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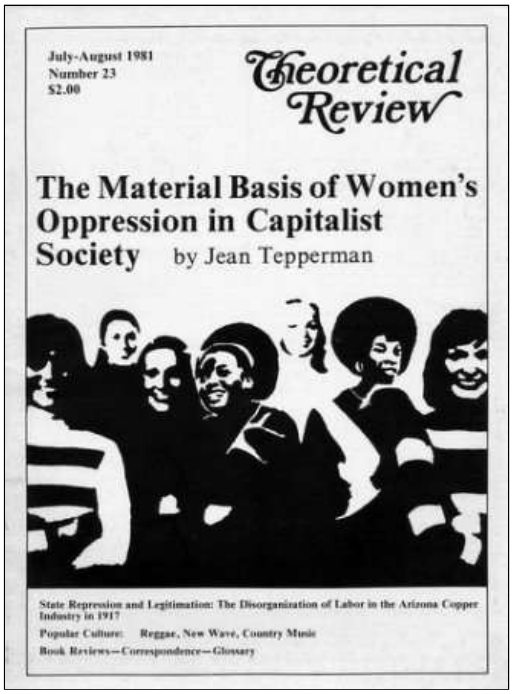
The Material Basis of Women's Oppression in Capitalist Society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The Material Basis of Women's Oppression in Capitalist Society by Jean Tepperman

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Purpose of the Paper

On the question of women's liberation, the Marxist-Leninist movement currently faces several related challenges: (1) The need to develop a basic theoretical understanding of women's oppression and women's liberation; (2) The need to speak to the large number of women with women's movement experience who see socialism and Marxism as necessary to women. Many of these women are organizationally homeless after political differences split the women's unions in

many cities, and many are dissatisfied with the alternatives of Marxist-Leninist and socialist-feminist ideology as they were presented in the debates leading to these splits. (3) The need to meet the challenge presented by the growth of the Right focusing to a great extent on issues of sex, women's liberation and family life (abortion, gay rights, ERA, etc.); (4) The need to address the changes in family life and sex roles in the working class: to speak to people's concerns about these issues and to understand how these changes affect our work in building a working class movement.

The last three challenges depend on theoretical development, which in turn is possible only by speaking to the realities of people's lives and learning from historical and current struggles of the women's movement as well as the Marxist-Leninist movement. But this theoretical development is hindered by incorrect ideas about the nature of women's oppression under capitalism and the connection between women's oppression and capitalism. Since few Marxist-Leninists have devoted much study to this question, there is a tendency to accept casually, certain traditional attitudes and responses as the "Marxist-Leninist" approach to women. This approach tends to narrow the question of women's oppression to issues related to the workplace: equal pay, anti-discrimination fights, affirmative action, etc.

This approach is an effort to analyze women's oppression in a Marxist, as opposed to "bourgeois feminist," framework. That goal is positive and achieving it is crucial to our movement. But such a narrow view of women's oppression will actually prevent us from developing an accurate Marxist analysis of women's oppression.

Most Marxist-Leninist would deny that they see women's oppression only in terms of the workplace. They are aware of a Marxist theoretical tradition linking women's oppression to an analysis of the family. But in public statements, many individuals and groups seem to be basing their political line on the assumption that the exploitation of women wage workers on the job is the fundamental material basis of women's oppression. An important current example of this problem is Point 13 of the Principles of Unity of the OC/IC:

> It is impossible to develop a revolutionary vanguard party without a vigorous struggle against all manifestations of sexism in every aspect of social life. The super-exploitation of women is a pillar upon which capitalism stands and the struggle against this exploitation is inextricably bound up with the struggle for revolution waged by the working class. The unity of men and women is critical to the struggle against sexism, i.e., men must take up the special demands of women. At present one arena of struggle is the women's movement. Within this movement communist women must take a leading role. Further, within the communist movement a firm struggle must be waged against male chauvinism– that is, the attitude in practice or words of male supremacy.

This point has many good aspects, including insistence on the importance of the struggle against sexism and identifying the women's movement as an important area for communist work. Its weakness lies in the way it draws the connection between sexism and capitalism. Whatever the intentions of the authors, this point implies that "super-exploitation" is the cornerstone of women's oppression under capitalism, and that this super-exploitation is also the main connection between women's oppression and capitalism. The logic of this line can be traced from its analysis of the source of women's oppression to its implications for program and strategy.

This line may not be held in its pure form by very many people. But its logic influences the movement to varying degrees, mixed together with other views. And many communist organizations operate practically on this line even though their actual theoretical analyses and strategies are somewhat more sophisticated.

For these reasons, it is important to expose this line to critical examination so we can see its implications, because it represents a serious theoretical and political error we must struggle against.

Implications of a "Super-Exploitation" Analysis

Before examining the issues, it is necessary to define some terms. Marxists use the term exploitation to refer to something very specific–the extraction of surplus value from wage workers by a capitalist. Super-exploitation is a term generally used to mean the extraction of a higher than usual rate of surplus value. For example, if two hours of the average person's daily work goes to surplus value, for the "super-exploited person" it might be three hours. The "super-exploited" person would have correspondingly lower wages. Groups such as national minorities and women, who have less power in the labor market, are usually seen as subject to this super-exploitation. In contrast to these specific terms, oppression is a very general one, meaning simply the domination of one person or group by another, and the resulting injustice and suffering experienced by the dominated person or group. Exploitation is only one type of oppression.

Super-exploitation of women workers is a real and important aspect of capitalist societies. Women are segregated into particular kinds of occupations, grossly underpaid compared to men, and pushed back and forth between job and home as capitalism's need for labor fluctuates–their ability to leave the workforce and become "housewives" makes them an ideal reserve labor force, and they are expected to have or find husbands to support them when their labor is not needed on the job market.

There is no doubt that this super-exploitation is an important part of the material basis of women's oppression under capitalism. But it is not the only, nor even the key aspect of this oppression. What are the implications of seeing super-exploitation of the job as key? One implication is that job discrimination is the key way sexism is maintained in capitalist society. This view deals with "women" basically as a subcategory of "workers" and presents their oppression as different quantitatively from men's (they are more exploited).

This in turn implies that change in this area is the key to liberating women. It goes along with the view that the family is part of the "superstructure" and will automatically change when the material base–capitalist production–changes. For example, when women earn equal pay, they will have equality in the family. This means that the key struggles for women are those against discrimination and for affirmative action. Another implication of this view is that there is no material basis for sexism in a socialist society, since sexism stems from capitalism's need for superprofits. This means that once capitalism is eliminated, the struggle to end sexism is a purely ideological one, without a continuing material basis.

In relation to men, this view implies that men oppose women's liberation, when they do, because of two factors: (1) their rivalry over jobs, and (2) the influence of bourgeois ideology. The main real contradiction between women and men is their division at work, which can be overcome by greater class consciousness and awareness of the need for working class unity. Men do not benefit from sexism and the struggle against it requires no sacrifices and changes on their part, except an ideological effort to stop looking down on women.

Because ending this discrimination is in men's interest as workers, and because its material basis will disappear under socialism, there is no need for a women's liberation movement as such.

Why Is the "Super-Exploitation" Analysis So Common?

There are good reasons why many communists want to see super-exploitation as the basic cause of women's oppression. It is important to show that sexism has a material basis and isn't just part of the "superstructure." In a capitalist society we must understand how all issues are linked to the basic contradiction between capitalists and workers. So it seems logical to look for this material basis in the worker-capitalist relationship of women to their bosses.

There are also some bad reasons why so much Marxist-Leninist discussion of women seems to be based on this "super-exploitation" analysis. These include:

(1) Misunderstanding of Marxism. Wage labor is the central, defining relationship in capitalist society. From this fundamental Marxist idea, some people draw the incorrect conclusion that wage labor is the fundamental aspect of the oppression of every person or group–no matter how important or unimportant wage labor actually is in their lives. This is a dogmatic use of Marxism, failing to make a specific analysis of each group's relation to production.

Marxism says that the character of the capitalist economy as a whole is determined by wage labor. But other forms of labor can be very important within a capitalist economy. This point may be clearer if we compare work in the home with peasant production. If peasants work a few days now and then for the local capitalist, this doesn't mean the basis of their oppression is wage work. Their condition as land tenants and petty commodity producers are much more important in shaping their lives. Their relationships to the state, the market system and the landowners are still important ones in their overall relationship to the means of production. Obviously, the participation of women in wage work is more significant that that of the peasants in this example. The point is that it is not a Marxist principle that their role as wage workers is the heart of women's oppression.

The super-exploitation analysis is also related to another error in interpreting Marxism. Some people are so anxious to prove that "everything is socially caused," "there is no such thing as human nature," etc. that they seem to come close to denying that there are biological differences between men and women and that these have something to do with their different social roles. (For instance, all societies have a social division of labor based on women's role as mother). It is true that these biological differences don't inevitably cause oppression. But it is also important not to pretend that

the capitalists invented the idea that there are any differences between men and women that have any significance for society.

(2) Tailism. The most important reason people tend to slip into the "super-exploitation" analysis is tailism. The discussion of super-exploitation keeps things on nice, safe ground when talking to workers, especially male workers. It's relatively easy to win progressive men to seeing the need for unity against the boss and struggle for equality at work. An analysis which included a critique of the family would be harder to talk about: it would raise the issue of women's need to struggle against men sometimes; it would mean probing into intimate and emotional issues that might scare people off. On the one hand we would be facing deeply-felt privatism–on the other we would be haunted by ultra "left" slogans of "radical feminists" and some Marxists, calling for smashing or abolishing families.

These are real problems, which will have to be dealt with sensitively in developing agitation and propaganda about women's oppression. But they are issues that must be confronted. It would be a serious mistake to ignore them in order to make our agitational tasks less complicated in the short run.

(3) Downplaying "Women's World." There is also an element of unconscious male chauvinism in the "super-exploitation" analysis. This analysis says material reality is the world outside the home–the world that has traditionally been men's. Women's lives and women's oppression are taken seriously to the extent that women participate in this traditionally male world. The really important role in which women are oppressed is the one they share with men–wage worker. The significance of the traditional "women's world"–the home and family–is ignored or downplayed, even in an analysis of women's oppression.

Elements of a Correct Analysis

If "super-exploitation" is not the key to understanding women's oppression, what is? It is important to see women's oppression as a total structure in which economic, historical and psychological factors all reinforce each other. The economic relationships create a context and set limits in which all the others operate. Traditions have been handed down for thousands of years. Early experiences in infancy and childhood shape the very core of our personalities according to certain conceptions of what it means to be female or male. The kinds of work expected from men and women differ greatly in a sexual division of labor affecting every area of life. Etc. etc.

Some Marxists have recognized the richness and complexity of this structure of sexism. Others have chosen to ignore many of its aspects. But in both the past and the present, most communists have maintained that if women could participate equally in work outside the home, all other aspects of sexism would more or less automatically be eliminated. The "super-exploitation" analysis implies that the main barrier to this change is capitalist discrimination in the workplace, due to the capitalists' need for superprofits.

In this paper I will argue that no amount of struggle on the job, and no amount of anti-discrimination and affirmative action efforts, could possibly eliminate women's oppression without

simultaneous deliberate measures to radically change the structure of the family. Equal employment efforts, by themselves, can never even bring about equality on the job.

The Marxist method tells us that the basic material reality of what people do to survive ultimately determines the nature of any social structure. But super-exploitation on the job is not the only aspect of women's material reality. There are at least three basic material realities in capitalist society that shape women's lives, in a complicated and changing pattern: (1) reproduction and child rearing, (2) work in the home, and (3) work for wages. It is a mistake to pick out one of these as a key in the sense that all the rest of women's situation automatically follows from it. But it is significant that it is women's reproductive role which defines her difference from men. Their other work somehow has to be adapted to their role as mother or potential mothers– systems of reproduction and child rearing have to be taken into account whenever any society makes use of women's labor in other areas. Of course, the social definition of the role of mother and arrangements for reproduction and child rearing vary greatly. These patterns must be compatible with the mode of production and level of economic development. The point is that women's roles in reproduction and production are dialectically interrelated and it is this dialectic which forms the basic material reality of women's role in society.

A full analysis of the material basis of women's oppression must include, in addition to women's wage work, the following elements:

(1) Reproduction. Engels' *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* is the only work of classical Marxism that tries to explain a systematic theory of women's oppression. In the introduction to that book Engels says:

> According to the materialistic conception, the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of immediate life. This, again, is a twofold character: on the one side, the production of the means of existence, of food, clothing and shelter and the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species.

It is important to note that in this passage Engels says that reproduction itself is part of the material basis of society. Understanding this would take us a long way toward overcoming the economism–the narrow focus on wage work–that dominates so much Marxist-Leninist thinking about women.

Engels goes on to say that the social organization for the propagation of the species is the family and that the state of development of the family is, together with the development of labor, the basis of organization of any society. What does he mean by this? What issues or questions does he deal with in discussing the development of the family and the status of women? Some of them are: control of women's sexual behavior, control of children (he meant within the family) and the economic dependence of women on men. Under modern conditions we would have to add the question of who controls women's reproductive powers, since the possibility of separating reproduction from sexuality has been created by effective birth control technology. We would also have to add the question of arrangements for the care of children, inside and outside the family. (In both these issues we can see that the state now plays a bigger role directly in women's lives as reproducers than it used to, although individual men still also have power over individual women in

these areas). We would also have to ask what is changing and what is remaining the same in the pattern of women's economic dependence on men.

One implication of this is that issues such as birth control, abortion, sterilization abuse, day care, welfare, etc., are not simply "superstructural" or "cultural" issues, but deal with an important part of society's material base.

(2) Housework. In most pre-capitalist societies, most work was done within the family unit. As capitalism developed, it divided work into public, socialized work and work that remained in the family. The more development takes place, the more work that used to be done in the family is brought into wage labor. Does this mean housework has become unimportant economically? No, for two reasons. One is that a tremendous amount of socially necessary work is still done in the home, mostly by women–the work women have always done, such as cooking, cleaning and sewing. In addition, new kinds of work, such as shopping, have been made necessary by the new ways production and distribution are organized.

Marxist economic theory has generally ignored the importance of the work women do in the home. In a recent article Paddy Quick, a Marxist economist, cites the above quote from Engels and comments:

> But while Marx analyzed the reproduction of the means of production (in particular in Volume II of Capital), he never completed his analysis of the production of human beings. Instead, in Capital, he made the initial simplifying assumption that labor-power is reproduced solely through the consumption of commodities purchased with the wage. In concrete capitalist societies, societies dominated by the capitalist mode of production, the reproduction of labor-power involves not only the direct consumption of commodities purchased with the wage, but also the consumption of use-values produced within the home (primarily by women.)[1]

Housework is necessary to the operation of the capitalist economy. Housework keeps workers physically and emotionally able to keep going back to work the next day, and helps the next generation of workers to grow up. With these tasks being done, the capitalist economy could not operate. And yet this work is not considered "real work" or a real part of the total economy, because it doesn't bring a paycheck. In spite of this, housework absorbs a tremendous amount of womanpower–more woman-hours than work outside the home. Some statistics given by another economist, Margaret Benston, illustrate this: "In Sweden, 2,340 million hours a year are spent by women in housework, compared with 1,290 million hours spent by women in industry. And the Chase Manhattan Bank estimates a women's overall work week at 99.6 hours."[2]

Marxist theory has not focused on this work because it is not wage labor, which is the type of labor that defines capitalist society. But understanding this work is important to understanding the situation of women in a capitalist economy, and to understanding the whole picture of how that economy operates.

One Communist Party theorist writing in the '40s, Mary Inman, tried to pinpoint the specific economic contribution of housework. She assumes that these tasks are done by full time housewives because she was writing some time ago. Although this is no longer true in many cases–the

economic function she points to still has to be performed, and the family is still the basic institution for doing these things:

> What has not been adequately taken into account is that people produce people, not solely by a biological process, but also by a social labor process. In the social labor process, as in the biological process, people do not produce people in general (merely by creating the material requirements of life: steel, coal, transportation, tools of production, food, etc.), but specific persons produce the human energy of specific persons, or perform one of the labor processes, or part of such a process, in such production.
> Uncooked and inedible foods, the products of other workers, come into the housewife's kitchen in the form of raw materials and by the consumption ... of a certain amount of tools of production, appliances, kitchen stove, pots and pans, etc., plus the consumption of a certain amount of the housewife's labor-power, these raw materials are transformed into the finished product: cooked foods.
> Since the objective of the housewife, however, is not merely the production of cooked foods, but of human energy, the cooked foods become in turn only one of the necessary raw materials for the production of the commodity: labor-power.
> If our housewife was concerned only with the cooked food production, when she finished the roast she might well leave it in the pan in the oven, but since that is not her objective, she must perform further productive labor upon it before it is ready to be eaten. . . steaks, chops, vegetables, salads, fruits and coffee . . . arrive safe and sound on the dining table by the expenditure of additional labor-power on the part of our friend the housewife.
> Her labor transforms soiled clothing that needs mending into clean clothing, ironed and with buttons sewed on, ready to be worn. Her 'living labor' seizes upon the rooms in disarray, and makes them comfortable and habitable again.[3]

I have quoted these passages at such length not because I agree with Inman's specific formulations, or the ways she characterizes housework in terms of Marxist economics– she is at times crude and incorrect. But the value of her descriptions is that they make housework visible. She shows that it is a crucial economic function. If "housewives" don't perform it, someone else has to. The issue of housework has too often been dismissed by Communists as a trivial concern of "bourgeois feminism." "Hassles over who does the housework" are political struggles, however limited, around a very important part of the material basis of women's oppression.

Women's Liberation and Economism

(1) What is Economism? As I understand it, economism is an error with two levels. As defined by Lenin in *What is to Be Done?*, economism is the belief that revolutionary consciousness and the revolutionary movement will grow spontaneously and directly out of the relationship between worker and boss on the job. Lenin's point was not merely that revolutionaries had to step in and point out the lessons of this direct economic struggle, but also that revolutionary consciousness and movements grow out of contradictions in many aspects of society:

> Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers only from without, that is, only from outside of the economic struggle, from outside of the sphere of relations between workers and employers. The sphere from which alone it is possible to obtain this knowledge is the sphere of relationships between all the classes and strata and the state and the government, the sphere of the interrelations between all the classes ... To bring political knowledge to the workers the Social Democrats must go among all classes of the population, must dispatch units of their army in all directions.[4]

More generally, economism is related to economic determinism, the view that the economy is the only dynamic force in society and all other aspects of society are simply and automatically dictated by its economic base. A more dialectical view sees many forces (the state, the culture, etc.) operating in a society, in complex and dialectical relationships. Among these, economic relationships set the context and the limits within which everything else must operate. These economic relationships also define the classes whose struggle provides the main dynamic moving society forward. But there is tremendous room for variation in different societies with different historical, political and cultural conditions, even with the same general economic system–and these other levels in turn have important effects on the relations of production and the class struggle. Engels wrote late in his life:

> According to the materialist conception of history, the ultimately determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. More than this neither Marx nor I has ever asserted. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the only determining one he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase.[5]

(2) Economism and Women. The"super-exploitation" line above is an example of economism. Sexism in all its levels is seen as simply "caused" by discrimination against wage workers on the basis of sex–liberation is seen as basically assured by eliminating discrimination on the job, and giving all women jobs.

Many Marxists go beyond this simplistic view and recognize that the family is part of the economic system and the relations of production, since the production and reproduction that take place in the family are indispensible to the operation of the economy. Even people who recognize this, however, can make economist errors in seeing the family only as an economic institution or, as Margaret Benston did, defining women as "that group of people who are responsible for the production of simple use-values in those activities associated with the home and family."[6] It seems she is missing something!

Analyses like this miss the crucial significance of the political, psychological and cultural aspects of the family, and the way these aspects are fused with economic functions. They fail to deal with the fact that sex roles are part of everyone's basic personality, shaped early in life, mainly by family experiences (to be reinforced later by the rest of society). Economist views ignore the importance of sexuality and sexual identity for women's oppression.

It could seem incompatible with historical materialism to assume that gender-related characteristics of men and women are biologically determined. And yet it is impossible to believe that people's most basic sense of themselves as male and female, and what that means in important and sensitive areas of life, is irrelevant to the system of sexism. We must understand the relationship of these issues to capitalism, and how socialist society might deal with them.

Strategic and Programmatic Implications

A deeper analysis of the nature of women's oppression leads us to more complex theoretical and strategic tasks. These tasks require more resources, since the answers do not come easy. And in this

area especially, we can succeed only through the serious application of the mass line–by finding ways to draw on what women themselves think about their complicated situation. We need to develop an analysis of the crisis in family and sexual relations that can guide strategy on these issues, as well as a deeper understanding of the place of wage work in women's lives.

(1) Program. In making this analysis we will still give a very important place to women's struggles against sexism on the job. Not because this area is the key to everything, but because it is the area where women's struggles are most clearly and easily related to class struggle. These struggles provide an important connection between the women's movement and the workers movement. They also organize women who are brought together daily by their jobs, and who have the power of all wage workers–to produce or stop production.

But in dealing with the reality of the lives of women, our demands have to go beyond the workplace. Left literature is full of references to the fact that women work a "double shift"–one on the job and one at home. But the left usually confines its demands to improvements in paid jobs. How does this deal with the "double shift"? Sometimes left groups add a demand for day care. This is fine, but it fails to deal with the "double shift" at all, since women's job in the home takes place before and after their paid jobs, when the children are not in day care.

Communists correctly oppose Wages for Housework on a number of grounds–but where is our analysis and program that speaks to women's oppression as mothers and workers in the home? Communists often dismiss the "bourgeois women's movement" for its petty squabbling about how men should do housework and child care. But the struggle around the division of labor in the home is an attempt, however limited, to deal with a crucial part of the material basis of women's oppression, and should be supported and seen as important by communists.

The usual communist program for women workers includes fighting job discrimination, affirmative action (if we are lucky), maternity leave, and day care. This program fails to speak to the pattern of work life of the vast majority of women who leave the workforce completely or partially for a number of years when their children are small. We should broaden our ideas about demands that deal with the conflict between the roles of worker and mother. In this context we need to see the importance of demands for rights and benefits for part time workers, and for training and placement of women who are re-entering the workplace, as well as a vigorous fight against age discrimination. Family allowances, common in many European countries, are also reform measures that address these real problems.

It may be objected that if maternity leave and day care were really adequate, these other provisions would not be necessary because women would not take much time off full-time work to have children. This may or may not be correct as a vision of how things would be in a fairly developed socialist society. But in the US today, most women–and especially most working class women–want to stay home with their small children, at least part of the day. They find raising their children more meaningful than working to produce surplus value, and hold views of child rearing that call for a parent to be around a good deal in the early years. It seems to me very arrogant for communists to dismiss these views as backward–especially given the fact that few have much

knowledge of children or have made serious studies of child development and working class family life.

The demand for adequate welfare is another essential element in any program that deals with the economic basis of women's oppression. Women must be able to raise children on their own, if they are to have any hope of gaining equality in marriage (if he knows you're trapped, what power do you have?) or of freely choosing whether or not to be married.

Finally, as mentioned before, the movements for reproductive rights–birth control, abortion, and the power to refuse sterilization–should be seen as struggles around the material basis of women's oppression, and not as "secondary," "cultural" or whatever. Whether you're having a baby or not is a pretty important reality–and the question of who makes that decision is a crucial part of the "social relations of reproduction."

(2) The Women's Movement. Another strategic issue, aside from what demands are important, is what the women's movement should be. It seems that a "super-exploitation" analysis would lead to the conclusion that any women's movement that communists support would be a minor sub-group within the workers' movement. Since women's oppression is basically seen as only quantitatively different from men's, no special movement would be needed. The impression is given that the only way to make sure a women's movement is really on the side of the working class is to confine the worker's movement to organizing workers around job issues.

But women's oppression involves some qualitatively different material realities from men's oppression, as well as many of the same ones. So women need a special movement through which they can fight against their own oppression, as well as participation in the workers' movement, national liberation movements, and others where they share common oppression with men. The women's movement is an important base for revolution in itself and not only insofar as it is part of the workers movement. Its class stand will be determined by political struggle. It will be an ally of the working class if we successfully develop and present a convincing Marxist analysis and strategy for the whole range of issues in the women's movement.

(3) The Relationship of Men to Women's Liberation. The relationship of men to women's liberation is pretty simple, if you go by the "super-exploitation" analysis. Since men are equally powerless as workers, and in no way benefit from sexism, we can appeal to their class interest to show them they should resist the super-exploitation of women. It is a good idea–as far as it goes. But on some level we all know this does not speak to many of the main problems between men and women!

A dialectical materialist analysis of the family does not lead to the strategy of fighting against men as men. It would be idealist or biological determinist to think that men are oppressive just because they are male. Basic class analysis tells us that individual men acting wrong does not determine the structures of sexism. These structures have evolved historically, through the interaction of family and work, the mode of production and the mode of reproduction.

However, the nature of these structures at present is male supremacy. Males have power over females in many ways but resting ultimately on their economic power as the main breadwinners in

the family. This role is in turn oppressive to men in many ways. But in relation to women it still gives men real power. They use this power to get many benefits at the expense of women: they often exploit women sexually and emotionally; they are fed, clothed, cleaned up after, soothed and presented with children whom they can care for only as much as they feel like it, and hand over when they are a pain in the neck. The fact that capitalists benefit from this work does not eliminate the fact that men also benefit from it.

If women are to be free, men have to do more than support their struggle against the boss for equal pay. Men have to change. They have to do work they have always felt was beneath them. They have to learn skills and sensitivities that have been seen as exclusively female (she will not leave housework and child care to him unless he does it well and takes it seriously; she will not feel her burden of responsibility for personal relationships lighten until others take on that responsibility). We can see that these changes give men an opportunity to grow in new and rewarding ways. They also strengthen the working class movement, by helping men develop stronger class consciousness in giving up the false image of themselves as individualistic lord and master in the home. But sacrifices are also part of these changes.

Change in family structure requires several simultaneous approaches: changes in women's jobs, to give them a base of independence; change in the policies of the state, to create laws and social services necessary for women's equality; and direct struggle on the level of family structure itself: to change power relations within the family, and to free people to choose whether to live in conventional families or create other forms for personal life. If this direct struggle at the level of family structure does not take place, changes in employment and state policies will not be enough.

(4) Women's Liberation and Socialist Revolution. It is important to make clear that without socialist revolution the changes necessary to liberate women are impossible. However, it is also important to remember that the most consistent and leading force for socialist revolution is the working class, and that the core of working class strength lies in organization at work. This paper has been talking about what it would take to liberate women, not about what it would take to make a socialist revolution–in practice these processes are inseparable, but we have to distinguish them in theory in order to be precise about either.

Women as women must organize to fight for their own liberation before, during and after a socialist revolution. But women as a group can't be the leading force in that socialist revolution–although women can and must play leading roles. This is because the category "women" includes many people whose class interest is unclear or contradictory. These people have many tendencies to try to deal with sexism through individual efforts, such as careerism, self-help and struggles that remain purely on the psychological level. These efforts are doomed to failure, since sexism is rooted in the structure of capitalist society itself. But many of these women are torn between their class interest and their desire to make the changes necessary to overcome their oppression as women. Many petty bourgeois women can be won to socialist revolution because they can see it is the only way for women to be liberated.

But working class women will have to be the leading force in a socialist women's movement–and under capitalism the women's movement will always contain some sections dominated by the petty

bourgeoisie and bourgeoisie. It is important to unite with as many of these groups as possible in particular reform struggles, while politically pushing for an alliance with the working class and clarity about the working class as the leading force in th struggle for socialism.

(5) Women's Liberation in Socialist Societies. Differences in analysis also lead to different views on the struggle for women's liberation in socialist societies. Some people may feel it is pointless to speculate on how things will work out after the revolution, beyond a statement of good intentions ("the liberation of women is a basic principle of communism," etc.). But people we are trying to win to socialism will–and should–demand more than that. If we say "socialism will liberate women" they will ask "How?"

If you believe the "super-exploitation" analysis, the answer is easy: by giving women equality at work and bringing them into social production. One recent example of this simple faith that jobs will mean liberation was the *Guardian* summary of "victories" for women in 1978. They included the fact that more women hold jobs as simply a "victory." They ignored the fact that in the context of current family structures and job requirements, many of these women are miserably overworked and their family lives disrupted. Many of those women who got jobs in 1978 certainly saw it as a victory–and this process of women moving out of exclusive involvement with the home is certainly progressive. But under the concrete conditions of this society, for many women that move was a hardship, not a victory. Women's own experience, plus the example of socialist countries, both show that jobs do not necessarily bring equality.

(In discussing socialist countries, I am not going to deal with the question of whether all these countries are really socialist. It is important to consider that question in relation to women's liberation–if we think the USSR, etc., are not really socialist countries, but China, say, is, what is the relationship between failures to develop socialism and failures to liberate women? For now I will use the term "socialist" in quotes and leave out this question.)

The various "socialist" countries have a great variety of programs and ideas relating to women. They all have two things in common: (1) Women have made tremendous progress under socialism, and (2) women are still second class citizens everywhere–paid less, working at lower level jobs, grossly underrepresented in leadership, especially top leadership, doing most of the housework and child care. These realities must also be reflected in personal relationships between men and women.

Why are women in this inferior position when they have job equality and participate in social production? Well, they left work for a while to have children, so thay have less seniority; they were having children at the age when men were receiving advanced training and so missed out on that; but mainly it is that they have too much to do–taking care of the house, shopping, cooking and spending time with their children.[7] Attacking women's oppression only (or mainly) through changes on the job is self-defeating, since job equality is impossible without major changes in women's family roles and in the expectations and resources for full time workers outside the home.

The structure of families is not "natural" or biologically determined. It also cannot be mechanically derived from the relations of production. It is not obvious that "relations of reproduction" are best or most compatible with socialism. The great variety of "socialist" countries

shows that socialism doesn't automatically produce a certain type of family structure. A few examples of the range of ideas and practices:

(1) In Cuba and the USSR, much effort is made to remove the stigma of illegitimacy, supporting unmarried mothers, and distributing birth control regardless of marital status. In China pre-marital sex is considered scandalous and an illegitimate child a disaster.

(2) In the Soviet Union there have been efforts (mostly in the twenties, but also in the sixties) to deliberately break, or at least drastically weaken, family ties. Soviet reformers reasoned that people would be more collective-minded without families. They have sometimes, like in the sixties, pushed plans for getting all children over a certain age (such as seven) out of their parents' homes and into boarding schools, where "experts" would do a "better job" raising them. Parentless children are cared for in group homes because that is seen as a more advanced living situation than families anyway. At the other extreme, some Eastern European countries are considering paid three-year maternity leaves, arguing that ties between parents and children in the early years are psychologically important and can be best built if the mother stays home. (Also the ratio of caretakers to children needed for high quality care of very young children makes it doubtful whether there are any economies of scale in institutional child care.) In the middle, Cuba and China value family ties but encourage women to return to full time work very soon after children are born– six weeks to a year. China promotes a policy of getting all parentless children adopted, because it is felt it is better for children to live in families.

(3) In the USSR and Eastern Europe, men do virtually no housework. The state argues that with the development of communism, housework will be "socialized," so sharing it with men is a reformist and bourgeois demand. In Cuba and China, the state pushes for men to do housework–in Cuba, with the force of law.

The traditional Marxist slogans of "abolishing the family" and "industrialization housework" are crude and vague. They raise images of impersonal, barracks-type living, children separated from parents, etc. Some Marxists have interpreted them this way and argued that this is a positive vision of the future (like some Soviet reformers). Most communists in the US choose to ignore this inadequate tradition of family theory and fall back on an economism which deals the current family structure will remain the same, or that changes in jobs will result spontaneously in "equality" (which is pretty vague).

If we just waver between these two inadequate poles, we will never convince women that socialism will liberate them. We will be caught in a bind like this:

Communist: "Socialism will give women job equality and day care centers and this will make them equal."
Women: "What about all the housework and child care we do after 'work'? What about the years we spend at home when children are little? (etc. etc.–in other words, what about the family?)"
Communist: "Don't worry, we're going to abolish the family and socialize housework and child care."
Women: "Take our kids away and raise them in big institutions? Live in barracks? Forget it!"

If we say that is not what we mean–what do we mean? That vision of the future is not acceptable to most people. But if the present family structure–and the requirements and hours of jobs–remain the same, women will continue to be caught in this contradiction. In resolving the contradiction between women's roles inside and outside the family, the goal is not necessarily to reduce family life and the parent-child relationship to such a minimum that it no longer conflicts with the full time work week as it has evolved under capitalism–nor to reproduce labor power with the most large-scale, efficient methods possible.

All children over the age of six weeks could spend 45 hours a week in day care so both parents could work full time. On the other hand it would also be possible to allow parents–women and men–of very young children to work fewer hours with no economic loss, in recognition of their job as parents–or for one parent to take an extended leave.

Socialism opens up new possibilities for society to choose how to organize the activities that have taken place in families. How can families or other living groups meet the important needs families now meet, without continuing to be traps for women (and for men and children too)? How can we re-integrate personal or family life with social production in a way that meets people's needs, individual and collective? How can we combine the roles of worker and parent in a way that is best for children, parents and society? How can we make sure that women–even mothers!–are economically independent of men: so their relationships with men will be equal, and so they can freely choose whether or not to be in relationships with men?

The question of women's liberation forces us to deal with these issues, or our ideas about women's liberation will be superficial, unconvincing, and ultimately wrong. It is our responsibility to study the structure of women's oppression and the experiences of other countries and come up with ideas about what women's liberation would mean in socialist society. Otherwise how can we hope to persuade women that women's liberation is really possible, and that socialism is necessary to that liberation?[8]

Conclusion

This paper is not an analysis of women's oppression in the US, but it does offer some ideas about what framework we should use when we begin to make such an analysis. Its purpose is to stimulate discussion so we can work together on moving forward in that analysis.

I have argued that the material basis of women's oppression under capitalism lies in the contradiction between their responsibilities for reproduction and housework in the home and participation in socialized labor outside the home. This contradiction leads to the dependence of women on men, which is the material basis for sexism in the working class family.8 This contradiction is in turn seized upon and manipulated by capitalists in order to squeeze superprofits out of the labor of women in wage work.

This pattern cannot be eliminated unless capitalism itself is eliminated. Class struggle is the only force capable of moving society forward from one mode of production to another: of making a revolution. But the struggles of women for their own liberation must be an important part of that

revolutionary process: providing the working class with an important ally – the women's movement – and strengthening the class struggle by encouraging the full and equal participation of working class women. A socialist revolution will not automatically liberate women, but it will create, for the first time, conditions which make it possible for the struggle for women's liberation to succeed.

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Endnotes

[1] Paddy Quick, "The Class Nature of Women's Oppression," p. 43.

[2] Margaret Benston, "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation." *Monthly Review*, Sept., 1969, p. 17.

[3] Mary Inman, *The Two Forms of Production Under Capitalism*, pp. 23, 25, and 29.

[4] Lenin, *What is to Be Done?* Chinese edition, p. 98.

[5] Engels, "Letter to Joseph Bloch," in Lewis Feuer ed. *Letters of Marx and Engels*, pp. 397-8.

[6] Benston, p. 16.

[7] The description of women's status in socialist countries is drawn from many scattered sources. Especially useful to me were: Delia Davin, *Woman-Work, Women and the Party in Revolutionary China*, Oxford University Press, 1976; Claudia Broyelle, *Women's Liberation in China*, The Harvester Press, 1977; Hilda Scott, *Does Socialism Liberate Women?* (mostly about Czechoslavakia), Beacon Press, 1974; William Mandel, *Soviet Women*, Anchor Books, 1975.

[8] This is very similar to the main point made in the Paddy Quick article cited above. There are some differences–I think she doesn't think housework is a significant factor and focuses much more exclusively on women's dependence during the time their children are small. But in trying to argue that sexism in the working class family has a material basis and is not just the result of copying the ruling class family, she is going beyond the Origin of the Family in a very important way.

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