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The Fourth International and women's liberation

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The Marxist movement has from the start addressed the question of women's place in society, both in its writing and thinking, for example in the Communist Manifesto but notably in Engels' work *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* not forgetting also Auguste Bebel's *Woman under socialism*; and in its activity - notable figures include Clara Zetkin in German Social Democracy, Alexandra Kollontai in the Russian Bolshevik party and Sylvia Pankhurst in the British suffrage movement. Links between the broad labour movement and women's activity as women have also been widely present (for example women's trade unions were formed in the early days of the trade-union movement in Ireland, Britain and Denmark, there were links between the Suffragette movement and labour unions in both Britain and Ireland).

Thus it is not surprising that the Marxist left also responded - albeit different currents in different ways - to the rise of the new women's movement in the 1960s and 70s in the context of a worldwide youth radicalisation. This emergence of feminist movements was not, as is often considered, confined to Western Europe and North America. Small feminist groups began to emerge in Latin America in the early 1970s, notably in Mexico but also elsewhere, despite the military dictatorships. Women from Latin America also made important theoretical contributions to feminism (for example Ginny Vargas, Peru). The Latin American continent-wide Feminist Encuentros, the first of which was held in 1981, are still a sign of active women's movement, despite the problems that have been noted concerning the "institutionalisation" of the movement through the presence and activity of NGOs. In India the feminist movement began to develop notably after the lifting of the State of Emergency in 1976, one of its main focuses was on the violence practised against women, notably rapes and "dowry deaths". Feminist women in Iran were a component part of the movement to overthrow the Shah in the late 1970s, and are again today an active part of the pro-democracy movement.

But of course this mass movement was strongest in those areas where the social conditions favoured the general youth radicalisation, in the context of the post-war boom, the massification of higher education and, particularly for women, access to contraception.

From this point of view it is logical that the 1979 resolution "Socialist Revolution and the Struggle for Women's Liberation" republished in this book [[1](#)] was initially developed by Fourth International

women from North America and Western Europe. Indeed there was some discussion as to whether such a resolution should indeed aim to have a world-wide scope or should deal with those areas where both the Fourth International had the majority of its sections, which – although in general small – were a real reflection of that upsurge of youth radicalisation, and therefore where the development of the second wave women’s movement was most marked. Although the decision taken was to deal with what were known at the time as the “three sectors” of the world (advanced capitalist countries, the “third world” and Stalinised and bureaucratised countries), the sections dealing with the latter two sectors are undoubtedly the weakest of the document.

The 1991 resolution on Latin America [2] was an important rectification to this in terms of understanding how the processes of radicalisation and movement building could take place in that specific context. It was based on a real study of the state of the movement at that time in the Latin American sub-continent undertaken notably by comrades of the Mexican PRT. Unfortunately the real implantation of the Fourth International in other parts of the world did not allow us to do similar work there. The most important point that this resolution stressed was that women moving into struggle on the basis of their social position as women, as mothers, as shanty-town dwellers fighting for water or main drains, as peasants fighting for the right to own or work the land, could also develop a gender-conscious radicalisation. We also saw this elsewhere for example as wives in solidarity with the struggles started by their husbands (see for example the 1984-85 miner’s strike in Britain) or as activists in the peace movement (the Women’s Peace Camp at Greenham Common also in Britain in the early 1980s) or in the nurses’ movement in France in 1988

The most important theoretical and strategic gain of the 1979 document is something which we believe holds good in general. That is that the process of transformation of society on an anti-capitalist basis, uprooting the basis for all oppression and exploitation, requires the active participation of an autonomous or independent women’s movement. What is meant by an autonomous women’s movement is spelt out in the resolution: *“By the women’s movement we mean all the women who organize themselves at one level or another to struggle against the oppression imposed on them by this society: women’s liberation groups, consciousness-raising groups, neighbourhood groups, student groups, groups organized at workplaces, trade-union commissions, organizations of women of oppressed nationalities, lesbian-feminist groups, action coalitions around specific demands. The women’s movement is characterized by its heterogeneity, its penetration into all layers of society, and the fact that it is not tied to any particular political organization, even though various currents are active within it. Moreover, some groups and action coalitions, though led and sustained by women, are open to men as well, such as the National Organization for Women in the United States and the National Abortion Campaign in Britain.”* (Our Methods of Struggle, point 2)

The basis for regarding such a movement as a strategic necessity is that *“b. Women are both a significant component of the working class, and a potentially powerful ally of the working class in the struggle to overthrow capitalism. Without the socialist revolution, women cannot establish the preconditions for their liberation. Without the mobilization of masses of women in struggle for their own liberation, the working class cannot accomplish its historic tasks. The destruction of the bourgeois state, the eradication of capitalist property, the transformation of the economic bases and priorities of society, the consolidation of a new state power based on the democratic organization of the working class and its allies, and the continuing struggle to eliminate all forms of oppressive social relations inherited from class society - all this can ultimately be accomplished only with the conscious participation and leadership of an independent women’s liberation movement.”* (Our Perspective 2.b.)

However the politics of such a movement are important, it is not simply women as women: *“e. While all women are affected by their oppression as women, the mass women’s liberation movement we*

strive to build must be basically working-class in composition, orientation, and leadership. Only such a movement, with roots in the most exploited layers of working-class women, will be able to carry the struggle for women's liberation through to the end in an uncompromising way, allying itself with the social forces whose class interests parallel and intersect those of women. Only such a movement will be able to play a progressive role under conditions of sharpening class polarization." (Our Perspective 2.e.)

This position was a break with the traditions of the Marxist movement on women's organising. Although women's movements linked to the Marxist movement were frequent, they had other roles: offering the possibility for women to have political activity where mixed political activity was not allowed, organising women supporters of the party, having specific work directed at winning women to the party. They did not, on a theoretical and on a practical level, take into account the need for an autonomous women's movement in order to build a relationship of forces sufficient to impose women's demands.

As such, this was the major debate with currents inside and outside the Fourth International who, while situating themselves as revolutionary Marxists, adhered to a conception of the revolutionary process focusing on working class represented by "the" revolutionary party as the sole agency of revolutionary social change, which would at best naturally incorporate women's demands or lay the basis for the elimination of women's inequality once it achieved power. It remains a distinctive position today in relation to other international revolutionary Marxist currents such as the Morenist current, the IST around the British SWP or the different currents developing from the British Militant tendency.

This position developed by the Fourth International should also be seen in the context of another debate that was taking place at the same time and was concluded by the adoption in 1985 of the resolution "*Socialist Democracy and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat*" [3], although the main lines of the discussion had been developed in the 1970s. This debate marked an important advance in the strategic thinking of the FI by asserting that the different experiences and interests of sectors of the exploited and oppressed implied the development of different authentically revolutionary organisations, and that one single party would not synthesise all their interests in its programme. This discussion was also marked by the experience of the Nicaraguan revolution and a further discussion of the question of the revolutionary subject in the 1980s, in which a distinction was proposed between the practical-political subject that would mobilise the mass of the population able to impose its programme, and the theoretical-political subject that would contribute to the development of the political programme while not directly mobilising the mass weight of the exploited and oppressed.

This important point was accepted by an absolutely overwhelming majority of the Fourth International at its 1979 World Congress. However, this did not preclude a number of other important debates continuing, at the congress itself and subsequently.

The position taken in favour of an independent women's liberation movement was argued essentially from the position of the failure of the leaderships of the parties and unions of the labour movement to take up women's demands and an idealised notion of male workers attitude to women crept in "*They often face sexist harassment and abuse which is organized and promoted by their foremen and supervisors. Even when it comes from their fellow workers, it is often the result of an atmosphere fostered by the employer.*" (Our Methods of Struggle 7.) This debate also found its prolongation after the congress in the debate about "men's benefits", that is to what extent men as individuals benefit from women's oppression, and thus have an interest, or think they do, in perpetuating a situation of inequality and discrimination.

Debates around the validity of Engels' contention that women's oppression was a product of the development of class society – a continuing subject of research and discussion among feminist anthropologists and social scientists today – produced a compromise formula: “3. *The origin of women's oppression is intertwined with the transition from pre-class to class society. The exact process by which this complex transition took place is a continuing subject of research and discussion even among those who subscribe to a materialist historical view. However, the fundamental lines along which women's oppression emerged are clear. The change in women's status developed along with the growing productivity of human labour based on agriculture, the domestication of animals, and stock raising; the rise of new divisions of labour, craftsmanship, and commerce; the private appropriation of an increasing social surplus; and the development of the possibility for some humans to prosper from the exploitation of the labour of others.*” (Origin and Nature of Women's Oppression 3.) There was however complete agreement that women's oppression pre-dated capitalism and therefore would not be eliminated by the overthrow of capitalism, as the experience of the Soviet Union had shown. The chapter “Thermidor in the Family” in Leon Trotsky's book *The Revolution Betrayed* was an important text in this respect.

In common with much of the current known as “socialist” or “class struggle” within the broad feminist movement, questions of sexuality and violence were less fully dealt with in our framework although demands were formulated. Early drafts of the document implying all lesbians were separatists were amended. Later, at the 2003 World Congress, a programmatic resolution on Lesbian and Gay Liberation that drew on the analytical and strategic framework of the 1979 was adopted. Certain FI organisations in the 1970s still had, lamentably, extremely backward positions on homosexuality, going so far as not permit membership arguing that it could put the organisation in danger as an illegal activity. Such a position would now obviously not be acceptable and any such organisation would not be admitted, or would be excluded from, membership of the FI. In 1991 one organisation was dropped from membership, following a decision by all the women comrades to leave the organisation because in their opinion their party had not correctly dealt with incidents of sexual violence and harassment, although the individuals responsible were expelled.

The 1979 resolution insisted on the fact that all women are oppressed, although this oppression combines with class oppression. However the only references to women of different ethnic origin are in relation to immigrant women, although in the United States Black women were among prominent leaders of the Fourth Internationalists who contributed largely to the drafting of the document. Later texts such as that about women in the Western advanced capitalist countries of 1991 [4] were better on this point. The questions of violence against women were also dealt with more fully in later texts.

Particular importance was given to the impact of the women's movement on the labour movement and the forms of organisation of women as workers, notably in the women's commissions that developed in trade unions. The forms and nature of these commissions were different depending on the traditions of the labour movement – the extent to which these trade-union leaderships accepted these as legitimate union structures or pushed them to organise outside of those structures. This did not necessarily mean however that the “legitimate” structures played a less dynamic role than those forced to organise on a more independent basis. The women's commissions in the British and French trade-union movements played an important role in pushing the trade-union leaderships to organise major national demonstrations in defence of abortion rights in collaboration with the organised women's movement in 1979. The Coalition of Labour Union Women in the United States did valuable work.

The resolution of 1979 placed itself in the perspective of a continuing existence indeed development of the women's movement. By 1991 it was clear that the world-wide impact of feminism was not expressed in the continuing growth of women's movements. Despite our conviction that women's

liberation was far from being achieved, the obvious questions of legislation had to a large extent been won in advanced capitalist countries and broad united-front mobilisations thus more difficult to achieve. The continuing activity of committed feminists tended to organise itself around specific themes and in particular where women were in need of support networks that were not provided elsewhere, for example women victims of sexual violence.

At the same time, the theoretical and analytical debates opened up under the impact of the women's movement itself were leading layers of women, notably in academic circles, to the conclusion that a women's liberation movement was an impossible objective because women's different experiences shaped by their social, economic, ethnic etc place made it impossible to have any common demands. These developments fed into and were strengthened by the intellectual movement known as "postmodernism" with its emphasis on deconstruction of meta-narratives and the impossibility universal values or demands.

Since the start, women in the feminist movement had on the one hand challenged "universal" figures, such as "the worker", pointing out that half of all workers were women and that any discussion of the working class and any movement claiming to defend its needs and interests had therefore to address itself to those experiences. In turn the movement itself was challenged by women who felt that as black, immigrant, working class or lesbian their needs and interests were not being taken on board by a movement that seemed located primarily among younger white heterosexual women in higher education or white-collar jobs.

In fact, from the start many lesbians, who did not feel their place was in the gay movement because they found it overwhelmingly masculine (and often sexist), had been key activists and initiators in the women's movement. An amendment on this very point was introduced into the 1979 resolution by women from Britain reflecting their experience that lesbian activists had been in the forefront of the women's movement and its central campaigns, notably to defend the existing liberal abortion law.

As women organised within the trade-unions to force workers' organisations to take up the demands of their women members, the women's movement saw the development of black women's groups, lesbian groups, women against racism groups that contributed to a consciousness-raising within the movement about women's different experiences.

One way in which this impact was clearly shown was how campaigns that had started around abortion rights, such as the National Abortion Campaign in Britain, took on board the experiences of the Bangladeshi women found to being used as unwitting guinea pigs for the injectable contraceptive Depo-provera, or the West Indian women in Britain who found obligatory sterilisation too often accompanied abortions and developed its programme accordingly.

At an international level, the International Campaign for Abortion Rights (ICAR) rapidly changed its name to the International Contraception, Abortion and Sterilisation Campaign (ICASC) - today it is today the Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights - in order to develop and expand in an inclusive way the question of women's reproductive health and women's right to control their own bodies. It is difficult to see in what way the right to decide what happens to one's own body would not be a universal demand for women, just as the demand to be free from torture or famine must be for all humans.

The emphasis on understanding women's specific experience also gave rise to different forms of difference or essentialist feminism that accepted there were essential differences between women and men and set as their goal that what are considered "feminine" values or characteristics should be given as much social value as what are traditionally considered "male" values. This approach, like

those based on a notion of patriarchy as a system of male oppression running parallel to capitalism or class society, was rejected as incompatible with a Marxist approach that understood all social relations as encompassed within the relations of production and reproduction

The entry of a generation of young women radicalising under the impact of the feminist movement also led to questioning of how easily they found their place in those organisations, in relation to older male comrades but also their own contemporaries. This was not of course specific to the organisations of the Fourth International, the symbiotic relationship between mixed radical movements and the feminist radicalisation led inevitably to questioning and challenging of forms of political organisation in general. However the Fourth International remains the only political organisation to have adopted an analytical and programmatic resolution on the question, at its World Congress in 1991, alongside proposals of many practical measures to be taken to form a “positive action plan”. [5]

In 1979 a sharp discussion had been provoked by the proposal that women comrades should have the right to meet together to discuss together the difficulties they faced in feeling at ease and accepted in the organisation in order to identify common features and propose to the organisation as a whole measures to confront these. This proposal was labelled as “anti-Leninist” by a majority of the outgoing leadership and delegates, in particular the American SWP and the current associated with it. The group of young women delegates from European and Latin American countries, as well as Canada, defending the proposal had their first experience of working across national and linguistic boundaries to wage a common fight. Although they were defeated at that Congress, the debate was essentially over as the practice continued where it had already been established, and the decline of the US SWP current and their eventual departure from the International meant that it was rightly seen as just one of a number of usual measures like parity or quotas for women’s representation in the leadership in the resolution adopted in 1991.

Since 1991 the contributions of the Women’s Commission to the international discussions have been focused on the place of women in the developing globalisation of the world economy, as in the theses of 1995 and the document on Women and the Crisis from 2010, and in reasserting the strategic importance of integrating the feminist dimension in our party-building and programmatic elaboration.

The battle for women’s liberation, and for revolutionary Marxist and anti-capitalist organisations to thoroughly integrate this fight into their programme, perspectives and strategy, is not over and under the impact of the developing situation we will have new tasks of analysis and elaboration. We think that these documents have created a framework that will help us fulfil those new tasks.

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P.S.

* From International Viewpoint. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org>

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 12527), [Socialist Revolution and the struggle for Women’s Liberation](#).

[2] See on ESSF (article 3983), [Latin American Women's Liberation: Dynamics of mass movements and feminist currents](#).

[3] See on ESSF (article 22694), [The Dictatorship of the proletariat and socialist democracy](#).

[4] See on ESSF (article 3982), [European Women's Liberation: Changing forms of the struggle for women's liberation](#).

[5] See on ESSF (article 3984), [Positive Action - Women in our parties](#).