

# SOCIALIST WOMAN

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women's sexuality  
the family allowance campaign

8p

**Introduction**

This issue of Socialist Woman has been produced independently for the Editorial board by an informal collective of women, some of us in the International Marxist Group, some of us not, but all active in the women's liberation movement. The main attempt of the issue is to make a contribution to the discussion on women's sexuality in the women's liberation movement, and it was agreed to publish contributions received without any editorial restriction. The issue therefore has no political "line".



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**Compatible ?**

"That woman was the slave of man at the commencement of society is one of the most absurd notions that have come down to us from the period of the Enlightenment of the Eighteenth century. Woman occupied not only a free but also a highly respected position among all savages and all barbarians of the lower and middle stages and partly even of the upper stage . . . The communistic household in which most of the women or even all the women belong to one and the same gens, while the men come from various other gentes, is the material foundation of that predominancy of women which generally obtained in primitive times . . . the reports of travellers and missionaries about women among savages and barbarians being burdened with excessive toil in no way conflict with what has been said above. The division of labour between the two sexes is determined by causes entirely different from those that determine the status of women in society. Peoples whose women have to work much harder than we would consider proper often have far more real respect for women than our Europeans have for theirs."

(F. Engels. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Selected Works Marx Engels (one vol.), p. 489-90)

" . . . Women throughout history before the advent of birth control were at the continual mercy of their biology - menstruation, menopause, and "female ills", constant painful childbirth, wetnursing and care of infants, all of which made them dependent on males (whether brother, father, husband, lover, or clan, government, community at large) for physical survival. That human infants take an even longer time to grow up than animals, and are thus helpless and for some short period at least dependent on adults for physical survival.

That a basic mother/child interdependency has existed in some form in every society past and present, and thus has shaped the psychology of every mature female and every infant.

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That the natural reproductive difference between the sexes led directly to the first division of labour at the origins of class, as well as furnishing the paradigm of caste (discrimination based on biological characteristics)."

(Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, p.8-9).

# Notes

## IN LIEU OF AN EDITORIAL

It seems to me that to try to examine women's sexuality in a vacuum, abstractly, is a trap; that it is necessary to examine the social context in which women's sexuality is defined. The standpoint from which this can be begun is marxism; the social context that of capitalism. Using this perspective, how does an analysis of women's sexuality appear.

The idea that any society has two aspects — its relations of production and its reproduction of those relations of production is fundamental to marxism. Engels writes, "According to the materialistic conception, the determining factor in history is, in the last resort, the production and reproduction of immediate life. But this itself is of a twofold character. On the one hand, the production of the means of subsistence, of food clothing and shelter and the tools requisite therefore; on the other the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species." (Preface to 1st ed. of the Origin of the Family.) In fact, scientific marxist analysis has concentrated overwhelmingly on the relations of production and on the material, technological aspect of the reproduction of the relations of production. While the position of women is affected by both aspects, our oppression is intimately bound up with the second aspect, the reproduction of the relations of production, and therefore marxists have systematically underestimated the significance of our oppression. To some extent this neglect is added to by the metaphor of society being divided into base and superstructure, the latter being determined by the former; emphasis is directed to the primary determinant. But the reproduction of the relations of production is as essential to capitalists as production itself. The other thing is that given a society of structured inequality between the sexes most marxist theoreticians have been men, the few women like Rosa Luxemburg have been a small element in a male dominated environment, and out of the most elemental division of labour of all, the one Shulamith Firestone lays such emphasis on, men's existence has centred much more around the area of production, making it harder for them to understand the theoretical significance of the other aspect. From the point of view of the analysis of the position of women in society, there seems to be significance in two aspects of the relations of production; those workers who are women are exploited as all workers by selling their labour power as a commodity whose price is determined by its (socially defined) cost of reproduction and not by the value of the labour performed. Secondly, in the realization of surplus value through the sale of commodities on the market, women's sexuality (in a perverted form) has become an important stimulus to sale (whether in a picture on an advertisement hoarding, or in the person of the woman provided to entertain the executive in the process of the conclusion of a "deal"). In regard to the reproduction of the relations of production, two aspects also stand out as crucial. Firstly, women's position in regard to the reproduction of the labour

force, ie the position in the family, perhaps the most important determinant of all, and secondly in the reproduction of acceptance of the relations of production, in which the division of labour deriving from women's position in the reproduction of the labour force is transformed into individual and collective division of the working class — individual in that each family unit involves a hierarchy — father — mother — children, and collective in that the whole group women, are seen by male workers as inferior to the whole group men, both serving to deflect the frustrations of the class as a whole from the real enemy — capitalism. The characteristic position of a woman in the working class family situation involves economic dependence, on the husband, relatively isolated social situation, and a relatively greater degree of exposure to T.V. and other capitalist mass media. If she follows the models set up for her, her existence will be centred round her children, whose "welfare" comes before any other loyalties, and whose upbringing takes on a possessive quality, an exclusivity which is an attempt to give meaning to a meaningless world. If all goes well, the new generation of producers and reproducers will be reared, accepting their respective roles without too much difficulty, the process of reproduction of the labour force will at the same time divide the working class so that women will have negative attitudes to struggles around productivity which will seem to threaten their immediate interests, and men negative attitudes to struggles around reproduction (i.e. community struggles, which centring on women are seen as inferior and separate).

So women are subordinated in regard to the reproduction of the relations of production and in the productive process itself. In capitalism the pre-existing family form and subordination of women has been adapted so that the central oppression of women centres round their role of reproducers of the relations of production in the family, but this should not be seen as the exclusive problem, as Mariarosa Dalla Costa tends to do, although it is important that we give great emphasis to it, because it is the great neglected area of marxist analysis. In fact the subordination of women in all these spheres is not merely a series of separate subordinations, but is linked together in sets of combinations so that each aspect weakens a woman's position in any other. Some examples: a woman with a family and not working is dependent economically and therefore weak; if she tries to reduce this dependence by going out to work, she can be stigmatized for neglecting her family. If she tries to conform to the images of sexploitation conveyed by the commercial world around her, she can equally be stigmatized as flighty, neglecting the kids, while if she does not she may no longer be attractive to her husband. For a young working girl, the thought of her "destiny" as a housewife may lead her to give little thought to her position as a worker, so that she is content with relatively low wages, a limited range of jobs, and does not demand training, weakening her

whole future position as a producer, and enabling women to be used as cheap labour and partly as a reserve army of labour by the employers. In order to become a housewife and mother she has to find "Mr. Right", which also distracts her from giving attention to other, non-central tasks, and in searching how to find Mr. Right, she is presented with sets of models and advice, to live up to which she must modify her developing personality into sets of stereotypes which, expressed as ideals in a host of sources, become another source of insecurity and self-absorption, for if she in any way falls short of the ideal, that can become a source of feelings of inadequacy. And so on in many permutations.

No wonder that women seek security where they can, in the marriage ritual, in religion, no wonder that they are subject to hysteria, "irrationality", and form the greater part of the mental hospital population. No wonder that a generalized psychological dependency is created, in which woman seeks to avoid the multiple contradictions of her position by leaving the decisions to the man, for no decision that she takes within the framework of capitalist convention can lead her into anything but a new problem. Yet her own evasion of decision reinforces further subordination.

So the different sources of oppression combine into a structured subordination in which all aspects of activity are negative in relation to others. It is within this context that female sexuality is defined; not by women themselves within an equal relationship, but by men in a relationship of inequality. Women become objects; some can be works of art, others merely have a use. A woman is not sexual – she is sexually attractive; her sexuality becomes that which attracts men. If plumpness is prized at a given historical moment, she is sexually attractive if she is plump; if slimness, that is her "sexuality"; if tit and bum, then that object quality becomes her sexuality. Thus sexual definitions are imposed by men in a situation of inequality. The nature of sexual contact is also defined for her. She may be merely a receptacle for sperm and a moment of male satisfaction, or the object around which men build their sexual fantasies; always heterosexual relations are defined in terms of penetration, although the main source of genital sexual excitation in women is the clitoris. A multitude of psychological "theories" justify this situation.



"Man is the nurturer of sex, a gardener cultivating the blossoms of sensuality, which flower or fade according to his dexterity" (P. Gebhard, *The Sexuality of Women*). In psychoanalytic terms, the transference

from clitoral to vaginal sexual response marks the development of the "mature", i.e. *male determined* woman. To this sorry amalgam is added a brew of general ignorance and mystique of the female body, which latter adds to its object qualities among more romantically oriented middle class males. The deification of women as expressed in extreme form in for example Rider Haggart's *She*, is merely the mirror image of her dehumanization in most sexual relationships.

The process of the emancipation of women therefore involves not merely her contribution as an organized worker to the class struggle in production, not only her crucial role in the class struggle in the reproduction of the relations of production centring round the home and community, but also her struggle in relation to her sexual subordination and objectivication, the struggle for self-definition and self-respect, without which neither of the other struggles can be effectively carried on by women, thus ensuring the failure or perversion of the revolution. In fact, since the roots of the subordination of women are not separate, but mutually interacting and reinforcing so the struggle for liberation is also an interaction of these different aspects.

The women's liberation movement therefore challenges two deep seated axioms of the marxist revolutionary movement – that the struggle in production is overwhelmingly of greater importance than the struggle over the reproduction of the relations of production, and that personal redefinition is peripheral to the pre-revolutionary situation, a subject for the post revolutionary period. That is why the "petty activities of middle class feminists" in demystifying women's sexuality, in seeking life styles not subordinated to men, in discovering that in relations with other women they can achieve sexual satisfaction, in starting self-inspection groups in order to understand and begin to control the sexual aspects of their biology, etc., etc. are in fact part of the necessary process by which revolutionary women can come to play an equal and unhumiliated part in creating the permanent revolution. Also of course essential to this process is our right to self-organization, to decide and lead our own political campaigns. For in a situation of inequality deeply integrated into the capitalist system formal equality merely perpetuates inequality; the development of a real revolutionary equality demands a period and an area of real inequality – in our favour. The pain which this process of liberation causes even the male revolutionary is inevitable, for revolutionary woman has no need of man – sexually, emotionally or intellectually. She chooses to associate with him on terms mutually agreed between *real* equals, for the collective destruction of the system which defies the terms of the oppression of each.

Carol Riddell





# MAKING WOMEN INFERIOR

## one of the tasks of the family in capitalist society

In the family the new born baby – that incoherent, inarticulate, helpless, tiny animal – gradually grows into a human being. A human being who is male or female, who 'belongs' to a particular family, who learns to speak and to communicate in a range of ways, to develop some characteristics and to suppress other potentialities, to become a male or female 'member' of a particular group in a particular society. In this process in our society girls learn to identify themselves with their mothers, to develop emotional, irrational, passive, dependant, timid qualities, and to become more interested in people than in things; boys learn to identify themselves with their fathers, to develop qualities of emotional control, rationality, aggressiveness, assertiveness, and to become interested in things and in ideas rather than in people.

This process which we are trying to describe is a *social* one, it is a complex and uneven one, and it does not *always* produce the expected types of women and men. Nor does it always produce characteristics which are appropriate to all the situations in which men and women will find themselves. (Thus the 'problem of the conflict between home and work for many women, the conflict between being an academically successful student and a successful woman student, the conflict between expecting equality and being female in society generally). Two examples will indicate that this process is social, not natural, in content. Firstly we can see that in different societies different types of men and women are produced. (The emotional, vain, gossiping, artistic men, the domineering, organising, hardworking women of Tchambuli society as described by Margaret Mead, as compared to male and female stereotypes in our own society). Secondly we can see that in some cases human beings do not identify themselves with the sex to which they physically 'belong' (according to the type of genitals they have), but with the opposite sex, as in the case of transsexuals. However we should not assume that because the process of attaining a sexual-personal identity is social, that it is superficial; nor, on the other hand can we assume that all aspects are equally significant. Except for transsexuals, who in changing sex are asserting their true identity, most of us cannot change our sexual identities; nor can we *individually* change the significance of being female in a male dominated class society. On the other hand it is possible to reject or modify some aspects of 'femininity'; for example with regard to dress and concern about personal appearance, with regard to commitment to household tasks, with regard to dependancy on men etc. However this scope for 'choice', even for those who are involved in the women's liberation movement, in which they find support in rejecting many aspects of traditional 'femininity', is fairly limited. And for most women,

whose education has been minimal, and has mostly seemed irrelevant to them, and whose chance of economic independence is absolutely limited, the alternatives to traditional family relationships and forms of self expression – however unsatisfactory these may be – hardly seem to exist at all at the present time.



In our society class inequality and sex inequality combine, and these are perpetuated through the family. In a certain sense we can say that the division of labour in the family (into houseworker and breadwinner), and the economic inequality of women and men in society generally (unequal work and pay) are the material basis of the sex stereotypes which we described above. So that once a child has identified herself as the same type of person as her mother, who has a certain position in the family and in society, the process of acquiring the characteristics of the subordinate sex will follow almost automatically. Thus we can see that as the consequences of being female become more apparent increasing numbers of girls (from about the age of 10) come to wish that they were boys; girls' school attainments fall off rapidly (from around 16) and they disappear more rapidly from fulltime, part time and day release education than even working class boys. However things are actually more complex and more subtle than this. The ways in which adults relate to male and female children bear the mark of the social inequalities between men and women. For example several studies have shown that even in the earliest stages of infancy mothers related to their male children differently (more attentively) than to their female children; this is even the case where mothers say that they believe that children should be brought up the same way irrespective of sex. (see Dahlstrom: Changing

*Roles of Men and Women*). Thus we can see that sex stereotyping in children's stories, in toys, in school etc. are more obvious ways of developing 'male' and 'female' characteristics in boys and girls; but the process is already underway in the earliest weeks of a child's life. It is not, then perhaps surprising that so many women experience their social inequality as their personal inferiority; and that for many women their consciousness of themselves as women is tied to an acceptance of their subordination. The process of throwing off this sense of one's own "innate" female inferiority is therefore likely to be difficult, painful and sometimes explosive — and not only for women themselves. The assertions of black power and black beauty made by black people have been tremendously important in their rejection of white racism, and also made many white liberals squirm. However, the problem of throwing off female inferiority is only to a certain extent comparable to throwing off black inferiority. Black people in Britain, the USA, etc., are overwhelmingly working class and amongst the poorest sections of the class, and the

potential for combining the black struggle with the anti-imperialist anti-capitalist struggle is very great. With women the situation is more contradictory. Wealthy women, even if they are "inferior" to wealthy men enjoy the privileges which come from being in a position to exploit and oppress others — women and men; for most wealthy women, their class interests are over-riding. To ignore this leads us into quite reactionary positions. Thus ironically, the most radical rejection of female inferiority as expressed by some radical feminists can lead to a desire to unite with police women against male demonstrators who are acting in support of women's demands. In addition to this, female inferiority is structured into society, into the family, and into the most personal relationships which people experience. Thus the problem of challenging male chauvinism and sexism in society, in the labour movement and in the revolutionary organization is very complicated — which is *not* to say that it can be ignored until after the revolution.

Margaret Coulson.

## First withdraw your troops... and then we'll talk.

One of the classical demands of the Women's Liberation Movement is "Free Contraception and Abortion on Demand". It is a very important one, as it is a first step in the direction of women controlling their own body. The size of the Anti-Abortion rally in Manchester has given us another proof of the hold the Christian ethic still has over this society; an ethic which defines woman as a womb anxiously waiting to be fertilised, and which belongs to the community. Although I agree that a lot of campaigning for free contraception and abortion on demand must continue, I would like to look at these demands and their implications a bit further. It is useful therefore to have a look at the second paragraph of the demand in the "Introduction to the Womens Liberation Workshop". It goes:

"We also have to begin to define what control over our own bodies really means. We don't want more and more pills and easier abortion if at the same time we don't begin to be able to make meaningful choices and not just end up with the freedom to get into a real mess".

The pill has certainly freed women from the fear of an unwanted pregnancy and the ensuing burden of childbearing (it was replaced by fear of thrombosis). Does that mean we can control our bodies now? Being able to control our reproduction is one aspect. The other is our sexuality, female sexuality. Are we in control of our sexuality now that we can control our procreation? It took long enough for society to admit we were capable of sexual pleasure. Freud recognised this fact but buried us deep down in the shit again by defining the clitoral orgasm as infantile and the vagina as the land of milk and honey. None of his theories had an anatomical basis. We know now that the vagina has no nerve endings, which means that it certainly cannot be a very sensitive area. It has also been established now by many researchers that

the clitoris is definitely the women's erotic organ and that it is also the organ that through stimulation provokes female orgasm. As the clitoris is not in or on the mouth of the vagina it is logical to conclude that the organ from which we derive sexual pleasure is quite separate from our procreation factory. Why have we been silent for so long; Freud surely did a good job; women can have their sexuality, but only on male terms. We are still very silent. Why are we frightened of not acting feminine, when this means acting out a male fantasy. I am sure they too have been conditioned into their roles; but aren't theirs somehow somewhat cushier than ours?

In the beginning of these notes I said that free contraception and abortion would be a first step towards women controlling their own body. It is only a step on a long road. If we do not look further and do not affirm our sexuality on our terms women's liberation will stay a utopian idea. Only the theories of what the basis of our oppression is and how it serves capitalist society to keep women in a position from which they reproduce its ideology as well as its slaves, will flourish. Already now, some women in the women's movement start saying they feel torn and schizophrenic, because they feel the only way to work effectively for liberation is to work with women; at home though there is a man who fucks her. ('You take the pill so what is bothering you?'). What bugs her is the realisation that she is not in control of her sexuality, that there is no equality.

It is time that women start to impose their terms, or as the French Women's Movement put it "first withdraw your troops and then we shall talk". In genuinely shared sexual fun, where the vagina becomes just one of those places used for sexual games, as so many other parts of the body, contraception and abortion would certainly also start to play a minor role in our lives, and probably sexism would become an obsolete word.

for a socialist

position on

# ABORTION

## 1. Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child

On March 25th a demonstration was organised in Manchester against abortion. The demo was promoted by the so-called Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child (SPUC), and its organisers encompassed the whole spectrum of right-wing and clerical reaction. It marched under the mystifying slogans of the 'beauty' and 'naturalness' of motherhood and 'Abortion kills'. SPUC is an extremely dangerous political enemy for its support is growing. Thus in Manchester there were about 80,000 demonstrators, compared with about 20,000 on a similar demo in Liverpool last year.

## 2. Response of the Left

Manchester Women's Liberation put in a great deal of work in mobilising for a counter-demo. In the end there were about 600 sisters and brothers picketing SPUC. This was more than in Liverpool. No support was to be seen from the organised labour movement (chauvinism?). It is important that militants show more support to expose the fact that under this system motherhood for working women is frequently the passport to a life of drudgery and financial hardship. It is also necessary to point out the sheer hypocrisy of a system, one of whose basic props is the idea of motherhood and the family but yet which continually ignores the medical needs of women - not only in respect to abortion (where methods even when available are still primitive in the extreme) but also in respect to child birth itself (where birth and physical pain are still synonymous). The whole field of medicine has been subject to a constant underdevelopment of research, a fact not unconnected with the present near monopoly of the larger contraceptive firms.

## 3. The illusion of 'choice'

It is very easy-especially for men to be parasitic on the women's movement in the sense of confining support to the abstract 'Right on sisters'. In particular support remains abstract if there is no comradely attempt to help the movement develop and thus criticise past errors.



'WE'RE AGAINST LEGALISED ABORTIONS'

One of these errors has been the way many women's groups have given a reformist explanation of the slogan of abortion on demand. Thus this is frequently posed in terms of 'a woman's right to choose' or 'a woman's right to control her own body'. Unfortunately words such as 'right' and 'choice' are just as confusing as 'Motherhood is natural'. It is actually untrue to say that abortion on demand will give the majority of women a meaningful choice whether or not to have children. This is because the majority of women are often unable (for financial reasons) or unwilling to have children. This of course is precisely why many women want abortion. To talk in terms of 'choice' is reformist because it does not tackle the question of why the system is such that many women feel compelled to need abortions, in short why the system cannot provide for children. The class boundaries are drawn very clearly here. Thus whereas for working women any choice is illusory, yet bourgeois women do often have a comparatively real choice inasmuch as their family situation does allow them, if they wish, to bring their children up. Moreover it is a utopic solution (and therefore no solution) for working women and men to struggle together to aspire to a bourgeois family relationship. Precisely because the objective function of the nuclear family is the oppression of working women, it is the nuclear family

which provides the essential organisational and ideological framework for the lack of socialised housework and the justification for unequal pay. This is why it is reactionary.

#### 4. Women who want children

This argument as to choice is important not just for reasons of theoretical clarity. It is important because it makes it possible to face up politically to the problem of those women who actually want children. It is not enough, and indeed it is wrong, to dismiss these as the equivalent of Uncle Toms. It is true that many are imbued with the mystifying ideology of motherhood and many are directly influenced by clericism. Likewise it is an obvious truth that these women want children in the context of the nuclear family which is essentially reactionary. However it is again utopic to expect these women to either individually or collectively renounce their family relationships. Again when such women march behind those such as Mary Whitehouse, Muggeridge and sundry bishops, we should attack them unremittingly.

Nonetheless revolutionaries should face up to the long term struggle of winning these women, especially as they comprise probably the majority of working women.

Thus a crucial distinction must be made between the leaders of SPUC, who have a rigid and more or less consistent reactionary philosophy, and the men and women on the demonstration, who are often simply confused politically. For instance it is a fair bet that though the women on the demo have a right-wing view of abortion yet many, because of their Irish connection, are against British troops in Ireland.

#### 5. The strategy of the bourgeoisie

Another fact socialists must face up to is that the bourgeoisie, or its more 'enlightened' sections, is becoming anxious on an international level to provide abortion and contraception facilities. Thus in Britain for example there has been a steady progress from (1) abortion illegal (2) legalising abortion within limits (3) a beginning by at least some local authorities to provide free advice and contraception (4) on the very day after the SPUC demo, the government announced national plans for available contraception on the N.H.S.

The reasons for these developments are clear at least in a general sense. There are, for capitalists, just too many people to feed. In particular when the bourgeoisie talks of overpopulation and too many people to feed they mean too many workers (and peasants). In India we might soon see the

situation of, if not forced sterilisation, then induced sterilisation in respect to offering a form of family allowance for one or two children and nothing (or even a penalty) for any more. Even in the imperialist heartlands we have entered a prolonged period of unemployment, which ultimately is against the bourgeoisie's own interests to the extent that it brings the whole system into disrepute.

In Britain it is arguable that one of the main reasons why there is not yet abortion on demand is (apart from monopoly interest and the short term expense) that the ruling class still has to shake off its own religious mystifications, but it is certainly not incapable of doing this as is shown in the case of South Ireland where members of the now ruling coalition have spoken in favour of legalising contraception.

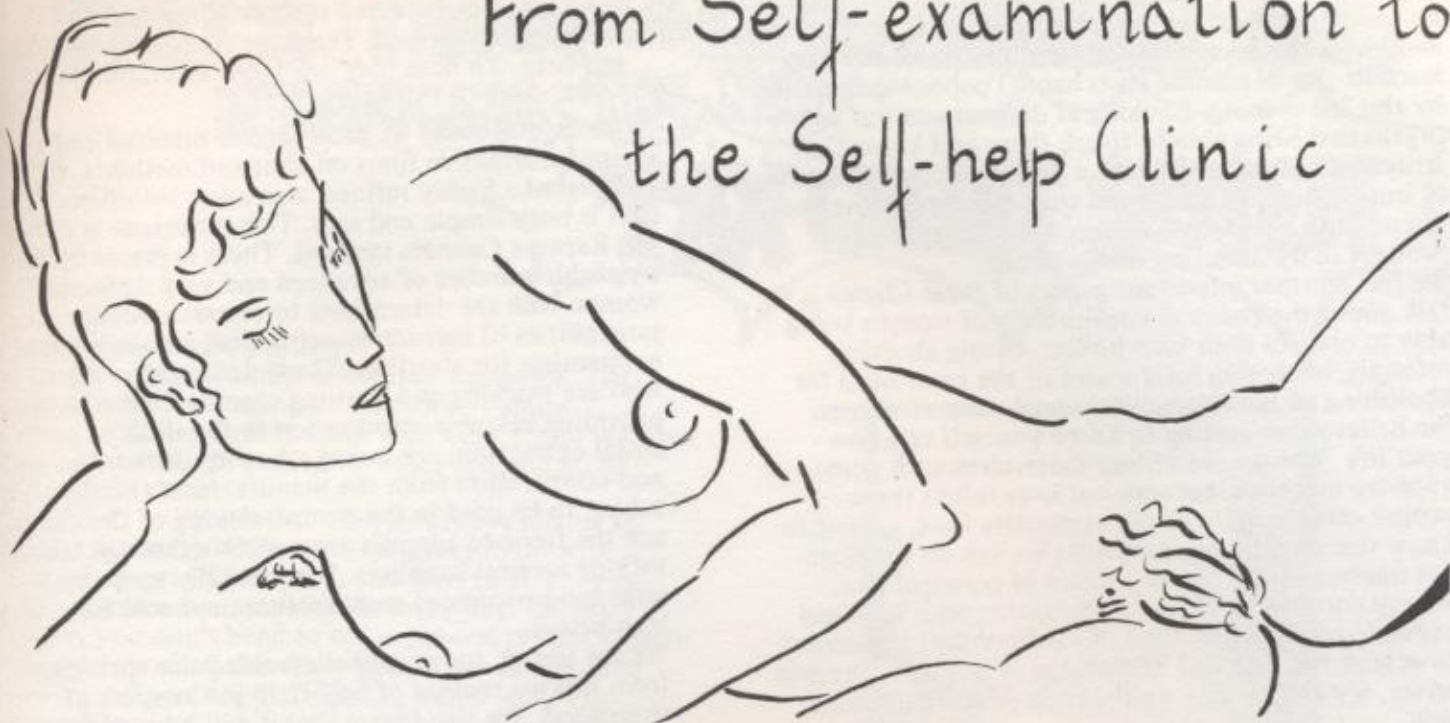
#### 6. For an independent class position

The mere fact that the demand for free available abortion is on the one hand being demanded by the women's movements and on the other hand is being championed by certain elements of the bourgeoisie, is nothing to be perturbed by. There have been historical examples of where proletarian and bourgeois interests have momentarily coincided whilst being opposed. The separate activity by the Communists and the nationalists against the Japanese invasion of China is one instance. What does become perturbing is when the 2 lines continually zig zag into one another or even begin to run parallel. In political terms this means class-collaboration. This is the POTENTIAL danger the women's liberation movement must avoid.

This is why the class boundaries must be very clearly drawn, and a proletarian strategy worked out totally opposed to the bourgeoisie. To do this it is not good enough to speak of 'women' in the abstract. Women, as women, have no unified, homogenous classless interest. They have class interests and these class interests differ. They have either bourgeois or proletarian interests and those women from the petit bourgeoisie can be won either way depending on the relationship of forces and one of the factors determining this relationship is the clarity of the presentation of proletarian ideas. This is not an argument against an autonomous women's liberation movement, rather it is an argument for the continuing development of such a movement on the correct political basis.



# From Self-examination to the Self-help Clinic



This article is a summary from some broadsheets published by some American sisters who are involved in self-help clinics. Some time ago a group of women decided to get together to compare past difficulties, and share experiences concerning the care of their fucking and reproductive organs.

Some of the problems we first attacked were: how can I recognise vaginal infections early, before they become so advanced that I have to visit a physician and probably wind up on antibiotics. Can I treat early infections, especially yeast (*Monilia*) effectively and inexpensively? How do I recognise yeast? What does syphilis look like, and can I recognise gonorrhoea, in spite of what physicians say? Are there marked changes on the cervix of my uterus during my 28-30 day menstrual cycle? If so does the cervix also show change due to pregnancy, and if so how soon can I see the change? We realised early in our rap sessions that being able to recognise very early pregnancy would be a great asset if we were to decide to terminate the pregnancy. Another point about which we were all up-tight was the present methods of health care for women. For example you've got an itch, you go to a doctor and an appointment is made for one or two weeks hence. You go through a lot of anxiety and by the time you see the doctor the infection might have spread. When you ask him what the matter is you get some Greek words slung at you and a lot of patronising phrases.

So the women got together. We rapped about our common medical encounters. Then we made a discovery on that very first meeting. In order to better understand what we were talking about we had to look. So we encountered our first, last and only hangup in the entire rap/self-help clinic. And we did it with the help of 5% courage and 95% curiosity. Up on the table each of us went. Some of us were a little shy going up, all of us thoroughly with it by the time we got down. All of us were learning about our sexual organs and realising that we were not only sharing our answers but were learning things about the cervix that was a gold mine of information. No wonder physicians have been reluctant to share the

information (£££ \$\$\$). We realised that there was a great deal that we could do for ourselves in personal health care, long before it becomes necessary to see a doctor and all because we learned a very simple self-examination procedure. We were able to purchase plastic speculums (one for each woman). The speculum opens the vaginal cavity to allow examination of the vaginal walls and the cervix. With the use of a lamp and mirror, it became quite simple to examine ourselves for irritations, discharges, changes on the cervix. Since the cervix has essentially no pain nerve endings, we realised that it was quite easy to have an infection developing without giving any signs. Not until a heavy discharge has reached the vulva (outer lips) or burning and itching is taking place, do we realise what is going on. By ten it is too late to do anything but to go through the ritual of visiting a doctor at his convenience (£££ \$\$\$).

The Self-Help concept of self-examination is based on the reintroduction of sisterly sharing of experiences and knowledge in a commonsense, honest manner. Collective knowledge used within close sisterly groups that we call the Self-Help Clinics, have already had positive results as valuable preventative health care measures.

The Self-Help Clinic consists of 3 meetings; usually an evening a week for three weeks. These meetings deal primarily with learning self-examination with the help of all the sisters in the group. This is a very meaningful sharing experience for all, since we learn what is normal by having the opportunity to examine many women, under well-women conditions.

Occasionally we will have a sister who has a more serious problem and having caught it within self-examination, is encouraged to seek professional help. The Self-Help Clinic provides the opportunities for women to confront the many myths, misconceptions, and misinformation that we have been fed our entire lives. Being able to examine ourselves in a group situation gives us the first real concrete opportunity to compare the "text book" with reality. This is also the time when we learn to recognise cervical changes (in colour tone, and other signs) in one another. Each

woman during the first session has learned to insert her own speculum for the self-examination procedure, and keeps this speculum for continuous use. We also learn to give bi-manual (two hands) pelvic examinations by the 3rd evening. Looking at diagrams of our pelvic organs and being able to touch them and know their structure manually, gives us a far greater understanding of our bodies. We also spend the sessions reading and discussing a variety of written material, much of it brought in by members of the group.

We feel another important aspect of these Clinics is to talk about the political implications of women being able to control their own bodies; Giving abortion referrals, becoming fully aware of the great need for abolishing all laws that restrict and control women.

We believe that getting to know yourself can save your life. Women are killing themselves with panic abortive methods, because our laws refuse them proper care. In spite of our restrictive laws, getting to know our own bodies and what we can do for them has opened up far better choices of personal care. We are continuing to live under outrageous laws and barbaric medical practices. We believe that in learning to accept the care and knowledge of our own physical selves, we will be well on the road to self determination.

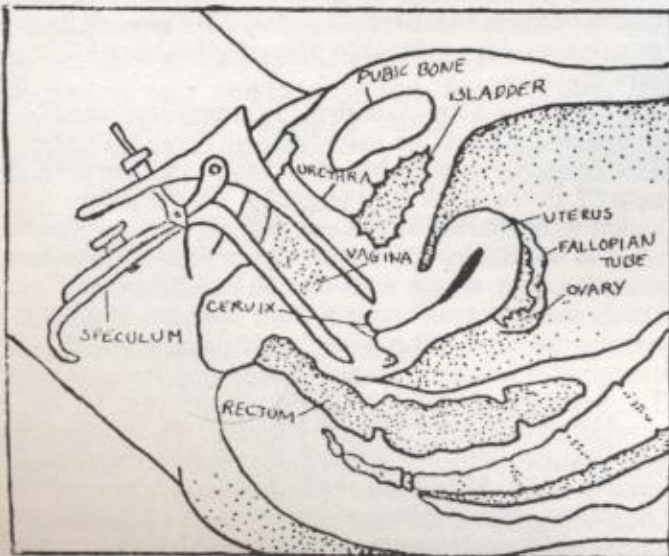
Some of the findings that came of our original Self-help Clinic and on which we were then able to take positive action were:

1. Any woman who is exposed to the risk of pregnancy, by examining herself once a week, and becoming thoroughly familiar with her own cervix, can within one week after missing her period, recognise that she is pregnant. She need not depend on chemical tests;
2. Syphilis is easily detected. Gonorrhea is still difficult but when uterine discharges occur, we catch them early and can take positive action;
3. Yeast infections can be recognised easily, as can Trichomonas, and treated inexpensively and in many cases with positive results within 24 hours without a prescription. You need not be a highly skilled clinician to learn to recognise by the name the most common vaginal infections. By being able to recognise early infections we have taken control of our right to choices of treatment. Including the choice of ultimate self determination which is also called "doing the job myself".

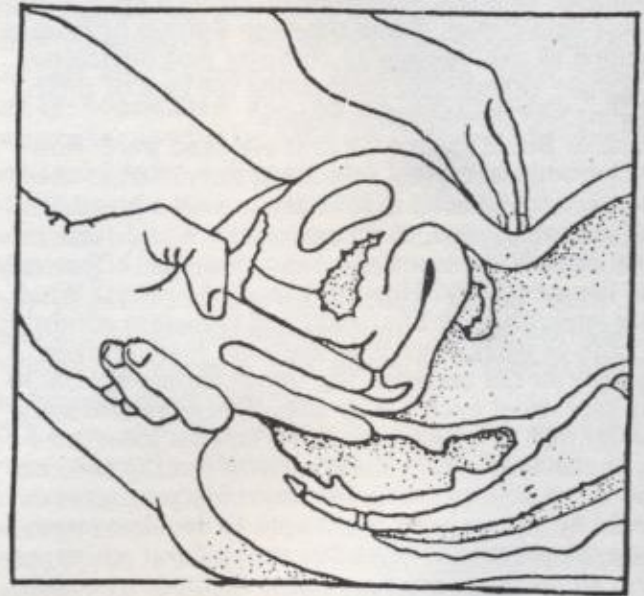
4. We have also perfected successful methods of starting late periods. These methods are based on self-help. To date they are 100% effective, and 100% safe.

After careful study of good factual material and seeing informative films on abortion methods, we discovered a highly refined aspiration technique that is both simple and safe. This technique is called the Karman Cannula method. There is presently also a sizeable number of advanced and very dedicated women who are determined to research out the possibilities of menstrual extraction, which is not a euphemism for abortion. These dedicated women, who are working and learning together and who are providing valuable information in the skills of menstrual extraction, are facing a host of difficulties and non-cooperation from the manufacturer (neither the tubing to be used in the manufacturing of the cannula nor the finished cannula are available through laboratory or surgical suppliers. It is specially made by a large bio-instrument manufacturer and sold for a very high price).

We are seeing, today, unbelievable gains springing from this movement of Self-Help in the spirit of sisterhood. We also foresee that it will take continued dedication by all sisters, vast investments of time, motivation, enthusiasm and money for this movement to succeed. Throwing off the oppression of centuries takes total commitment and sisterhood.



SPECULUM IN PLACE



RECTAL EXAM



BI-MANUAL EXAM

# THEY'RE TAKING OUR FAMILY ALLOWANCE AWAY

## INTRODUCING THE NEW TAX CREDIT SYSTEM

"What's all this then honey?"

"It's part of the Family Allowance campaign. The Government is planning to take away Family Allowances and replace them with a tax credit system. All the credits will be tied to wages and will go to the men."

"Oh God . . . What next! They're always hitting us with something. Whats the men going to do with it when they get it? Hey, Joe, you hear this? They're making more money out of us every day. Oh no, honey, you don't need to tell me about profits. I know what the money's for. They gets richer all the time and we is staggering through the week. Well, I'm pleased to see you here. I'm glad somethings getting together round here."

"What! Our Family Allowances that women have had for years? But thats the money that tides me over that is. If I didn't have me book on a Tuesday the kids would starve. He doesn't give me enough anyway".

"Oh yes, I'll sign. I know about it all right. I've heard about it from the women you know, and I saw something on the television. You in that Women's lib. men? Well all I can say is its about time women got together and did something. And this is happening all over the country? Well I think thats marvellous, I really do. There should be more things like this."

"Whats all this then? That petition for the Family Allowances? I'll sign that all right. Every woman agrees with that. Well its the only money we've got isn't it? The only bit of money we've got to call our own. Whats my one bit of independence, no one's going to touch that."

Looked at in isolation, the Family Allowance campaign could be as reformist as the campaign around the Anti-Discrimination Bill. Trying to influence government legislation, when most of us don't believe in voting, when nearly the whole of the Trade Union movement walking through the streets did bugger all against the Industrial Relations act, is a fairly depressing and crushing occupation. If we take the petition, the evidence to the Select Committee and the writing to MPs seriously, we are in effect saying that parliamentary capitalism can or should work if we go through all the right channels. Some of us may even still believe that even if every woman in the country signed the bloody thing, that Heath and his mob would say, "OK ladies, fair enough. I'll change it all back for you. You're right . . . the tax credit system is just a piece of pernicious, common market capitalism exploitation, designed to divide the higher paid from the lower paid and to keep the working class in the neck more. Sure I'll change it. For you my dears, . . . anything." And if even if the Government makes a concession of giving the tax credits to the mother (which now seems likely) what will that mean? It will mean a small victory to us (which is good), but it will make very little difference to the weight of the new tax system as a whole which is repressive and which we won't have changed one bit.



International Women's Day march in London



Women evicted from postoffice after occupation, as part of the family-allowance campaign.  
Photos by Martin Slawin.

Another voice of opposition to the campaign comes from some of our revolutionary sisters, who say "Every fight against laws, IN REACTION to some new move by the boss class is *not* where we should organise." Their point is clear . . . we should make our own initiatives. We should not merely jump and snap back in surprise at every new repressive measure against the working class, but instead we should work out long term strategies. We must consider more on-going political ways of organising, as around housing or women's health. Of course, this is right. There is not nearly enough of this in the Women's movement. Not nearly enough analysis of how capitalism is changing/going through different phases and crises and how we should work out a long term perspective for *action* based on what we can see to be happening. But the Family Allowance campaign can and should be part of that. How?

### How can the Family Allowance campaign be revolutionary?

First of all, I *don't* want to discuss the ins and outs of the tax credit system in detail. We have spent too much time doing that already, and if that's what you want, write to the Child Poverty Action Group, because it's certain that *they*, at least, *do* believe in patching up the system, extracting the 'best' parts of legislation and underlining what they think are the 'progressive' bits. For instance, the opening sentence of one of their pamphlets is, "We have had only 4 months in which to prepare evidence for the Select Committee of the implications of the Tax Credit system for low income families, and the need for a number of amendments if the system is going to contribute meaningfully to the elimination of poverty." The CPAG goes into tremendous detail, suggesting all sorts of amendments, "which could then transform the new tax system into a valuable anti-poverty measure". (You must decide for yourself whether capitalism - which keeps 2/3rds of the world below the poverty line to feed us more cars/washing machines/colour tellys - is even capable of doing that.) What I do want to talk about is; for what purpose has the Family Allowance legislation been introduced now?, and how can the campaign against it be revolutionary? The new tax and tax credit system has been brought in at a time when working class living standards are being attacked through the freezing of wage packets and through continual price rises. This, in effect, means a *cut* in wages, not only when they are *paid* (with the Freeze and higher taxes) but also *IN THE HOME*. The Unfair Rents Act has finally done away with all subsidised housing and people will now have to pay market (inflated) prices in rents. The rent rebate scheme and the tax credit system are designed to *divide* and isolate us from one another, and also to bring many more people under the *control* of means tested benefits. This more than ever before will divide the higher paid from those who it is hoped will become dependent on benefits/rebates/tax credits. In effect this will mean that for a whole new sector of the working class, strikes for higher wages will appear too much of an effort, because any wage rise will mean a cut in benefits. The family Allowance scheme is, of course, a part of this. Unlike the CPAG, we know that the tax credit scheme has not been designed as an anti-poverty measure, but as an attack and a means of control on the working class after a period of increasing wage rises and victories like those of the miners and the dockers and in the face of the growing militancy of the class. The attack on our housing conditions and living standards *in the home* represent

attacks where we are least organised. That is why the Government and the big industrialists, who have suggested these laws think they can get away with it! If our wages and living standards are being attacked in the home where we are most vulnerable, then it is *here* that we must organise.



### The only money we've got

What is the real significance of Family Allowances to women? The quotes at the beginning of this article represent how a lot of women see Family Allowances . . . "a bit of independence"; "money in my pocket"; "the only money we've got to call our own". This is one of the most important aspects of it. In Italy, women on large scale rent strikes, used the money they were withholding as their own to spend as they chose. They felt they had been robbed enough. This is happening in Liverpool too. During the current rent strikes, one woman from Tower Hill said, "I'm going to spend my rent, and do you know where it'll go that £5? I'm going round to the shop and I'm buying all the food I haven't been able to afford for the last 6 months for my kids". Many sisters have pointed out the difficulties of getting something back off the State, like demanding a hand-out. This has been a problem in the Claimants Unions who demand a Guaranteed Income. But the point here is *not* that we go down to the Social Security office and ask them for more money, but that we use our knowledge to *control* the SS as we want to. That was the point of the Cohabitation campaign - that our SS money should not have strings attached dependent on whether we are living or sleeping with a man or not, it should be ours as a right; money to call our own and as much as we can get. This is what the Family Allowance campaign is all about . . . connecting up the idea that women should have money *in their own right*, that this should *not* be related to the man's wage (or any wage); that it shouldn't have strings attached; that as women we do shit work for the system for which we don't get paid and then it falls onto us to make ends meet when the bosses put the prices up, and that is what we should organise around. Why should women be forced into part-time work (when we already do a full day's work with overtime) just because Tesco's and Sainsbury's want to make more profit or just to put more money into the pockets of the property owners and money lenders? If Family

Allowances is one way or a start to discussing around these issues, then it can be revolutionary.

If our women's groups mean anything, they should mean that we are trying to build a *base* in our communities. Trying to get to know more women, talking to them in the street, going to see them, them coming to see you, being involved with the actions around women's needs. It is the building of this strength and solidarity, in the areas we live in, organised around different struggles like the Family Allowance campaign and the things which affect us most which will be the deciding factor in the women's movement and in the revolutionary movement as a whole.

### Nellie Gate

*PS* Many IMG women (and other sisters who pick up a copy of Socialist Woman occasionally) will wonder why this article is here, and why I have (as a non-member) taken the trouble to express views which are so radically different from the IMG's line on *women* (IMG says that the 'woman question' is really secondary to proletarian struggle, while I believe that women's revolution is fundamental and integral to the liberation of the class, and has to be organised autonomously but at the same time as the collective struggle of the class);

and on *point of struggle* (IMG says that because the fundamental contradiction in capitalism is between the workers and capital that the main point of struggle must be at the point of production i.e. in the factories. I say, that while I agree on 'the fundamental contradiction' nevertheless this exploits us in every aspect of life, and only by fighting at home, at school, in the streets *as well as at work* can we hope to overthrow the power of capitalism. (I forget IMG's line on the Guaranteed Income except that they don't agree with it because it evens out the distinction between 'producers' and 'non-producers'.) I have written this article because I take the women's movement seriously. Because I believe there are many women who are still overawed by the spectre of the "Left groups" as the only 'organised' possibility of overthrowing the State, and who are still denying their own strength and belittling their time spent in the women's movement to their brothers. I can only say that 'Class struggle and feminism are for us one and the same thing, feminism expressing the rebellion of that section of the class without whom the class struggle cannot be generalised broadened and deepened' (from the statement of the International Feminist Collective).

NG

### March 27th — Women show their militancy in the North West



Various actions were taken up and down the country on March 27th the day chosen by the family allowance campaign for nationwide protests. In Lancaster, following the example of the London demonstration on the 10th March, a group of about 50 women and 20 children with some male supporters marched from the city centre to the main post office and occupied it. Many of the women were working class mothers from the local housing estates. We occupied the post office for two hours, taking the opportunity of feeding the children with crisps, fish and chips, etc., providing some new wall stickers for post office users, and turning the telephone booths into a children's picnic area. The police in this sleepy town did not get themselves together enough to evict us, but local reporters gave us very sympathetic coverage.

The police had finally got themselves together by the time the main body of demonstrators moved on to the local "Mothercare" shop, and made up for lost time by literally throwing the protesters out — in the ensuing scuffle, six arrests were made, three sisters and three male supporters. Charged with causing an obstruction likely to cause a breach of the peace, and "obstructing Police Constable Hogg in the course of his duty", their cases come up at the beginning of May. The IMG and IS groups played a full part in this demonstration, and three IMG members and two IS members were arrested. For the first time in Lancaster's history a militant demonstration was supported by the majority of working people, and the local paper received many complaints about police violence.

Nina Thomas

### Report on the Gay Marxist Conference in Warwick



At the Leeds national GLF Conference, a certain amount of interest was shown in the question of the straight left and to whether gay Marxists in the Movement should or should not join a particular organisation. In order to continue discussing this and other related topics a conference was set up in Warwick at the end of February.

We all agreed that the attitude of the straight left towards gay people and GLF is in general reactionary, or at best, it pays a vague sort of lipservice towards the question. Sexuality and in particular gay sexuality is "not a strategic question" or is "a deviation from the class struggle". Homosexuality is talked about amongst the straight left as a distortion of capitalism and that "there won't be any queers after the revolution". In view of these sorts of attitudes, all of which one hears over and over again, it is not really surprising that most of the people there did not feel that they could join a straight left organisation, although the people there who were already in the I.S. and the I.M.G. thought it very important that they should stay in it.

Other workshops were on educating the straight left and in connection with this, giving support to and encouraging other gay people in the organisations to come out, and to join GLF. We discussed the relationship between sexual class oppression and how to present our ideas to the working class and to working class gay people, eg. speakers on Trades Councils, solidarity with strikers etc., and how we can give a Marxist perspective to the Gay Movement, though emphasising that we in no way wish to "take over" GLF.

As a beginning to all this, we decided to set up a journal called "Gay Marxist" which will hopefully be sold in GLF groups, Womens Liberation groups, revolutionary organisations, Trades Councils etc. Anyone with a revolutionary perspective can contribute to this journal. Articles must be sent in by April 20th. The first issue will be out on the first of May. Contributions and orders to, Don Milligan, 2 Blades Street, Lancaster, Lancs.

Carol Smith, Lancaster GLF

### Report of the Conference of Socialists in the Womens Liberation Movement in Birmingham on March 17/18

The size of the Conference was very encouraging. Nearly 300 women attended, and although one might have missed some of the flamboyance and excitement that radical feminists bring to Womens Liberation meetings, those attending made up for that in their determination to have a well ordered discussion. It was, I understand, intended as an exploratory meeting, and those who might have hoped for more were destined to be disappointed, it remained very much just that. There was a tentative air about it, quite logically. To call together anyone who might wish to classify herself as a Marxist without further definition and without further precision as to the aims and structure of the conference must result in a certain vagueness, which was reflected in most of the discussions.

The bulk of the meeting on Saturday consisted of workshops, some general, with one centred around Maria Delarosa's pamphlet, and another devoted to Ros Delmar's critique of Engel's "The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State".

The general discussions were very wide ranging, but the key concern seemed to be with coming to grips with the role of the family in capitalism and our strategy in relation to this. While it was generally accepted that vague slogans such as Smash the Family must be rejected there was little agreement about a basic approach to the problems, or which issue should be central to any strategy. There was much discussion on the question of nurseries, the oppression of children in the nuclear family, and nursery campaigns



which most sisters feel is a crucial issue, and it is obvious that, as with most aspects of womens oppression, a great deal of work needs to be done in clarifying and elaborating a strategy.

The issue of paid housework caused possibly the most heated debates, particularly in the Delrosa workshop, being quite strongly rejected by most sisters. I will not repeat the arguments which have been discussed in various issues of Socialist Woman and elsewhere.

It was unfortunate that Ros Delmar's paper was not ready prior to the conference and had to be read immediately before the discussion which meant that most of the points raised in it could not be adequately dealt with. However, I'm sure its publication will result in more fruitful discussion.

On the second day the Conference concerned itself with the positions of the various established tendencies of the left and continued on to a plenary session on strategy. There are two basic problems concerned here:

1. Whether it is possible to forge some kind of United Front of socialists in the Womens Liberation Movement to coordinate activity around specific strategic tasks relating to the struggle against womens oppression as part of the struggle of the working class against capitalism, and
2. What would be the relationship of such a grouping to the Womens Liberation movement as a whole?

It was felt that the preliminary nature of the conference precluded any definite decision relating to these problems, and the feasibility of such a body adopting a strategic line and the coordination of work.

It was, however, decided to prepare for a further major Conference projected for the 30th June, and a meeting will also be held in London on April 28th at 2pm at the Workshop.

Lesley Richardson, Harrow SWG

### Ways of Seeing by John Berger. Pelican, 60p.

We live, not merely in a class society, but a class society with a male-dominated culture. This means that in all aspects of our lives which are culturally determined all norms tend to be male. It means that standards are set by males, and these standards include those that would seem to be the province of the female (i.e. those that men have said are their province). Thus, the most influential books on child-rearing have been written by men - Freud, Spock, Bowlby, Erickson, Truby King, to name the most important only - all of which emphasises the importance of the mother-child tie, and the great, unbridgeable differences between male and female characteristics and roles.

The women's liberation movement, in its emphasis on consciousness-raising, has attempted to break with this male-orientation. In particular, it lays stress on the importance of women ceasing to regard themselves as mere appendages of men, channelling their interests and aspirations through them, and seeing themselves only in relation to men.

This aspect of consciousness - women seeing themselves in relation only to men - even (or perhaps especially) relates to their own sexuality. Whereas a man uses his sexuality in order to achieve sexual success, a woman uses her's to gain 'possession' of a male, because in our society it is only in this way that she is considered socially successful, and is also the

only way in which the majority of women can be assured of economic security.

The distortion of sexuality that results is both inwardly and outwardly determined. Women in our society (it is not universal) are supposed to be sexually submissive, this is how men like them, and yet it has been shown that 'dominant' women are able to enjoy sex more — they are not afraid of their own sexuality and are able to let their partner know what they need and want. So distorted are the values of our society, however, that such women, unless very sure of themselves, may think that they are not normal and may even feel guilty of their feelings.

The outward distortion of women's sexuality is perhaps more obvious, but it is also more insidious, so that it becomes harder to pinpoint. We are so used to its manifestations in every aspect of our culture, most recently and notoriously in advertising and pornography (the latter has been around for longer), the two often indistinguishable. (I am distinguishing between eroticism and pornography — the latter is exploitive, both economically and in terms of human personality and sexuality).

A book which clearly and delightfully explores this theme (amongst others) is *WAYS OF SEEING*, by the Marxist art critic and historian John Berger. The difficulty of reviewing this book is in trying to select quotes that succinctly give the flavour of the essays on Women in Art and the Nude, and on Advertising. (In fact, the chapters, three of which are essays in pictures, have no titles: I have indicated the subject matter of two of the written essays and one of the picture essays).

Taking as the overall theme of the book, the European oil painting tradition, Berger gives us new insights into how women were (and are) seen by men and by themselves and how this is reflected in the way they are presented. The distinction between nudity ('Nudity is a form of dress') and nakedness ('to be without disguise') is discussed. Most paintings of nude women are to display ownership of the woman by the painting's owner (or painter). Many paintings moralised, e.g. about women's vanity. Nude women were depicted with mirrors, admiring themselves, but it was the watching men who were actually doing the admiring. Women were (and are) only too aware of the watching men:

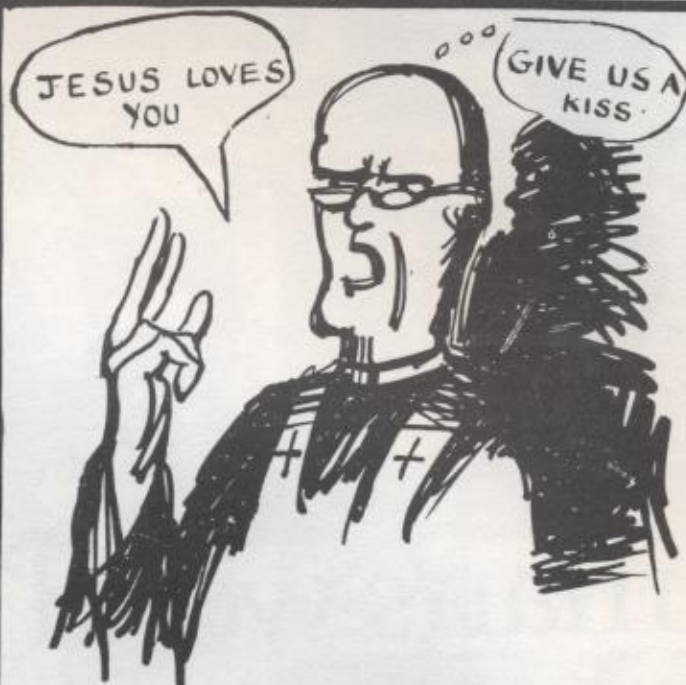
'Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women, but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed, female. Thus she turns herself into an object — and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.'

In the essay on advertising, Berger explores further this aspect of woman: as object. He examines the concept of 'glamour', which he says is a modern concept. The aim of consumer advertising is surely to reach women, who are the biggest buyers of consumer articles. It is true that a certain amount of advertising purports to appeal to common-sense and intelligence: 'This article will last longer because of the materials used to make it and the method of construction', but the vast majority of advertising plays upon people's fears in an alienated society. In particular upon their fears of not being 'woman enough': the condition of their home, their washing, their children's health, even their husband's clothes, all reflect upon women's supposed role in life and their success in that role.

'The spectator buyer is meant to envy herself as she will become if she buys the product. She is meant to imagine herself transformed by the product into an object of envy for others, an envy which will then justify her loving herself. One could put this another way: the publicity image steals her love of herself as she is, and offers it back to her for the price of the product.'

It should be emphasised that the particular sections of the book reviewed above are set in the context of a work that examines cultural concepts in a property-owning society, although it goes deeper than merely saying that women are property too. Lavishly illustrated and written in a style that can be understood not merely by those already knowledgeable about art, this is a book that cannot be too highly recommended.

Leonora Lloyd



## APOLOGIES

**For** the last issue of S.W. but due to lack of time and people this issue was not proof-read.

**To** Sue Beardon (Bristol Women's Liberation Group) for stating that the group was involved in the Trade Union meeting at Birmingham. Sue supported the idea of the meeting as an individual and not as part of the group.

## POSTER

THERE WILL BE NO WOMEN'S LIBERATION WITHOUT REVOLUTION. THERE WILL BE NO REVOLUTION WITHOUT WOMEN'S LIBERATION. Poster available from Socialist Woman at 15p each.

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