

ON THE WOMAN QUESTION

A Critical Approach to Marx and Feminism

Women, Wages and Labour during the Industrial Revolution



NEW YORK CITY.—THE SEWING-ROOM AT A. T. STEWART'S, BETWEEN NINTH AND TENTH STREETS, BROADWAY AND FOURTH AVENUE.—See Page 107.

A significant contributing factor to the current trend of conceptualising 'gender' as a standalone form of oppression is a lack of familiarity with its application throughout history as the *intense ideological enforcement* of material female oppression. Here, it is useful to explore periods of history where the significance of sex (as opposed to gender) is particularly evident, and how this relates to the mode of production.

Towards the end of the 18th century, capitalists required a rapidly-expanding working population to meet skyrocketing production demands and so the Industrial Revolution saw a mass reorganising of the peasantry. Industrialisation needed to achieve two things: reorganise *where* the peasantry lived; and reorganise *what* the peasantry did. Condensing the population into smaller spaces allowed for wage suppression through competition and made way

for the social and biological control of the population. However, despite an increased concentration of male labour in cities, the population was still too low to suit mass exploitation.

The response to this dilemma was the conservative movement to compel women to marry and reproduce, thus producing more male offspring to join the workforce and more female offspring to join the domestic workforce. The continuation of reproductive labour was made even more important given that child labour was a valuable commodity and infant mortality was incredibly high. Women's reproductive labour, therefore, was exploited to maintain the cycle of increased production and wage suppression, concentrating wealth in the hands of the bourgeoisie. The proletariat as a large urban workforce was quite literally born out of urbanised women. In summary: the bourgeois Industrial Revolution would not have been possible without the domination of women's reproductive cycles.

However, it is important to note that the campaign to encourage women to take up household life was not due to the limited labour potential of the female worker (technological advances around this time actually made more work accessible to women than ever before). Her subjugation was purely because her reproductive labour is *more valuable* to the exploiter class than her economic labour. Males, meanwhile, can *only* contribute to capital accumulation through wage labour. In short, men are a means of production; women are a means of production *and* a means of reproduction. Women's productive labour was also valuable to the capitalist in terms of wage suppression. Writing in 1889, Clara Zetkin noted that 'the capitalists...are not content just to exploit women per se; they use female labor to exploit male labor even more thoroughly'. Female labour was cheap; unlike their male counterparts, women were not expected to support their family financially. Their wages

were proportionately lower, thus women's labour was used to suppress the wages of men through competition. Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm echoes this sentiment in *The Age of Revolution*, asserting that it was 'more convenient to employ the tractable (and cheaper) women'.

Somewhat predictably, women made up a large proportion of the workforce in industries which can be seen as an extension of domestic labour — the textile industry, for example. Hobsbawm states that 'out of all workers in the English cotton mills in 1834-47 about one-quarter were adult men, over half women and girls'. So, when proletarian women were not incapacitated by their obligation to reproduce, they were exploited in industries deemed befitting of women. In any case, woman's exploitation is either directly sex-based (birthing offspring to expand the workforce), or indirectly sex-based (her cheap labour can be used to drive down the wages of men). Sex-based roles of working men and women were enforced by rigid sex-stereotypes and social expectations. This ideological oppression was theorised as the separate spheres of public and domestic life, to which men and women belonged, respectively. So, whilst advances were being made in women's on-paper legislative rights (suffrage, education etc), these were significantly offset by the immense social pressure upon women to exist within the constraints of the domestic sphere — where marriage, childbirth, childcare and housekeeping were her sole prospects.

These changing social and economic circumstances also gave proletarian men motivation to utilise the reproductive labour of women to survive. Prior to industrialisation, the rural peasantry (whose labour was of a sustainable or low-surplus productive nature) were generally organised into family units. In a small, domestic farming setting, a single person can sustain themselves with their

own labour and so, as their family unit grows, the labour required to sustain it grows proportionately. In rural settings, there is little economic necessity to form or grow the family unit other than to form social networks between villages and towns. Where family units did form and grow, each family member (man, woman and child) was required to contribute their labour proportionately. Whilst the labour of the rural peasantry was solely for sustainability, bourgeois industrialisation demanded *surplus* labour.

The labour demands of men within new industrialised settings were exponentially higher than before but wages were pitiful — unlike in rural settings, the fruits of men's labour were now barely enough to cover subsistence. Due to this wage suppression, men often used the wages of wives and children to supplement their poor income. Conversely, the fettering of women's wage-earning potential combined with an economy centred on male production rendered woman's entire survival dependant on her ability to marry a man. This created an unequal economic relationship — in which women were forced to rely on the wages of her husband for survival whilst his position was complemented by her domestic and waged labour. In this way, the bourgeoisie relied on proletarian men to enforce the subjugation of women within the home. In other words, working class men perpetuated the oppression of working class women indirectly on behalf of the bourgeois by making her his domestic servant, taking her wages to supplement his own and treating her as his social inferior.

Establishing women as domestic servants in order to maintain the workforce clearly benefits individual men (as well as the ruling class). Despite changes in the mode of production, women's role as domestic servant has remained ever-present. After all, why would men object to social conventions, gender roles and the institutions of marriage and family which gift them women who cook, clean, care

and child-rear for them? Too often, this inequality and exploitation is not subjected to political analysis due to it taking place in the private, domestic sphere between individual men and women. Unfortunately, so many left wing men are all too happy to wax lyrical about revolutionary communist politics in Zoom meetings whilst their wives get dinner ready, do the laundry, clean the house and get the kids to bed. Indeed, much left wing hostility to feminist politics is due to men's fear that revolutionary women will demand equality in the home — something most men will simply not allow. Despite hundreds of years having passed since the Industrial Revolution, there is clearly much work to be done regarding women's oppression within her own home.

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