demand money from him for fear of the pimps.

"Women are always afraid", she confides to a friend at the hostel.

The film is about her fear, her total passivity, and her inability to control even the smallest part of her life.

But it never allows the idea that she is incapable of control—she fled Turkey on her own initiative—but that she is prevented from living as an autonomous human being by the structures of society at every level.

Any rebellion is instantly squashed, even to the lengths of killing her. That is why the film is so depressing to watch. There is no way out for Shirin, nor for many like her, at least not yet. When political activists get a leaflet into the factory where she works trying to get the workers to resist redundancies, they are confiscated by the supervisor. Control over Shirin is absolute.

It would be tempting to say that the film fails because it shows no way forward. But it is itself a weapon against the exploitation it describes. That is why it deserves wider distribution than it got in this country—it says more about the exploitation of immigrants, rape, sexist ideology and oppression in the capitalist west than a thousand leaflets. Just as strongly as films about the concentration camps in Nazi Germany, the message of this film is "Never again."

SHIRIN'S WEDDING is distributed by The Other Cinema, 12-13 Little Newport Street, London WC2H 7JJ. Tel: 734 8508/9

Women and the Revolutionary Party

The 1978 National Conference of the International Marxist Group had two major discussions on issues raised by the women's liberation movement. The conference adopted an extensive resolution outlining our basic positions on a strategy for women's liberation. We hope to print a summary of the main points of the resolution in a future issue.

The second discussion dealt with the specific problems facing women militants inside the IMG. This raised some very basic questions about the role of a revolutionary party; the relationship of activity in the women's movement and a revolutionary organisation; how tensions between men and women express themselves in a mixed political party and the methods and limitations of combating sexism within its ranks. This discussion revolved around the role and functioning of women's caucuses (that is meetings for all and only women members) inside the IMG. After months of often heated pre-conference discussion the conference finally adopted a resolution which we reproduce here.

The IMG is a combat organisation fighting to unite the working class and all oppressed in society to take state power and to achieve human liberation. For this we understand the necessity of organising as a Leninist democratic-centralist party.

Two questions then concern us here:

How best to aid the organisation's intervention into the class struggle and participation in the movements of the oppressed? How best to build up the collective strength of the IMG? Therefore our starting point in this discussion is the collective needs and development of the whole organisation. In starting from the needs of the whole organisation, are we in some sense minimising the needs of women comrades? In the same way that we have rejected notions of 'dual loyalty' (to the IMG or to the WLM) in the WLM or NAC, we also reject similar distinctions between members of the revolutionary organisation.

As revolutionary marxist we argue that there is a unity of interests among all members of the organisation which is expressed in our commitment to the revolutionary programme.

However, our programme must be more than a list of demands on a page: it must be our day to day intervention into the class struggle. The struggle against sexism within our own ranks is the counterpart of the struggle against sexism in the working class. We must fight to make the concept of unity of interests as meaningful as possible.

1—Sexism in society finds its reflection inside the IMG. It finds expression in a number of ways:

- (1) The lack of consciousness in the IMG as to how and why sexism operates in its own ranks.
- (2) A concept of cadre which can be interpreted as a stereotype of traditional male behaviour.
- (3) Insufficient understanding of women's educational needs.
- (4) A tradition of political discussion which encourages individual competitiveness and dismissiveness rather than collective dialogue.
- (5) Lack of confidence of women comrades induced by conditions within and without the organisation.
- (6) A division of labour which creates a distinction between

(mostly male) producers of theory, and the practical activists.

(7) Insufficient action to deal with the problems of child-care.

A discussion of these difficulties sheds light on many general problems of the development and integration of all comrades in the IMG—both men and women e.g. educational development, methods of discussion and debate which generate confidence etc.

For a revolutionary organisation to develop and synthesise the strengths, capacities and experience of all its comrades—women and men—methods must be sought to overcome some of the problems—or at least begin this task. Thus the struggle against sexism is not exclusively an area of external intervention for a revolutionary organisation.

Clearly no revolutionary party can seek to eradicate sexism from its ranks until the conditions have been created in society as a whole to achieve this task i.e. the conditions for liberation have been set by the overthrow of the bourgeois power in society.

However the revolutionary party must challenge sexism if it is to fulfill its political tasks.

Within a revolutionary organisation, there is an identity of interest between all its members—whatever their sex, race or area of intervention. This unity of interest flows from the concern of a revolutionary organisation to collectively develop and struggle for a revolutionary programme based on the analysis and experiences of all layers in society.

In so far as the unity of interests at a programmatic level is not developed at a practical level, it is essential for the whole organisation to fight against sexism at every level of its operation.

However, this synthesis of the theoretical and the practical gains of the Women's Liberation Movement with the revolutionary programme and the methods of organisation adequate to the understanding of women's comrades' experiences and capacities, is the collective responsibility of the whole organisation.

This must be reflected in the concerns and discussions of the collective bodies of the organisation (branch and national leaderships, aggregates, national conferences) which must take responsibility to explore solutions to the problems of involvement and development of women comrades.

3—Through their direct experience, women comrades are in a good position to identify and understand the problems specific to women members of a revolutionary organisation. Through participation and debate in the WLM, many women comrades have experiences to contribute to the organisations discussions on methods of overcoming these problems.

In a situation where women comrades are not adequately integrated into a revolutionary organisation, discussions with other women comrades will aid women to find confidence and mutual support to explore and synthesise their experiences and to highlight problems of sexism existing in the organisation. Discussion in the whole organisation on overcoming specific problems of sexism are enriched by the contributions emerging from these discussions of women comrades. Caucuses of women comrades are therefore an important element in the steps taken by the IMG as a whole to understand and adopt measures to develop the struggle against sexism within the IMG.

4—The functioning of women's caucuses is to make contributions to the collective development of the organisation as a whole.

The caucuses of women are therefore accountable to the collective structures of the whole organisation, which in turn has a responsibility to discuss seriously, and where there is agreement, take proposals and contributions emerging from caucus discussion.

5—This understanding of collective interests at the level of the programme between men and women within the revolutionary organisation distinguishes the operation of women's caucuses within a revolutionary organisation and the mass organisations. Whilst measures are necessary in a revolutionary organisation to check sexist practices,

and whilst women's caucuses have a contribution in this, there is no need for women comrades to organise autonomously from the structures of a revolutionary organisation (i.e. in "self-governing" independent structures).

However, in the Labour Movement, we understand the need for autonomous independent forms of organisation as an essential aspect of a struggle for democratising that movement, and, by challenging sexist ideology within the working class, forcing a struggle for women's liberation. Thus the autonomous organisation of women is essential in the mass organisations to ensure that the struggle on women's oppression is to proceed and the leadership of the traditional organisations is forced to take it up.

6—From this general framework we can derive guidelines for the operation of women's caucuses in a revolutionary organisation.

i) The meeting of women comrades in caucuses encourages the organisation as a whole to come to grips with the problems of sexism. Caucuses are not a solution in themselves to the problems facing women comrades.

They play an important role in tackling the problems referred to in the 7 points in paragraph 4, on page 4. An essential foundation for tackling sexism within a revolutionary organisation is a theoretical and political understanding by all its comrades of the oppression of women in all its forms—economic, social, sexual, ideological. The education of all comrades on these questions is essential to any attempts to challenge sexism in the daily actions of revolutionary militants.

(ii) Women's caucuses should be convened in a way that facilitates the fullest discussions within the collective structures about their tasks and content. They should be convened in consultation with the relevant bodies. Report backs are the crucial way that discussion held in women's caucuses can be generalised throughout the organisation.

The National Conference of the IMG must assert the need for women's caucuses. We would like to make the following concrete proposals about the organisation of women's caucuses, in order to provide a clear basis for discussion.

Women's caucuses should be called by women comrades in collaboration with branch leaderships as and when necessary. There should be no 'secret caucuses'; women comrades have a responsibility to the organisation to announce when caucuses will be held, and to ensure that all women in the branch are notified of their occurrence.

Timing: These caucuses should be timed as far as possible not to clash with other branch activities; on the other hand, branch leaderships should assist in ensuring that time is allocated for caucuses when requested by women members.

Conflicts: between branch leaderships and women comrades which may arise over frequency of caucuses or any other issue connected with them should be referred to higher bodies (area leaderships, if necessary, the NC); the Women's Commission should also be notified of any such disputes.

National Women's Caucuses: Co-ordinated by the Women's Commission, National Women's Caucuses should be called as and when necessary. Local women's caucuses and fractions working on the question on women's liberation should make requests to the Women's Commission for calling of the National Caucus, and this request should then be circulated to branches to assess demand.

National Caucuses should only rarely be needed if local caucuses function adequately. Their tasks should be to synthesise the discussions at the local level, and to feed this discussion back through the organisation. They will also assist in establishing greater cohesiveness and support among women comrades.

Leadership Women's Caucuses: These should be called by women on the NC/PC in collaboration with these bodies as and when necessary.

Conjunctural Caucuses: These should be called as and when necessary on particular issues, again in conjunction

with the relevant bodies; for example, women comrades may find it necessary to hold a caucus at national schools, at events such as the Marxism Symposium etc. in order to help women comrades with problems of contributions, or to make suggestions to the organisers of such events about organisation, facilitating participation of women and so on.

Obviously all such general proposals are subject to the general financial constraints operating on branches and other bodies of the organisation.

Caucuses should make every effort to be accessible to all women members, not just those involved in the WLM. All caucuses have an absolute duty to make the substance and the proposals from their discussions available to the local and national leadership and to the organisation as a whole. The leadership of the organisation should have a positive attitude to women's caucuses and encourage women comrades to organise such meetings. Leading women comrades can play a particular role here especially if women comrades are experiencing problems in this regard.

Discussion within women's Caucuses.

(1) Women's caucuses cannot be rigidly defined, partly because they will be experimental structures for some time to come. The authors of this resolutions do not have sufficient knowledge of the specific problems facing women individually or in a particular area, to be able to outline and identify topics for discussion arising out of the needs of women involved and their role in the IMG.

(2) The function of caucuses is not to seek a common basis among women comrades on general political issues. Any discussion arising in such issues should be carried out in the existing structures of the IMG, although caucuses may make suggestions to branches etc. about the conduct of such discussions and the role of women comrades within them.

(3) Women's caucuses should not be used to prepare contributions to the external work of the organisation.

(4) Women's caucuses should not substitute for general discussion within the organisation about women's liberation and male chauvinism, although they will obviously make an important contribution to such discussion and help where necessary to initiate them and focus on specific problems facing women comrades. They should assist, but not substitute for, the education of women and men comrades in the IMG. Neither should they substitute for the involvement of women comrades in the WLM.

(5) Women's caucuses are not legislative or executive: they are **advisory**. They have no independent powers to decide anything about the external work or line of the IMG. They should exist to recommend changes in the practice of the IMG on sexism in the IMG. They are also voluntary bodies and they are unelected. As such, they are unlike any other body inside the IMG.

Our experience of the problems of different branches and sections of the IMG suggests that it is very difficult to state in **advance** exactly the type of discussion needed in every particular circumstance but we suggest the following broad outlines for caucus discussion, pending precise definitions which can only be made after full discussion.

Consciousness-raising: Discussion of relevant personal problems; discussions of male chauvinism. Identification with the needs of women comrades with respect to **education**. Needs of women comrades in relation to the **leadership**; examining of the role of the leadership and identifying areas where women need specific help and support from the leadership, or particular types of action to be taken. Problems of the role of **women comrades in the leadership**. Help in integrating new women comrades into the organisation; discussions of recruitment and relationships to women contacts. We expect initial discussion in women's caucuses to concentrate on problems women comrades find difficult or impossible to discuss in the

presence of men: political inadequacy, insecurity, male chauvinism, education, conflict between personal and political life, children, marriage relationships, political solidarity.

For these particular reasons (i.e. women need caucuses to identify the problems of sexism) branch or fraction leaderships should not be entitled to the extra authority of determining agendas before the problems of sexism have been identified by women comrades themselves. Reports back will be the arena where a positive dialogue between all comrades, male and female alike, can occur.

The debate about the distinction between 'personal' and 'political' matters has just begun, and will continue after the Conference. We would like to point out that, although we recognise that the revolutionary organisation should not take positions on many questions regarded as personal, it may yet be essential to discuss and analyse them within the organisation. However, we are opposed to any conception of caucuses as a basis for launching personal attacks upon, or dictating to, individual comrades. Consciousness of oppression is a **collective** matter.

The incoming Women's Commission should make recommendations to the national Committee about a reformed educational programme, nationally and in the branches. This would obviously concentrate on the questions of the needs of women comrades and style of discussion. Local caucuses, branches, fractions could send suggestions to the Commission on this.

The Women's Commission should also request that the leadership opens a discussion of the whole question of child-care. An issue that is in no way the responsibility of women's caucuses nor the Women's Commission to solve; unfortunately it is the case that women in the organisation have to initiate the discussion on this question.

Sensitivity to comrade's individual and personal situation in e.g. personal relationships, responsibilities for children, in the structuring of comrades' work and the demands placed on them, will be assisted by the contribution of women's caucuses.

The questions raised by the debate and experiences of the WLM must be evaluated and integrated into the **programme** of the revolutionary organisation. This programmatic development, and the intervention in the class struggle that flows from it, are the responsibility of the bodies which collectively develop the programme and activities of the organisation. The women comrades active in the WLM will make their contribution to this evaluation and integration particularly through the discussions of the WLM fraction, but also through the other structures set up to evaluate external areas of intervention (branch and national leaderships, commissions, fractions.)

The experience of the WLM will also be reflected in the contributions women comrades make in the discussion of sexism in the organisation, both in the women's caucuses and in the collective structures. In this way experiences of the WLM can be reflected in changes made in the practice of the organisation and will also enable women comrades to participate more fully in the organisation.

Women comrades have an enormous potential contribution to make to the life and politics of the organisation. This potential is still far from being realised, despite certain advances in theory and practice made by the IMG over the past few years. Only the establishment of women's caucuses will help to realise this principle. At least, we should free ourselves from all prejudice about this issue, and try to investigate the various positions and options open to the IMG as frankly and as carefully as possible. The aim is not to ghettoise women's issues and problems, but to make them the property of the IMG as a whole, and its concern. Women's caucuses will help to stimulate a more outgoing approach by women comrades rather than a concentration among themselves on informal discussion and unresolved conflicts.

Viability Views

The thought of a late abortion is obviously an emotive subject even within the abortion movement. At the National Abortion Campaign Conference last April a decision was reached, after widespread discussion, to push for no legal or medical restrictions on abortion. Judy Watson and Rose Knight explain why.

The discussion within NAC confronted these questions:

- Should women have a choice throughout pregnancy to terminate it, or should there be a limit?
- Is there a stage when the 'foetus becomes a 'baby' before it leaves the womb
- Should women only have the right to decide and then should a doctor/the state/society decide?

We believe a woman's right to choose means we must be able to decide if and when to have children. Full control of our fertility is essential if we are to control our lives.

A foetus is undeniably a **potential** human being but it does not yet have social, intellectual and emotional links. By 12 weeks all the organs of a foetus are functioning but the anti abortionists draw the line at conception.

In the abortion movement we accept that life has begun at conception but cannot agree that a foetus' life is more important or equally important to the womans. We believe that a womans actual life always outweighs a foetus' potential life so it should be **her** choice.

A woman is happy about her pregnancy may consider the foetus to be a 'baby' at 8 weeks. Another, who is unhappy, may consider the foetus as only an unwanted, upsetting change in her body and a potential misery.

What is a viability?

At present, viability (the point at which a foetus can survive independently of a woman's body) stands legally at 28 weeks. The Infant Life Preservation Act states that abortion is legal up to 28 weeks or viability. There have been reported cases of foetuses surviving at 25/26 weeks. Already SPUC is jumping on this point threatening to take up a test case on any doctor who carries out an abortion at 25 weeks as they claim this is now viability.

As medical science advances, it brings forward the point at which a foetus can survive outside the womb. This will create a situation where we will be forced to accept more and more restrictions to a woman's right to choose.

But many people have a cut off point at 7 months precisely because this is the point at which we are aware that incubators can help a foetus to survive and we know many people who were born at 7 months.

In a future society where we know people who were born at 4 months this would obviously produce a similarly emotive response at the thought of aborting 4 months foetuses.

This makes it clear that the 'medical' point of viability is really irrelevant, as we are talking about the principle of a woman being able to abort a foetus during the period in which it is part of her body. It is the aspect concerning her body we consider to be more important.

Not the church, not the state, not the doctors.

To set an upper time limit on abortion is to say to the pregnant woman "Yes, we believe in your right to make decisions affecting your body and your life for the first 12/20/24/28 weeks of your pregnancy--then it must be someone elses

FREE ABORTION ON DEMAND



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PLAY THE GAME

DON'T MAKE
THE RULES

decision"—the 'someones else' being the doctor or some other expert at living our lives for us. An upper time limit represents state intervention in our personal lives. We want the state to provide abortion facilities, we do not want it to tell us when we can use them.

We do not believe that our fertility or sexuality is an area in which we as women need protecting from ourselves.

Many of us would not choose to have a late abortion, but, we must realise that we have no right to generalise from such personal feelings and prevent other women from choosing termination at any stage.

We say "Not the church and Not the State" and we must be clear that neither can we ourselves decide another woman's fate. We cannot support "abortion on condition" of "abortion until a certain time" if we stand for a woman's right to choose.

This also raises the problem of what punishment we would give to women who did have late abortions—would we prosecute them? Is legislating against late abortions the way to ensure early abortions?

Early Safe Abortions

Given the medical complications in late abortion we do not believe women will take the decision lightly. At present 80% of NHS abortions take place within the first 12 weeks, 90% of those done by the charitable clinics, who do 2/3 of all private abortions. If we had no restrictions on a woman's right to choose and plenty of day care abortion clinics we have no doubt that these figures would be a lot higher. In a late termination, the medical procedures should be fully ex-

plained along with all the hazards and the woman should be left to make up her own mind. We want early safe abortions which will eradicate the need for late ones, but we cannot close our eyes to women's need for late abortions even under these circumstances.

What we want

To enable us to obtain a woman's right to choose in law, we would require the abolition of the Infant Life Preservation Act, the 1967 Abortion Act, and their replacement with a law stating that it is no offence to have or perform an abortion.

To extend this choice in law to a choice in practice we require improved facilities and sympathetic staff.

Under the NHS Reorganisation there is a duty laid on the Secretary of State to provide adequate contraceptive facilities. This should be extended to include facilities for abortion, specifying a certain level of facilities per area.

In NAC's campaign for day care abortion clinics we will be fighting to make this a reality, since we know that a change in the law would guarantee nothing.

Any gains we may achieve in law or around facilities will only be won through our self activity as women in a mass campaign challenging the role of Parliament in restricting our rights. We can only rely on our own strength as a self led women's struggle which has the support of and participation of the WLM, the student movement and sections of the labour movement.

We have to win support around the idea of a woman's right to choose legislation and what that entails in practice.

Letters



Belfast Women's Collective
C/O 52 Broadway,
Belfast 12.

Dear Sisters,

"**Socialist Woman**" recently published an article on the women's movement in Ireland. As the information concerning women in the north was far from complete, we would like an opportunity to make the following points.

We find it regrettable that "**Women and Ireland**" failed to acknowledge the existence (October '75 - May '77) of the Belfast Socialist Women's Group (SWG), which was instrumental in bringing women's issues to prominence amongst the revolutionary left and the republican movement. The only socialist women's organisation mentioned was the Andersonstown Women's Group. For a brief time, following an initiative by the SWG, a group was set up in Andersonstown; however, after the dissolution of the SWG in May '77, a new group - the Belfast Women's Collective - was formed. Members of the Collective include many previous SWG members, women from West Belfast, plus others new to the women's movement. . . . At the present time, no other women's group is active in anti-unionist areas. Members of the Collective attend RAC meetings and we have a delegate on the National Resistance Campaign Committee, which has been formed since the Coalisland Conference. We are currently involved in organising a nursery campaign in Twinbrook and we have just finished a highly successful week of activities in celebration of International Women's Day.

Finally, the article also ignored the paper "**Women's Action**" (the **only** women's paper in the 6 Counties), which was first produced by the SWG in June '76 and which continues to be published by the Collective.

Copies of "**Women's Action**" can be obtained (price 10p plus postage), by writing to the Collective at the above address.

Belfast Women's Collective.

c/o A Woman's Place
42 Earlham Street
London WC1.
20th April 1978.

Dear Sisters,

re: **Article by Woman and Ireland Group-Socialist Woman-Spring 1978 Issue.**

We are writing in reply to the letter from Belfast Women's Collective, a copy of which we have seen - perhaps you could print both of our letters together?

Before we answer our sisters' criticisms, we would like to point out some mistakes in the editing of our article.

Under the section on Irish Women United, the article says it "involved women from the Communist Party of Ireland and the Socialist Party of Ireland. The Official Sinn Fein didn't join." In fact what we wrote was "On the more radical side, a group called IWU grew out of a lesbian/feminist Dublin group and some women from left organisations. Women from groups like the CP of I, the SP of I and Official Sinn Fein (now Sinn Fein the Workers Party) **didn't** join."

In the last chapter (which we admit was far too brief) we in fact said "and a socialist women's group which amalgamated with a local Belfast group to form Andersonstown Women's Group (which was a reference to the Socialist Women's Group). The article was written before we received a copy of "**Women's Action Vol. 2 Issue 1**" which explained what the Belfast Women's Collective was doing. The writers mistakenly believed that since the SWG dissolved all energy was currently concentrated in Andersonstown (Women's Group).

Also edited out was "Women are also very much in the lead of relatives action committees, street protests against army harassment etc."

Having said all that, we do take the point from Belfast Women's Collective that the information in the article on women in the North was incomplete - and would ask them to keep us informed of events - we will endeavour to do our best this end.

We think it important to stress how hard it is for any women's movement to exist in Ireland - when that movement quite rightly aligns itself with the anti-imperialist struggle in the North which historically is both catholic and sexist, their difficulties are enormous. We in no way underestimate the essential role SWG and their paper "**Women's Action**" have played, and extend our solidarity and support to the Belfast Women's Collective.

Yours in struggle,
Women and Ireland Group,

WIRES



Want to know where your nearest women's group is? need help with the project you're writing on women's legal rights? like to know about women's theatre, film or music groups? want to contact other lesbians? Want to know more about Women's Aid or feminist publications? If you do you can write to WIRES, the national information and co-ordination service of the Women's Liberation Movement.

WIRES has been running successfully for nearly three years now. It was set up after the 1975 National Women's Liberation Conference as a central point of contact in the Movement, so that all groups could report their activities and keep in touch with what other groups are doing, as well as enabling more isolated women to find out about the various campaigns, projects and research going on all over the country. Such a co-ordination network is vital in a movement as diverse as ours, which is made up of local groups, and where much of the activity and information would otherwise remain unknown except to those most closely involved. Our files are fairly wide now, with contact addresses relevant to almost every subject you'd be likely to need. But they also rely on you to write regular reports and keep them fully up to date.

The fortnightly newsletter is a vital part of our work, with information, articles, reviews, debates, events, letters, and news from groups and campaigns. We'd like more women to write for the newsletter so that it can become a more lively reflection of the discussions going on in the movement. At present we take many of our articles from local newsletters, but we'd appreciate a wider indication of what other people see as important.

WIRES is run by a collective of 5 women and by 6 monthly meetings where any woman can come along with new ideas, criticisms, and suggestions. We have only just taken over in York and are only beginning to grapple with the problems involved so we welcome as much feedback as possible from all sisters. We are financed almost entirely by subscriptions, and we hope groups will be able to raise money for donations so we don't have to spend too much of our energy on fundraising—it's your paper too! Above all we need subscriptions—£6.00 p.a. for individuals (£4.00 if poor) and £12.00 p.a. for groups (which get sent 2 copies). We make a charge for adverts for groups not in the W.L.M.

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