

# Marxism and Feminism in an Age of Neoliberalism

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Hitting your head on the glass ceiling is not the same as falling into the basement. - Johanna Brenner<sup>1</sup>

Women today live lives that only four decades ago would have been unimaginable to most. They are visible in every aspect of public life today. They are a permanent and important component of the workforce; indeed it is difficult to think of an occupation in which women are not represented. They hold positions equal to men and, today, there are more women in third level education than at any other point in history. Changes in women's personal lives have been no less dramatic. Less than thirty years ago, marriage was regarded as the only path to respectability for a woman. Today, women have multiple sexual partners; they choose not to marry and to have children as lone parents. Sex is something that is openly discussed in society, which is an enormous step forward, particularly in Ireland, where sex was something shameful and repressed. Yet despite all of these significant achievements women still earn significantly less than men; they continue to be responsible for the majority of care in the family and the bulk of domestic work in the home; they face sexual discrimination in the workplace and in society which often manifests itself through physical and sexual violence. Access to abortion is highly restricted and even where women have won reproductive rights they are under constant attack.

Despite this, popular culture and the mainstream media continue to present sexism in society as something quaint, part

of a by-gone era, an out-dated relic that only really exists in the pages of a Mad Man script. Every day we are bombarded with an endless flow of 'post-feminist' ideas and images of self-empowerment and self-improvement. Women today, we are told, can have it all if they only want it enough. Women who feel they are treated unequally or unfairly only have themselves to blame; they need to examine their own behaviour and cast aside their victim mentality. The only real challenge women face today, we are told, is learning to have it all. How do you balance the successful job, the fulfilling relationship, having a family and still look good doing it? Success is understood in terms of the accomplishment of the few women who are corporate executives or have successful professional or political careers and whose success is supposed to trickle down the ladder and help all women. Rarely are the experiences of the vast majority of women, working class women, ever addressed. The media is less obsessed with their problems and doesn't seem all that keen on explaining how you afford a school uniform for your child when your child benefit has just been cut or you've lost job.

The current post-feminist icon is Sheryl Sandberg, the Chief Operating Officer for Facebook. Sandberg, who considers herself a feminist, recently published a self-help book for women called *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*. Sandberg, does begin by acknowledging that she is at an advantage in having an extremely well paid job and she does acknowledge that real barriers do exist for women, including lack of access to affordable child-

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<sup>1</sup>Johanna Brenner, 'The Best of Times, The Worst of Times: US Feminism Today' *New Left Review*. Vol.1 No. 200, 1993, 191.

care and discrimination and harassment in work. She also acknowledges that there are few women in positions of power in our society. However when it comes to examining why this is the case, her response is very problematic. She writes:

We hold ourselves back in ways both big and small, by lacking self-confidence, by not raising our hands, and by pulling back when we should be leaning in. We internalize the negative messages we get throughout our lives, the messages that say it's wrong to be outspoken, aggressive, more powerful than men. We lower our own expectations of what we can achieve. We continue to do the majority of the housework and child-care. We compromise our career goals to make room for partners and children who may not even exist yet. Compared to our male colleagues, fewer of us aspire to senior positions.<sup>2</sup>



Sheryl Sandberg, Chief Operating Officer for Facebook and author of *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*

Essentially, Sandberg is arguing that the real reason that women have not achieved equality is women themselves.

<sup>2</sup>Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*. London: WH Allen/Random House, 2013, 8.

She is correct to point out that women are sometimes less assertive than men and that they are socialised to behave differently to men and so can sometimes be less likely to speak up or make demands in the same way that men are expected to. However, the reason that women continue to endure sexism and discrimination in society is not because we made the wrong personal choices or we failed to dismantle 'the hurdles in ourselves'. Sandberg is wrong because she ignores the fundamental reasons why sexism continues to be so ingrained in our society despite all of the important and significant gains that the women's movement achieved. This leads her to conclude that the only way of achieving equality between men and women is to let it 'trickle down': once a few women break the glass ceiling and achieve prominent positions in business and politics, this power will trickle down the ranks and empower all women. Again Sandberg is seriously mistaken. The reason that some women in our society have been able to rise in the corporate and political world was not the result of power trickling down; rather it was a direct result of the women's movement of the 1970s and 1980s that mobilised men and women to fight for equality. The women's movement exposed the systemic structures behind sexism in society and fought for fundamental change in society. Feminism as a movement was inspired and influenced by the struggles of the 1960s but when those struggles receded, the less radical and more conservative elements of the feminist movement came to dominate. The strategy shifted from one focused on liberating the masses of women (and men) to one concentrated on getting women into positions of power. As a result so-called mainstream feminism increasingly found itself, at best in accom-

modation with the forces of capitalism and at worse in convergence with corporate and neoliberal interests. Questions of race and class, once fundamental, were marginalized or abandoned in favour of identity politics.

## Feminism seduced

In the past two decades we have seen the political and historical dimensions of women's liberation co-opted and utilised by the capitalism to justify the continued exploitation of women around the world. The American writer Ariel Levy, author of the best selling *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, describes the nature of this shift:

Only thirty years (my lifetime) ago, our mothers were burning their bras and picketing Playboy, and suddenly we were getting implants and wearing the bunny logo as supposed symbols of our liberation. How had the culture shifted so drastically in such a short period of time?<sup>3</sup>

The history and the language of women's struggle to assert and define their sexual desire, to be understood as something other than decorative, has been packaged and sold to us as another commodity. Feminism is used for everything these days, except the fight for true equality, as almost anything can be considered feminist' - shopping, watching porn, prostitution, even war and occupation. Where feminism once argued for the emancipation of female sexuality, today it has become the justification for 'porn star in training' t-shirts for pre-teens. Where once young

women were subject to a staid, repressive sexuality that forbade any expression of their sexuality, they now face a paradoxical inversion of this repression, as sex and sexuality becomes conceived in increasingly narrow and commodified terms in the phenomenon of raunch culture.

The marketplace is taking up and reinforcing certain behaviour in a way that can make it hard for many young women to find the space where other views of female sexuality and other ways for women to feel powerful are celebrated. By co-opting the language of choice and empowerment, this culture creates smoke and mirrors that prevent many people from seeing just how limiting such so-called choices can be.<sup>4</sup>

This sexist culture is tolerated, even celebrated, because it rests on the illusion of equality. Since men and women are equal, we are told, it is therefore unproblematic that women should prioritise their sexual attractiveness, it is simply a free choice exercised by women equal to men. A remarkable similarity has emerged between liberating' feminism and liberating' capitalism. Nina Power remarks in *One Dimensional Woman* that, 'the desire for emancipation starts to look like something wholly interchangeable with the desire to simply buy more things'.<sup>5</sup> Stripped of its radical political dimensions, feminism has become the latest must have accessory and sexual freedom has too often meant exploitation not liberation. One explanation for this lies in what British Marxist Lindsey German terms capitalism's 'amazing

<sup>3</sup>Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*. New York: Free Press, 2005, 3.

<sup>4</sup>Natasha Walters, *Living Dolls: The Return Of Sexism*. London: Virago, 2010, 119.

<sup>5</sup>Nina Power, *One Dimensional Woman*. London: Zero, 2010, 27-28.

ability to use the changes in society to its own advantage even if the capitalists or their supporters have done little or nothing to bring these changes about'.<sup>6</sup> This is particularly obvious when it comes to feminism. From the 1980s we saw what Nancy Fraser refers to as the reversal of the previous formula which 'sought to use politics to tame markets' and the institution of 'a new political process using markets to tame politics'.<sup>7</sup> How did this shift take place? When we hear the term neoliberalism we tend to think of an economic doctrine that emphasises the unfettered role of the free market. Neoliberalism emerged in the early 1970s as a response to 'a structural crisis of capitalism' as profit rates declined and the existing capitalist policies, practices and institutions ceased to effectively serve the interest of capitalism and its insatiable drive for profit. The result was that capitalism abandoned the social democratic model that had dominated after the Second World War and embraced neoliberalism in the hope that it could improve profitability.<sup>8</sup> The construction of consent for this shift involved a political and ideological assault on 'common-sense' understandings of the world so that neoliberal fidelity to the logic of the market increasingly began to be viewed as an entirely natural way for the social world to be organised. Margaret Thatcher best expressed this shift when she remarked: 'economics are the method but the object is to change the soul.'<sup>9</sup> Neoliberalism, in other words, required both an economic

and an ideological construction of a market based populist culture that emphasised consumerism and individual freedom. As David Harvey argues:

By capturing the ideas of individual freedom and turning them against the interventionist and regulatory practices of the state, capitalist class interests could hope to protect their position. Neoliberalism was well suited to this ideological task. But it had to be backed up by a practical strategy that emphasised the liberty of consumer choice, not only with respect to particular products but also with respect to lifestyles, modes of expression and a wide range of cultural practices.<sup>10</sup>

Neoliberalism became particularly good at treating everything, even politics, as if were a consumable commodity so that, as Philip Mirowski argues '[i]n its most advance manifestation, there is no separate content of the notion of citizenship other than as customer of state services'.<sup>11</sup> One of the key slogan's of second wave feminism was 'the personal is political'. Under neoliberalism the personal is the only political permitted; a series of consumer choices, or individualised responses to individualised needs. Writing in his book *The Individualised Society* the

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<sup>6</sup>Lindsey German, 'Babes, Barbie and the battle of the sexes'. *Socialist Review*. April 1995. <http://pubs.socialistreviewindex.org.uk/sr185/german.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Nancy Fraser, 'Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History'. *New Left Review*, Vol. 2 No. 56, 2009,

<sup>8</sup>Al Campbell, 'The Birth of Neoliberalism in the United States', in Alfredo Saad Filho and Deborah Johnston (eds), *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader*. London: Pluto, 2005, p. 189.

<sup>9</sup>Margaret Thatcher quoted in David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 23.

<sup>10</sup>Harvey, 42.

<sup>11</sup>Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis go to Waste*. London: Verso, 2013, 58.

sociologist Zygmunt Bauman explains how this shift affected individual consciousness:

Being an individual *de jure* means having no one to blame for one's own misery, seeking causes of one's own defeats nowhere except in one's own indolence and sloth, and looking for no other remedies other than trying harder and harder still . . . With eyes focused on one's own performance and thus diverted from the social space where the contradictions of individual existence are collectively produced, men and women are naturally tempted to reduce the complexity of their predicament. Not that they find 'biographic solutions' onerous and cumbersome: there are, simply, no 'biographic solutions to systemic contradictions' and so the dearth of solutions at their disposal needs to be compensated for by imaginary ones. There is therefore a demand for individual pegs on which frightened individuals can collectively hand their individual fears, if only for a brief moment.<sup>12</sup>

Under neoliberalism even oppression is privatized in the sense of being silenced or made invisible. If a person *feels* that she is a victim of sexism, she must first look to her own responsibility; by the same token any residual sexism is a matter of personal taste. If a woman is raped, she is told she must examine her own behavior and consider her own responsibility to keep her-

self safe: Did you dress provocatively? Did you drink too much? Did you walk home alone? The rapist is rarely asked to focus on or change his behavior. Under neoliberalism the responsibility lies with a woman not to allow herself to get raped. This represents a powerful ideological shift which has made oppression a matter of personal responsibility and has depoliticised the reality of women's oppression.

## Theories of Oppression

If we want to challenge sexism in society we first need to understand where it comes from. The most persistent and widely accepted explanation for women's oppression today is that of patriarchy. The term patriarchy generally refers to a system of male power that transcends history, class and society. As an idea it is so widely accepted that any rejection of the theory is often greeted with genuine amazement. This is not surprising as one of the reasons that an idea like patriarchy tends to carry weight as an explanation for women's oppression is that it does appear to fit reality. Most people do not experience sexism as something abstractly imposed by the system', rather as Judith Orr remarks; it is something that is articulated 'through real human relationships between individuals.'<sup>13</sup> Patriarchy is one of the cornerstones of mainstream feminist theories of women's oppression and argues that men have always violently oppressed women. For example, Andrea Dworkin, a leading proponent of this thesis and author of many books on the subject of violence against women, writes:

In the intimate world of men and women, there is no mid-twentieth century distinct from

<sup>12</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *The Individualised Society*. Cambridge: Polity, 2000, 106.

<sup>13</sup> Judith Orr, 'Marxism and Feminism Today'. *International Socialism Journal*. Vol. 2 No. 127, 2010. <http://www.isj.org.uk/?id=656>

any other century. There are only the old values, women there for the taking. The means of taking is determined by the male. It is ancient and it is modern; it is caveman and astronaut, agricultural and industrial, urban and rural. For men the right to abuse women is elemental, the first principle, with no beginning unless one is willing to trace origins back to God and with no end plausibly in sight.<sup>14</sup>

The problem with the approach is that it is ahistorical and understands sexism not as a product of class society as a whole and of capitalism today but as an ‘eternal truth’ separate from the capitalist system. The difficulty with this theory is that it offers little understanding of the historical origins of women’s oppression, of how widely differing the experience of oppression is from class to class, or of how the nature of the family, which both Marxists and feminists would agree is the source of much oppression for women, has changed historically. It fails to recognise that relationships between men and women have not always been governed by violence and inequality and that they are subject to social change. Thus patriarchy theory tends to advocate for the widely accepted belief within the women’s movement that the fight for women’s liberation is something separate from the struggle against capitalism. Since all men, consciously or unconsciously, oppress all women, the primary division in society is not one of class but of sex.

Patriarchal theories often make a distinction between the economic oppression that women experience under capitalism

and the ideology of patriarchy arguing that they are two autonomous spheres. The problem with this perspective, as Marx pointed out in *The German Ideology* (1845), is that you cannot explain the development of society if you simply see history as a product of particular set of ideas:

The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. We do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life process. Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development: but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse alter, along with their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.<sup>15</sup>

The patriarchal explanation for women’s oppression sees ideas as sustaining themselves; whereas the Marxist ex-

<sup>14</sup>Andrea Dworkin, *Men Possessing Women*. London: The Womens Press, 1981, 68.

<sup>15</sup>Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1974, 47.

planation is based on an understanding that it is the material world that shapes the ideas in our heads, not the other way round. Therefore any understanding of women's oppression must be rooted concretely in a historical analysis of particular societies not in generalised presumptions about the nature' of men (or women).

A second influential theory for understanding sexism in society is what is sometimes known as privilege theory or intersectionality. We live in an increasingly unequal society and people experience oppression in a range of different ways from race, class and sex to gender, nationality and religion. Privilege theory is an attempt to recognise all the different ways that people are oppressed in our society. One of the most widely known privilege documents *Check your Privilege 101* defines privilege as 'an unearned advantage that a dominant group has over marginalized groups.' It goes on to argue that 'a key aspect of privilege is that, due to its unearned nature, those who have privilege often do not realize they have it. In other words, they don't see the access and opportunity being a member of a dominant group affords them.' Types of privilege include class, race, education, gender, gender identity, age, body size, able-bodied, life on the outside [of prison], religion and sexuality. The document concludes by asking people to 'check their privilege' by among other things, 'acknowledging that privilege exists' and 'calling people out about privilege.'<sup>16</sup> Intersectionality is a form of privilege theory that is also concerned with how different oppressions intersect and interact with one another. This theory draws in particular on black women activists' criticism of mainstream feminism that while claiming to speak for all women

it often ignores racism. Intersectionality also focuses on the class differences among both oppressed and supposedly 'privileged' groups and can be useful in terms of understanding the relationships between different forms of oppression.

One of the biggest differences between these approaches and the Marxist approach to oppression is over the question of class. Privilege theory and intersectionality reduce class to just one of a series of inequalities. Yet for Marxists class is the fundamental relationship that propels the capitalist system forward. It is also, crucially, the key to overthrowing it. Marxists do not 'overly privilege' class, as they are often accused of doing. Class is central to the Marxist understanding of oppression not because the working class are the most oppressed group in society, often they are not - but because the working class has the power to overthrow capitalism and end the oppression and exploitation for all the oppressed groups. The other difficulty with privilege theory is that it tends to focus on challenging and changing individuals and therefore feeds into the neoliberal idea that oppression is a private matter. If oppression works through a series of unearned advantages, then the logical conclusion is surely for the 'privileged' to give up these 'privileges'. However, this argument fundamentally misunderstands the nature of oppression; it does not just exist at the level of individual relationships; it is intimately intertwined with capitalism and propagated and promoted by the institutions of the state and the media. Secondly, placing an emphasis on the different experiences of oppressed people limits the possibilities for people fighting back together in solidarity with one another. While it is important that we always challenge sex-

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<sup>16</sup>'Checking your Privilege 101' was produced by the Transformative Justice Law Project of Illinois (TJLP), which says it is 'a collective of radical lawyers, social workers, activists, and community organizers.' It is available at <http://www.feminish.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/privilege101.pdf>

ist, racist or homophobic ideas we need to be careful about arguing that people must abolish all of their prejudices before they can get involved in struggle in any meaningful way. It is often through participation in struggle that people find that their prejudices are challenged and their ideas change.

## Marxism and Oppression

Many feminist writers accuse Marxism of economic reductionism; meaning that they reduce all social questions, including women's oppression, to class relations. For example, Michael Albert, one of the leading anti-capitalist activists in the US remarked in a debate about the relevance of Marxism for the 21st century that: 'Marxism...tends to exaggerate the centrality of economics and gives insufficient attention to gender, race, [politics] and the environment.'<sup>17</sup> But clearly issues of gender, race and the environment are not separate from economics. If women can be paid less than men employers benefit from this economically; African slaves were transported to the Americas for economic reasons; fracking which is so destructive of the environment is undertaken for economic reasons. Also these type of accusations usually rest on the false assumption that Marxism subordinates women's oppression and other oppressions like race and LGBT to the more important arena of the class struggle or ignores oppression altogether. One of the reason for this, Eleanor Leacock points out is that '[i]n western academic circles second-hand knowledge of (or assumptions about) Marxist ideas are legion, but Marx's and Engels' works are all too

seldom read. The usual practice is to set up Marxist theory as the straw man of economic determinism and then to knock it down.'<sup>18</sup> Marxist theory does place a great deal of emphasis on economic relations, but this does not prevent Marxists from treating with questions of women's oppression with the utmost seriousness and playing a leading role in the fight against oppression in all its forms.

The Marxist approach to oppression seeks to illustrate how the origins of oppression are rooted in class society; this is not the same thing as reducing oppression to class. Marxism is based on an understanding that it is the material world that shapes the ideas in our heads, not the other way round. Therefore any understanding of women's oppression must be grounded concretely in a historical analysis of particular societies, not in sweeping generalisations about human nature. Capitalism is the prism through which all of our sexual relations are currently distorted and this means that Marxists share with feminists a deep loathing of sexism and argue that women have yet to achieve genuine liberation. Contrary to what you may often read, the question of women's oppression was no mere afterthought to Marx and Engels' analysis of class society rather it was, from the very beginning, an integral component of their work. Their theory of the origins of women's oppression was developed and refined over several decades culminating in the publication of *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* in 1884. Engels wrote *The Origin* after Marx's death, but it was a joint collaboration, as he used Marx's detailed notes along with his own.

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<sup>17</sup>Michael Albert made these comments during a debate with Alan Maass of Socialist Worker (the paper of International Socialist Organisation in the US) on the relevance of Marxism in the 21st century. The debate is available at <http://socialistworker.org/Featured/MarxDebate.shtml>

<sup>18</sup>Eleanor Burke Leacock, 'Introduction: Engels and the History of Womens Oppression' in *Myths of Male Dominance*. Chicago: Haymarket Book, 2008, 17.

Engels argues that the male dominated family has historical roots that can be located in the emergence of class society during the transition from nomad hunter/gather societies to more permanent settled agricultural societies. This transition saw the emergence of private property and with it the rise of class society. The family became institutionalised as a means of protecting property and wealth and ensuring that they were passed from father to son. Women during this period began to be reconceived as the property of their husbands. Far from being an unchanging feature human biology or an unchanging idea in people's heads, women's oppression Engels argues arose with the emergence of class societies:

The first class opposition that appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male. Monogamous marriage was a great step forward; nevertheless, together with slavery and private wealth, it opens the period that has lasted until today in which every step forward is also relatively a step backward, in which prosperity and development for some is won through the misery and frustration of others.<sup>19</sup>

Women's oppression cannot be understood as something separate from capitalism rather it plays a central role in its perpetuation. Capitalism relies on the central role that women have in the 'private' family as it is in the family that the next

generation of workers are cared for. Some feminists will argue that Marxism cannot explain the more personal aspects of women's oppression because it locates the root of women's oppression in class society. This is a caricature of Marxism, which assumes that Marxists only concern themselves with exploitation at the workplace. Marxists stress the economic roots of inequality precisely because we seek to understand how seemingly different forms of oppression have come to play a crucial, and often interdependent role, in maintaining a system of exploitation. The essence of Engels' analysis of women's oppression is that the source of women's oppression is located in their reproductive role within the family and in the family's role as an economic unit in society. This subordinate role in the family is connected to other facets of women's oppression in society at large.

## Capitalism and the Family Today

Today's families are very different from the families that Engels and Marx were writing about. Now, in almost every industrialised country, the traditional male-breadwinner family model has been replaced with the two-income family model with both men and women working outside the home. However, this has not produced greater equality for women; indeed, it has created a whole new set of burdens. The modern woman is now supposed to be some kind of superwoman who has a successful career, happy well cared for children and a sexually satisfied partner. For working-class women this creates a double burden, in which they return home from work at the end of the day only to face all of their family responsibilities. Unlike wealthy women who can afford to pay for

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<sup>19</sup>Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. New York: International Publishers, 1972, 129.

someone to take primary responsibility for childcare and domestic work, working-class women are expected to work outside the home and care for their children. In order to understand why this is the case we need to recognise the vital economic and ideological role that the family continues to play for capitalism. Economically, the family is the site where the next generation of workers are fed, clothed, socialised, educated, loved and cared for to ensure that they turn into the next generation of workers and the family is also an important unit of consumption. The family also plays an important role ideologically under capitalism with the media and politicians holding up the nuclear family as the ideal way to live our lives.<sup>20</sup>

Increasingly fewer and fewer families fit this right-wing ideal of the nuclear family. Women have children later than ever before, increasing numbers actively choose not to have children and a significant number of families have one lone parent, usually a woman. Judith Orr argues that 'while traditional ideas about the family do not fit the reality of society today, their resilience reflects the fact that it has survived as a dominant social structure, despite many profound changes in how we live and work. It serves an important purpose in maintaining and justifying the status quo.'<sup>21</sup> Neoliberalism was not just an ideological project; its principle objective was to reorder the economic relations and shift the balance between labour and capital, in favour of capital. One of the ways this was achieved was through the destruction of social capital. Increasingly, more and more responsibility is placed onto individual families as basic social protections and the welfare state is slowly dismantled. Things like healthcare and education, once

provided by the state, are being turned into commodities, privatised and the cost is passed onto individual families. All of these attacks and the current austerity all have a disproportionate effect on women. The ideology of the family continues to be propped up even in ways that are contradictory to the needs of capital itself. Women's work in paid employment outside the home is vital to capitalism so it not in the interests of capitalism to see women return to the home. However, the ruling class do want women to understand that their primary responsibility is for care within the home. However, we cannot simply reduce the family to a political and economic unit of capitalism. Indeed, most people consider their family to be centrally important in their lives. The family can be the one place where we can expect and receive unconditional love and support and functions, for many, as a haven from a brutal world. This experience can be contradictory as the family can also be a site of much unhappiness and even violence. Domestic violence accounts for a significant portion of recorded violent crime in Ireland. The most common scene of murder is the home. Women who are raped are more likely to be attacked by someone they know - often within the home. The physical and sexual abuse of children is also more likely to happen inside the home than outside. None of this should be particularly surprising as the family is an institution based on hierarchical relationships and sexual repression. The family promises happiness and safety, but frequently it delivers insecurity and sadness. It is seen as a haven from the outside world but it cannot be a genuinely secure retreat. Pressures on the family, from unpaid bills to unemployment, from problems of parents working

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<sup>20</sup>Lindsey German, 'Womens Liberation'. *International Socialism* 101, Winter 2004. <http://www.isj.org.uk/?id=32>

<sup>21</sup>Orr, 48-9.

shifts to difficult relationships, all impinge upon it. This is also why there is so much concern over 'family breakdown'. The capitalist state intervenes to prop up the family, financially through family credits and other allowances, and directly through a series of professionals connected to health, education and welfare. The 'breakdown of the family' - the rise in statistics for divorce, the decline of marriage and the increase in women having children outside marriage - is used by right wing politicians to explain everything from crime to obesity.<sup>22</sup>

## Class

Sexism affects all women in society, regardless of their class position - just as racism affects people of colour in all classes and homophobia affects LGBT people of all classes. This is why people with power and influence in our society are, overwhelmingly, male, white and straight. But while being wealthy does not insulate you from sexism in society it does allow you to mitigate some of the most difficult aspects of oppression. Wealthy women, for example, do not have to worry about childcare in the same way that working class women do because they can pay someone, often a working class woman, to look after their children. Individual advancement makes sense for wealthy women but as a strategy for the majority of women it leads to a dead end. For Marxists class is important not just for understanding oppression but also for determining a strategy to fight against it by locating where to power lies so we can destroy it

Marxist-feminist Martha Gimenez comments, while women of all classes share

<sup>22</sup> Lindsey German, 'Is the Family a Haven or a Hell'. *Socialist Worker*. 25 Nov 2008. <http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=16503>

<sup>23</sup>Martha Gimenez, 'Capitalism and the Oppression of Women: Marx Revisited,' *Science & Society*, Vol. 69, No. 1, January 2005, 28.

certain experiences of oppression, women of different classes are also simultaneously locked into an antagonistic relationship. Thus, as she notes, crucial class differences between women reflect

important class and socioeconomic status differences in women's experiences of biological reproduction . . . as well as differences in the organization of social reproduction: the use of paid domestic workers not only by capitalist women but by women affluent enough to afford them highlights how oppression is not something that only men can inflict upon women. The real advances upper-middle-class professional and business women (those earning six-figure salaries) have made in the last 30 years presupposes the existence of a servant stratum, drawn from the less skilled layer of the working class, including a large proportion of women from racial and ethnic minorities, often undocumented immigrants.<sup>23</sup>

Therefore, how do Marxists resolve this apparent contradiction: women of all classes are oppressed under capitalism, yet class differences also divide women? The Marxist analysis of women's oppression is not just another theory of oppression; it advocates a strategy to change it. Women workers suffer oppression and exploitation but they are part of a powerful force, the working class. The working class does not benefit from the oppression of any group;

it is only capitalism that benefits. By oppressing a section of the working class on the basis of sex or race and dividing workers, capitalism is able to drive down the pay and conditions of all workers. One of the problems that capitalism has continually had to face has been the tendency of workers to organise collectively to fight back against their exploitation. The American Marxist Hal Draper argues:

To engage in class struggle it is not necessary to 'believe in' the class struggle any more than it is necessary to believe in Newton in order to fall from an airplane. The working class moves toward class struggle insofar as capitalism fails to satisfy its economic and social needs and aspirations ... There is no evidence that workers like to struggle any more than anyone else; the evidence is that capitalism compels and accustoms them to do so.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore one of the strategies that capitalism employs to weaken and defeat workers is to set them against one another, thereby making them less able to fight back. Conversely it is in the course of workers' struggles that the practical need for unity helps break down ideas like sexism and racism that have been used to sow division.

Mainstream feminists will argue that you can fight sexism in society without overthrowing capitalism. This is hardly surprising. The class position of someone

like Sheryl Sandberg gives her a stake in the system and sets her apart from the conditions and experience of the majority of women. That is why mainstream feminists will always seek to limit the scope of the struggle and keep it within bounds that are acceptable to their class interests. They will argue that 'we are all in this together' or call for the 'unity of the oppressed'. However, unity in struggle is not the same thing as ignoring the different class interests that are at play. Socialists want to see real change for women in our society but we also want to fight for a new type of society that ends all oppression.

Conclusions In order to achieve true equality between men and women it is necessary to fight for an alternative to capitalism because as Hester Eisenstein argues 'a vision of justice for women and all humanity cannot be realised within the violent and dangerous machinery of corporate globalization'.<sup>25</sup> Too often activists on the left make the mistake of thinking that you must choose between a focus on fighting oppression or ignoring oppression because it divides workers and instead focusing on questions of class. However, the only way to effectively challenge oppression and ultimately to destroy it is to link the struggle against oppression with the struggle against capitalism. That is why Marxists argue that the struggle for women's liberation is not separated out from the wider struggle against the capitalism system. It is also why it is vital that we make our struggles reflect women's aspirations and demands and make these demands part of the wider struggle against capitalism.

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<sup>24</sup>Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution, Volume 3: the Politics of Social Classes*. New York: Monthly Review, 1978, 41-42.

<sup>25</sup>Hester Eisenstein, *Feminism Seduced: How Global elites Use Womens Labor and Ideas to Exploit the World*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2009, 13.