

# European Women's Liberation: Changing forms of the struggle for women's liberation

Saturday 18 November 2006, by [Fourth International](#) (Date first published: 1991).

**SINCE the 1979 11<sup>th</sup> World Congress resolution “The Socialist Revolution and the Struggle for Women's Liberation” important changes have taken place in the forms of women's radicalization in western imperialist countries.**

**That resolution noted the mass resurgence of feminist ideas and organizations. It came at the end of a period marked by large-scale mobilizations on the abortion question, by self-organization of sizeable sections of the female population and by workers' struggles in which women had played an important role.**

## Contents

- [I. The changes in women's \(...\)](#)
- [II. Reformist strategies \(...\)](#)
- [III. Women's radicalization](#)
- [IV. The orientation of revolut](#)

Breaking with a tradition of indifference or distrust towards feminism by our movement, the text advocated building independent women's movements in every country according to the rhythms and particularities of local situations. It affirmed the strategic character of building such movements as an indispensable condition for challenging women's oppression and achieving real socialism.

Since then we have to note a decline of “organized feminism”, but this does not mean a generalized decline in women's radicalization. The centre of gravity of radicalization has changed, as have the channels by which it is expressed. The essential question facing feminists is to find ways of linking up with the new generations of radicalizing women in order to build feminist movements that preserve the gains of past years and that can once again have an influence on the political scene.

The decline can probably be explained by two interlinked factors. The economic crisis has altered the overall balance of forces in favour of the bourgeoisie; reformist organizations have accepted the logic of austerity. In some countries, the media have been pushing the idea that we are now in a “post-feminist” era, where equality between the sexes has already been achieved. In this context, which is also marked by a relative lack of workers' activity in many countries, the weakness of the women's movements meant that they could not swim against the stream and impose anti-capitalist demands; winning genuine women's liberation seemed to be a utopian idea.

During the 1970s it was possible for the various currents of the women's movement to unite and engage in mass action in alliance with trade-union and democratic organizations nationally and internationally to win and defend women's rights, such as abortion. The granting of legal reforms slowed down this type of mobilization.

Our analysis of the nature of women's oppression has not changed. The absolute need to build an autonomous movement - the only guarantee that there is a radical and effective struggle against oppression - has in no way disappeared. What remains is to make tactical adjustments to a new conjuncture.

## **I. The changes in women's situation and different bourgeois policies**

The general trends in the social situation of women described in the 1979 resolution remain fundamentally valid today, but new elements should be incorporated:

- Continuation of the massive participation of women of all ages and from all family situations in the labour market, although their integration into waged work takes place fundamentally through part-time work. Wage discrimination and sharp segregation between "masculine" and "feminine" jobs - running through training, promotion, working conditions, etc. - is continuing and even deepening.
- Better technical possibilities exist for women to control reproduction, but in the majority of cases these are limited by laws limiting women's right to decide.
- Continuing massive presence of women in public education to the level of high-school graduation and university entry. Mixed schools have not meant real co-education. Women's presence is limited to humanities faculties, and in any case diminishes sharply in higher levels.
- The development of legislation which postulates formal "equal rights", outlawing discrimination, penalizing sexual violence etc., without taking positive steps to enable women to overcome their historically disadvantaged position.
- An increasing choice by women to live alone, with or without children, as seen in the number of divorces requested by women, single-parent families, women living alone, etc. Obviously this situation does not always represent a free choice - insofar as it is does, it is made possible by women's increased economic and legal independence.
- Black and immigrant women continue to suffer from racism, which combines with and reinforces their oppression as women.
- Greater social recognition and rejection of maltreatment within the family and the sexual violence which men use against women.
- Increasing participation of women in public spaces until now reserved for men; exclusion has been replaced by integration in unequal conditions in all spheres of public and social life.
- Liberalization of sexual habits and customs, recognition of women as sexual beings, although this is still not expressed in greater sexual equality between men and women.

All this reflects the political activity of feminist organizations and has meant an important development of women's consciousness, their personal autonomy and self-esteem; and a change of the socially established stereotypes for men and women. All these elements have created a situation which is different and more complex - because contradictory - than that of 1979.

This reality has been noted by those who defend the social and economic order, forcing them to re-elaborate their discourse so that it seems more in tune with the new situation. It has also led to a differentiation in the policies developed, although there is obviously a basic and firm agreement to

preserve the family institution, the fundamental pillar of oppression, and to keep women in the workforce in a particular form. But the bourgeoisie is far from having a single, clearly-defined plan to achieve its goals.

### **A. Changes in the traditional family and different bourgeois policies**

The changes indicated above have introduced important fissures in the traditional model of the family, determined by the seclusion of women in the home, dedicated to domestic tasks and care of the children, and by the relations of domination which existed within it.

Some of these changes are:

- the increase in the number of non-married, cohabiting couples;
- the large increase in the number of single-parent families;
- the soaring divorce rate;
- the increase in the number of lesbians and gay men living open and proud lives;
- the decline in the birth rate, reflecting women's change of attitude to bringing up children as their only preoccupation;
- The increase in legal complaints for domestic violence is an important indicator of the change in women's self-esteem, and the cracks made in women's relationship of emotional and sexual dependence on their husbands.

This change in women's consciousness and the social rejection of this most brutal expression of women's oppression has also demanded greater attention to the problems which exist in the family: media attention and campaigns around battered women in the 1970s; exposures of physical and sexual abuse of children; the problems of children of separated parents. However, there are not sufficient of the social services necessary (battered women's centres, etc.) to meet the demand.

There are a number of different bourgeois responses to this situation which also reflect national particularities:

**a)** Constant promotion of the ideal of the happily-married couple in a permanent union, with a mother responsible for the home and two children, despite the fact that most women work. This is particularly the case for the white working-class family. Capitalism is less concerned with defending or promoting the unity of black and immigrant families, which it will happily break up through immigration laws, deportation orders or police harassment.

Another aspect is the European bourgeoisies' insistence on the "dramatic consequences" of the falling birth rate. The need to "reverse this trend" is used to reinforce the idea that women's fundamental role is within the family, producing children (directed at white women). At the same time this prepares the ground for cuts in social spending and throwing the burden - especially of the care of old people - back into the family, under the pretext that there will not be enough workers to contribute to social security funds.

**b)** Certain sections of the bourgeoisie have become more flexible on questions such as the status of children born outside marriage or legal recognition of cohabiting couples. This flexibility aims at incorporating the structural changes in the way people live their lives into the system, because capitalism requires the continued existence of the nuclear family as the general model even if

different variations can be accepted.

No alternative to this style of living exists on a mass scale. The indices given for the “crisis of the family” can be countered in different countries by various elements including the rise in the number of marriages, the possibility to register “illegitimate” children in the names of both parents, the incorporation of certain types of “acceptable” homosexuals (white, male and middle class) into the norm through offering a possibility of “marriage”, and so on.

**c)** Some openly reactionary sectors of the bourgeoisie use the “crisis of the family” to press for measures of moral order - in Europe this often includes the idea of a maternal wage, eroding the incomes of single parents and attacks on lesbian and gay men. These currents are still markedly on the extreme right of the political scene, even if some churches have put themselves in the vanguard of this struggle but they have had some success in the British state and in Germany, and they do influence more mainstream bourgeois thinking on the family. In the United States, they have a larger mass base and have been openly encouraged by successive governments.

Those who do not adapt to the nuclear family or the dominant sexual model are often considered marginal, while women who accept the more or less established rules of social behaviour are considered more favourably.

## **B. Women's massive presence in the workforce on terms determined by their specific oppression**

Contrary to the most pessimistic predictions, the economic crisis has not led to women being pushed back into the home. In all the European countries, women's economic activity continues to rise. Even if the rate of women's unemployment is higher than men's everywhere, nowhere has there been a systematic attempt - as there was during the 1930s - to replace female workers by male ones.

The reasons for this are evident. Outside of women's own increased reluctance to return to the home, it is the change in economic organization over the past 40 years that is responsible for this new attitude of the bourgeoisies. The development of the tertiary sector has led to the creation of a large female workforce, not highly skilled but sufficiently so that they cannot be replaced from one day to the next by an unskilled metalworker or a redundant miner.

In addition, women's low wages encourage the bosses to keep these workers. This continuous entry of women into waged work has taken place on varying scales according to the country. But the forms that it takes are determined everywhere according to the situation of domination over women. Modern capitalism faces a contradiction for it is dependent on female labour outside the home, but it is also dependent on “free” female labour inside the home.

The precarious conditions in which women are integrated into waged work form a whole which goes from discrimination in professional training, in hiring conditions and wages, and which finishes in the feminization of poverty.

The expressions of this specific insertion of women into the world of work are as follows:

### **a) Increase in part-time work**

In countries with the highest levels of female employment part-time work has reached its highest levels. Part-time work is most likely to be exclusively female: 80% of all part-time workers are female, and in West Germany and Denmark the figure rises to 95%. The majority of women workers in Britain - the first European country to promote part-time work on a large scale - are part-timers. This carries with it low pay, low status, high productivity levels and lack of union organization and

maternity rights.

Lack of adequate child-care facilities for children below school age is the key factor that forces women into part-time work. Although it seems the only possibility for them others - particularly young women - want to work full-time but cannot get jobs.

Trade unions in Europe have generally not responded to the special needs of part-time workers.

### ***b) Job segregation***

The expansion in female employment has not been spread across the occupational jobs and groupings. Job segregation has even increased with the rise in women's rate of activity and is the key factor in their lower average pay. Women are predominantly employed in the service rather than industrial sector. Among semi-skilled women workers, many of them work separately from men in jobs like wiring and routine assembly work. Nor, despite anti-discrimination legislation and changes in education, have we seen women breaking into male-dominated jobs or a marked increase of women working in the top professions.

### ***c) New technology***

A quiet revolution is taking place using new technology to structure and restructure the hierarchical sexual division of labour at work, at a time when the workers' movement is on the defensive. These changes are geared to the interests of a capitalist, imperialist and patriarchal society.

Introduction of new technology not only brings job losses but also a deterioration in women's working conditions. According to recent surveys in the tertiary sector, women just do not have the "promotional characteristics" - post-entry qualifications, an unbroken service record, geographical mobility - to take advantage of the new managerial and administrative opportunities. Men are more often encouraged to retrain, while women are left to occupy the lesser-skilled jobs (such as computer operators rather than programmers).

### ***d) Flexibility and the reorganization of work***

To get the most out of the new machines capitalists are demanding that workers work around the clock - introducing shift work, weekend work and attempting to lift the ban on nightwork for women. An increasing number of firms (banks, insurance) are also proposing to exploit women's dual role by installing terminals in their homes.

The arguments used to try and convince women workers to accept flexible hours are not the same as for male workers. The argument directed at women emphasizes the possibility to combine "their" family responsibilities with waged work. For men, the arguments emphasize increased leisure time.

All the attacks outlined above go in the direction of introducing flexible jobs, hours, wages and employment patterns. The ruling class tries to create a divide between a small minority of skilled workers - usually male, of the dominant nationality - and an increasingly large marginal layer of unskilled, precariously employed workers made up of women, a section of young workers, immigrants, and unskilled males, who only have temporary jobs and are not covered by social security. It needs to cement the sexual division of labour at work as it reorganizes production to achieve these aims.

### ***e) Unemployment and social security***

Since 1974 there has been lower economic growth and higher levels of unemployment than at any

time since World War II. In nearly all countries the proportion of women registered as unemployed is higher than for men - in Austria, Greece and Portugal the unemployment rate among women is double that for men. (Of course, official statistics mask the full scale of female unemployment as many women fail to register as unemployed.)

No capitalist state ever recognizes women as workers on equal terms with men. One example is the series of measures taken recently in various European countries that tend to exclude even more women from social security coverage, while married women without jobs have never qualified for benefits. The new restrictions on unemployment benefits give priority to heads of household (usually men). Such measures reinforce the fiction that a woman's place is in the home and that women's work only provides a "supplement" to family income. They deny women's right to economic independence.

### **C. Attacks on abortion rights and women's right to control their own bodies**

**a)** The USA has been at the forefront of the attacks on the right to abortion with the recent attempt to reverse the 1973 Roe v Wade ruling, which gave women a constitutional right to abortion. This frontal legal attack is combined with grass-roots fanatical mobilization by extreme sectors of the "Moral Majority" and evangelical churches, taking the forms of burning down clinics and physically preventing women from entering them. However, it now seems that the Republican Party will downplay its hardline opposition to abortion which unexpectedly turned out to be a vote-loser.

This offensive has also developed in a less frontal way through attempts to limit existing laws: reducing time-limits or limiting women's right to decide, giving greater power to parents and husbands or lovers, demanding parental permission for minors, etc. Attempts to restrict the laws meet massive rejection expressed in mobilization. In some countries, (Belgium, Spanish State) there have been big mobilizations to broaden the scope of the existing laws.

Another line of attack is the severe restrictions on health service resources making access to abortion difficult.

The badly-named pro-life organizations, whom we should better call "pro-foetus", are developing an international campaign with extensive means and economic resources, as well as counting on the support of sectors of the political, judicial and medical establishment. They are attempting to erode the social climate favourable to abortion created by the activity of the feminist movement. These forces use a discourse that tends to criminalize and culpabilize women, using the communication media, schools etc, with particularly aggressive rhetoric and propaganda.

However, abortion as a right is never secure under capitalism as it conflicts so strongly with the subordinate role ascribed to women in our society. In fact, all legal changes on this front have failed to give abortion to women as a right - instead it is framed in legislation as a "necessary evil" of the modern world. We have certainly not seen the end of such attacks. But, at the same time, the bourgeoisie knows that it has to reckon on women's ability to fight back against any challenge to this right, limited as it may be. The great majority of women now consider that this is a fundamental element in their battle for independence.

There have also been a series of attacks on other aspects of women's rights to control their own bodies, around issues of surrogacy, new reproductive technologies and donor insemination.

**b)** The response of bourgeois governments to the AIDS epidemic consisted of a wave of hostility particularly directed against the male gay community, with demands for the registration and segregation of victims and potential victims. While US figures show that while only 8% of AIDS

victims are women, in New York it is already the primary cause of death for women of child-bearing age. The extension of AIDS beyond the gay community has forced most Western governments to take it more seriously. This has led to some sex education campaigns about "safe sex" in the mass media or in the schools. However, the right wing uses this issue to attack sexual freedom in general. It has also been used to reinforce racist ideology.

#### **D. Public spending cuts**

A symptom of the economic crisis is the tendency of the capitalist class to cutback on the costs of reproducing the labour force. Social services are more expensive than women's unpaid labour in the home.

The state aims to transfer the burden of these services back onto the individual family. Attacks on maternity rights, creche and nursery provision, health and community services not only increase the level of female unemployment because these are female intensive areas, but they also step up the unpaid work and the oppression of women in the home.

#### **E. Women in the bourgeois political arena**

##### ***a) Legal rights***

Throughout the 1970s most governments (right or left) - under the pressure of women's mobilizations - introduced a series of major legal reforms on women's rights, although American feminists' attempt to enshrine equal rights in the constitution was defeated after a hard battle. However, these laws have generally had little practical impact. The deepening economic crisis has made governments even less willing to bear the costs themselves or to impose the extra costs involved upon employers. But these laws have had an important effect in raising women's expectations and willingness to struggle.

##### ***b) Women as voters***

The changing social position of women has been accompanied by a change in their pattern of support for the existing political parties. Before World War II the general pattern was for more women than men to vote for right-wing parties. A gender reversal is now underway.

A number of parties of both right and left have engaged in wide-ranging tactics to win over women voters. This has taken a number of forms, including pseudo-radical feminist arguments ("re-evaluating motherhood", reconciling work and family life), establishing ministries for women's rights, feminizing their image, etc.

##### ***c) Women in bourgeois political institutions***

The absence of women from representation in the legislative assemblies and government has led to increasing demands for reform. A number of bourgeois parties have responded with proposals to increase the representation of women, but it is remarkable how little impact this has so far had. There has been a small increase, reaching 20%-28% in the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands, but not exceeding 10% or 12% in the other imperialist countries of Europe.

## **II. Reformist strategies in relationship to women**

The reformist leaderships are caught in the contradiction between maintaining their traditional relationship to the base of the mass workers' organizations, and thus to women at the base

beginning to express specific aspirations, and their general logic of “managing the capitalist crisis”.

The reformist discourse varies from country to country. The general framework tends to be a pro-equal rights position, but without being prepared to take the positive action necessary to make them a reality. In some countries the argument is that “the basics have been won”. In others, where a more specifically feminist gloss is given to reformist ideas, we see arguments developing for women’s low pay to be alleviated through an incomes policy. Increasingly, the reformist leaders, both in and out of power, are being pushed rightwards - accepting the logic of the capitalist crisis and refusing to fight against the basic inequalities women face at work and in society. To the degree that the labour movement confines itself to the narrow, economist concerns of the traditional industrial sectors of the working class, the parties of the ruling class will have some success in recruiting layers of women behind their own fake “feminist” banners.

### **a) The trade-union leaderships**

**a)** The paper policies adopted by many unions over the last twenty years in themselves were quite progressive and could represent a real step forward for women. But the specific structures in the trade unions nationally, locally or in the workplaces (women’s commissions, officers or secretariats) usually receive no real support from the leadership and the real battle is often for thorough implementation of these policies. Hence their effects and achievements have been limited, though not negligible, in areas such as equal pay, sexual harassment and childcare.

On many occasions, the trade-union leaderships have turned their backs on women’s demands, ignoring or even opposing them, thus deepening elements of conflict between working class men and women. This helps to justify the relations of domination which exist between men and women in the working class, and makes convergence with the feminist movement more difficult. The French unions have not mobilized an active opposition to the imposition of flexibility and part-time work, and the disappearance of the CGT women’s monthly journal *Antoinette* is final evidence of this union federation’s policy to stop all specific work aimed at women. In Belgium we saw women workers left to fight alone at Galerie Anspacht in Brussels and at the Bakaert-Cockerill steelworks near Liege over the introduction of part-time work and the loss of jobs. In Italy, the FIAT union did not oppose the introduction of nightwork for women.

### **b) The leaderships of the reformist parties**

In 1979 we noted that social democracy and Stalinism (particularly the latter) were slow to respond to the rise of the modern feminist movement, and that their response was influenced by two factors: i) commitment to the family; and ii) the need to maintain and strengthen their influence with the workers’ movement.

Since 1979 the inter-dependence of the struggles of women and the workers’ movement has necessitated a more developed response. Women as voters, as trade unionists and as political activists comprise an important political entity that these parties have to consider. Most parties have adopted and developed policies formally supporting women’s equality, in some cases including immigrant and black women and lesbians, although the policy that has flowed from this has been patchy and partial. The reformist leaderships in some countries have shown a willingness to incorporate leading spokespersons of the feminist movement as researchers, journalists, counsellors, MPs and top civil servants in women’s ministries or committees of local councils. This is made possible because the socialist and feminist revolution which many women were expecting - along with the rest of the left - did not come about and women still wanted to see changes here and now.

#### *i) The Socialist parties*



Most Socialist Parties have adopted specific “positive action” measures, albeit superficial, aimed at winning women’s votes, and particularly increasing their representation as parliamentary candidates. The left currents within these parties have sometimes been able to use this opportunity to pass progressive measures.

Social-democratic governments particularly have attempted to integrate feminists into institutional work, encouraging moderate feminism oriented simply to obtaining small reforms, producing changes which appear the natural result of the evolution of a democratic society, blurring the role and combativity of women in winning these changes. However the gains are real, however small, and they may be used as a lever on social democracy.

The creation of women’s ministries or institutions emerges from the need to give an institutional response to the social pressure of women. The French and Spanish experiences show that women’s ministries, although long on speeches about equality, in practice accept the traditional sexual division of labour and are no guarantee that women’s interests will really be defended, particularly in the context of austerity policies. Their lack of executive capacity and respect for official policy put clear limits on their activity, but their existence can be positive in reaching broader layers of women. The contradiction between their formal and practical positions can provoke debate and differentiation between the women in these parties, some of whom are prepared to engage in united action.

#### *ii) The Communist parties*

The current upheavals in Eastern Europe and the discrediting of Stalinist rule have thrown most CPs into crisis. However, we should not expect any significant about-turns in the CPs’ policy and practice on women.

They will continue either to deny the need for women’s autonomous organization and struggles or push a (sometimes very sophisticated) rightwing version of gender politics, for example arguing for a “feminist incomes policy” which increases women’s wages at the expense of men’s. However, as their crisis provokes significant ruptures and departures we can hope for a questioning of traditional policies and a greater readiness from some layers to get involved in united feminist struggles.

In conclusion we can say that the impact of the women’s liberation movement, its lasting effect on political consciousness and the political agenda, have made it impossible for the mass organizations not to respond in some way, however inadequately, opening up increased possibilities for united action with women from these organizations.

### **III. Women’s radicalization and self-organization and the autonomous women’s liberation movement**

The birth of the women’s liberation movement reflected the profound structural change in the lives of the mass of women. The feminist movement succeeded in revealing the social character of women’s situation and giving an expression to the revolt of women as a gender. Despite the changes that have occurred, women’s lives are characterized by discrimination, subordination and oppression. All these factors mean that the basis for women’s activity and radicalization of women continues.

Many of the ideas expressed by the movement have been accepted by a big majority of society. At the beginning of the 1980s, there was a decline and a disintegration of the movement, sometimes as the product of integration into institutional and/or social service work, or dilution into different types

of sectoralized organizations. In many cases women's organizations continue, although isolated and focused on concrete and/or one-off activities. Today, except in the Spanish state, there are no national coordinating structures of women's groups, which implies an element of weakness of the movement, a sectoralization of the struggles and demands. But women's active resistance to concrete attacks on their rights has continued and new organizations have emerged on specific themes or initiatives of temporary coordination, allowing optimism for the future.

Women's greater participation in various types of struggles - in the unions, political parties and other movements - is a feature of the situation. Although this has not always been translated by an organizational strengthening of the movement the potential exists for this and for a political expression of gender consciousness.

In many countries there has been a greater convergence between the struggles waged by women on their problems as a gender and those of the whole of the workers' movement; the workers' organizations are a point of reference for many women to solve their problems. As a relatively new active force in the workers' movement, many women can be more combative than the workers' movement as a whole and challenge the class-collaborationist policies of the bureaucracy. The investment of feminists in the labour movement is aimed at transforming the labour and mass movement to make them reflect women's needs and to make it possible for women to become a permanent part of these organizations.

## **A. Women wage-workers**

In several countries in Northern Europe large numbers of women have joined the trade unions as they entered the labour market over the last period. In some countries this has even helped prevent a dramatic decline in trade-union membership of the kind experienced in the 1930s. In Scandinavia, the level of women's unionization reaches 50%, and in Britain, Italy and Belgium it is around 30%-33%. In France, given the overall weak rates of unionization (5% in the private sector, 10%-12% in the public), the number of unionized women is very low, almost nil in some sectors.

### ***a) Women trade unionists***

The active participation of women workers has played a key role in a series of workers' struggles. In West Germany women workers in the steel industry have been in the forefront of the campaign for a 35-hour week. They adopted as their own the demand for a 7-hour day, first articulated by social-democratic women in Sweden in 1972.

The strike that took place in the National Health Service in 1982 in Britain involved large numbers of women workers and won significant solidarity from other workers, such as miners, firefighters and teachers.

The women in Denmark's unskilled all-women union (KAD) played an exemplary role in the near general strike that took place in Easter 1985 following the break-up of negotiations between employers and the main trade-union federation. The women's union took the initiative to form an inter-union strike committee on one of the industrial estates, and it was here that the strike held out longest. The women successfully forced the trade-union bureaucracy to release funds for the strike.

Working-class women also fight for their specific demands. In 1984 for example a group of women workers in Asturias (Spanish state) demanded to be employed in the mines, where the men from their communities have always worked. With the support of the women's secretariat of the CCOO, and against the media and the UGT, they won and a group of them were finally employed in surface work, winning the support of their fellow workers.

At a more generalized level, we saw at the end of the 1980s a wave of struggles in majoritarily feminine professions - particularly nurses - which affected most West European and North American countries. They brought a whole generation of women to the front of the social scene. Among other things, they demanded recognition of their professional qualifications - highlighting the inequality between their situation and that of male technicians, and refusing the status of handmaidens to doctors - thus going beyond simply demanding women's right to work. In addition - particularly in France - they developed structures of self-organization to control their struggles from top to bottom.

### ***b) Solidarity struggles***

Two examples of women's involvement in solidarity struggles with strikers are:

- The Spanish steelworkers' wives who organized a women's coordination to build support for the struggle at a national level against the Gonzalez government's decision to close the Sagunto steelworks, which were the mainstay of the local economy. They often adopted vanguard positions which were more radical and action-oriented than the steelworkers who were threatened with the loss of their jobs.
- Born out of the NUM dispute with the Tory government in 1984-85, the Women Against Pit Closures movement was a nationally-organized autonomous network of women's groups based in the mining communities. These groups had to fight for the right to have their own bank accounts, representation in NUM branch meetings and the right to picket alongside the men. Many of the women were miners' wives and new to active politics, yet their resolution helped to ensure that the dispute lasted so long, won so much support against Thatcher, and made links with other movements such as CND, Greenham, black and immigrant groups, lesbian and gay groups and international campaigns.

This movement arose, of course, in the rather particular context of the vanguard role of the miners' union, the length and intensity of the struggle and the relatively homogeneous nature of the mining communities. But beyond this specificity it should be emphasized that it was a dramatic example of the political power of working-class women in action, and an example for other women in Britain and elsewhere.

## **B. Feminist work in the trade unions and their feminization**

**a)** Under the pressure of women's organization, and in order to keep or win women members, many trade unions have been forced to make small concessions in representation or broaden their debates to include such questions as a guaranteed minimum wage, abortion rights, sexual harassment at work, the portrayal of women in the media, specific demands of black or lesbian women, etc.

But the greater presence and participation of women in trade-union struggle and activity has not always led to a strengthening of their organization within the unions. Often these attempts clashed with the negative attitude of the trade-union bureaucracy and sometimes had to confront the distrust of the majority of the membership. Or, as in the Spanish state, they succeeded in maintaining special structures, but faced problems in terms of concrete activity. Equal opportunities committees and programmes exist in many major unions, but these are not the same as positive action.

Women's mistrust of trade-union organizations is such in certain countries that they have developed structures of self-organization outside the unions. The most striking example was the French nurses' coordination during the winter 1988 strike.

**b)** Women realize that for their struggles to be supported and their needs as women to be acted on, the representation of women has to increase at all levels of the unions.

There are a number of reasons for the under-representation of women in the labour movement:

- the sexual division of labour means that most women are in the least organized sectors;
- the history of the workers' movement, and the chauvinism of the traditional leaderships;
- the large proportion of women in the "informal" sector in certain countries.

In Britain, NUPE, a municipal and health workers' manual union, ran a successful campaign in the late 1970s to encourage women - the majority of their members - to become shop stewards. In West Germany, women in the printing and textile unions raised the demand for quotas in union structures in proportion to their numbers in the union. In Italy, the male leaders of the CGIL themselves criticize the limited presence of women in the leadership, because they are alarmed by the low level of activity or, indeed, the disaffection among women.

### **C. The mobilization of women in the social movements**

One of the striking aspects of women's radicalization in the last decade is their mass participation in the social movements - in ecology, peace movements, in solidarity committees with liberation movements or aid to the third world.

A particularly important example was the women's peace movement that developed in many European countries out of the anti-missiles struggle. Women were attracted to this movement both on the basis of a general appeal around disarmament, and because of the links - highlighted by feminist coalitions in the Spanish state and Britain for example - between militarism and patriarchy. The forms of organization this movement adopted were networks of women's peace groups, mass action initiatives, and coordination at an international level - forms learnt from the women's liberation movement. Many women, particularly young women, gained their first experience of feminist ideas in such formations. In many cases women were at the forefront of the most dynamic mass actions, as at Greenham Common.

#### ***a) Black and immigrant women***

Struggles against racism have often involved black and immigrant women in a prominent way, and they have taken up their specific oppression: pinpointing sexual harassment; discrimination in housing, jobs, health and education; immigration laws; specifically racist violent images of women's bodies and violence towards black and immigrant women; and racist assumptions about black and immigrant men involved with rape and violence.

They have taken up the specific oppression they suffer due to the family forms and culture of their own communities, and launched campaigns against excision and infibulation of women and girls. Black and immigrant women have been at the forefront of placing anti-imperialist questions before the whole women's movement.

Where black women's organization is more developed, for example in Britain and North America, they have challenged many assumptions of white feminists - for example, taking up the issues of fertility control as they affect black and immigrant women such as forced abortion and sterilization. This has been in the context of xenophobic speeches from forces like Le Pen in France, and Margaret Thatcher in Britain, on the fear of being "swamped" by the "alarming" fertility of black and immigrant women. They have challenged the idea of a consensus among women, stressing that they

cannot put gender before race and class.

### ***b) Young women***

The feeling that men and women are equal and that women are not oppressed because of their sex is much more deeply rooted among young women today, and talk of the women's liberation movement seems "old-fashioned". However, they can be attracted to a movement capable of developing the "traditional" themes of feminism: contraception, sexuality, violence, which enable women to radicalize quickly and build specific organizations to carry out their own feminist activity in the neighbourhoods and educational establishments.

In the recent student mobilizations young women played a more active role, as they do in the peace, anti-racist or Green movements. In France, young women of North African origin have unquestionably play a vanguard role in anti-racist mobilizations. Through this political activity they can become aware of their oppressed situation in society, in the family and in the labour market. The contradiction between their assumption that they are equal and the reality when they find that their movement is dominated by men can provoke a sharp reaction and a turn to organizing among themselves as women.

In a country like the Spanish state the youth mobilizations have given birth to groups of young women whose struggle focuses on questions such as sexuality, violence, education, etc.

It is important to explain that the solution to this oppression is a collective fight, and not an individual one or an individual search for a career. A collective fight must include those young women who are outside the education system, who are unemployed and for whom the only future seems to be to find a male breadwinner.

### ***c) Lesbians***

The fragmentation of the women's movement has been largely reflected in the lesbian movements. There are a few exceptions and there are also some countries where the lesbian community is only now beginning to grow and organize.

The fragmentation of the women's movement often involved major disagreements over issues of lesbianism and sexuality. The failure of socialist feminist currents to adequately respond to the issues and demands raised by lesbians has contributed to the relative hegemony of radical feminist ideas in the lesbian movements.

The weakness of the feminist movement is also a major factor of the de-politicization of the lesbian communities. Although lesbians remain generally much more political and radical than their gay male counterparts, the late 1980s saw the emergence of a growing preoccupation with style rather than with women's liberation on both sides of the Atlantic.

On the other hand, the campaign against the British Section 28 involved the largest lesbian and gay rights demonstration ever in Europe and was one of the most dynamic campaigns against the Thatcher government in recent years. It was notable not only for the fact that it was led by lesbians, but also the support generated in the labour movement and internationally.

## **D. The left parties**

Women's presence in the non-revolutionary left parties has become stronger by a combination of radicalization of women in the traditional base of these parties - that is the growth of their aspirations as women under the influence of the women's movement - and the entry into these

parties of certain layers of feminists previously organized in the women's movement. These women were in search of a seemingly more "effective" alternative to the women's movement, once the period of big united-front struggles was over. New political formations (such as the Greens) can also have a certain attraction for women who are seeking an overall political alternative but who reject the traditional parties which often have a very "masculine" image.

### ***a) The traditional workers' parties***

Women have organized at rank-and-file level, for example in the British Labour Party, the German SPD and Norwegian social-democracy, to fight for policies corresponding to their needs as women and for greater representation. We have already underlined the possibilities opened up for joint action by the contradiction between this battle and the attitude of the leaderships. The women's structures in these parties sometimes take more radical positions on general political questions than the parties themselves.

### ***b) The German Greens***

In this party autonomous women's caucuses exist and leadership bodies are elected on the basis of gender parity. Speakers in meetings are taken on the basis of equal time for men and women. The all-woman leadership of the parliamentary fraction caused an enormous stir when they publicly challenged the sexual harassment of men in their own party. Taking on the politics of gender does not however avoid the debate about political strategy, and women will often be found to have different political views about the priorities in the struggle and what alliances the Greens should make.

## **E. The feminist movement**

Traditional feminist themes re-emerge from time to time as new subjects of mobilization, sometimes in response to attacks on rights already won, sometimes as concrete demands to broaden these rights.

For example, in 1982, under the left government, the French feminist movement mobilized to impose the reimbursement of abortion by the social security. In 1985, women from the entire Spanish state decided to collectively defy the government's restrictive abortion law. This campaign has inspired a resurgence of activity among women on a whole host of other issues surrounding their oppression, and strengthened the national coordination led by the far left. Two thousand women in Germany met to discuss new reproductive technology, and in November 1989 120 women from all over Europe came to the Socialist Feminist Forum in Sweden. International Women's Day can provide a focus for involving all currents of the movement in united initiatives.

Different examples demonstrate the strength of the autonomous women's movement when it is able to take initiatives on questions which rally broad layers of women and bring behind it sections of the traditional organizations of the workers' movement. The self-organization of women within the labour movement is a key mechanism for effecting the necessary political interaction between the movements of women for their liberation and the organizations of the working class.

The changes in women's situation have provoked a political differentiation in the movement. This greater differentiation has been shown on the theoretical terrain. Among the new theoretical themes some - related to questions of race, class, imperialism and sexuality - show up the different situations that exist among women. Feminists' differing attitudes and relationship to the state and its institutions have also provoked discussion. Other discussions arise with new problems (for example the new reproductive technology), or on themes such as sexual violence.

The development of the struggle against men's sexual violence against women, touches one of the most vulnerable aspects of masculine domination. We situate the origin of this violence in women's oppression and raise the necessity for it to be considered as a social crime, placing the accent particularly on women's self-organization and self-esteem. Another line has been developed which situates sexual violence as the origin of women's oppression and elaborates a series of demands which include an anti-pornography movement, censorship, strengthening the police and demands for stiffer prison sentences.

The development of fundamentalist ("back to nature") alternative currents (who consider industrialization of any form as totally negative) has had a strong impact on feminist thought. The possible implications of new reproductive technologies have stimulated these discussions. These "naturalist" tendencies, profoundly anti-science, demand a serious response on our part.

At the core of these ideas is the view that women's oppression is a product of biological differences, reflected in the cultural sphere, and not a result of the social and economic organization of society. Such an analysis involves a retreat from the early perspective of modern feminism that argued that femininity and masculinity were socially constructed and could therefore be changed. Instead they advocate creating "women's space" within the framework of existing capitalist society.

The process of differentiation has produced a variety of currents among which we can identify:

- Radical feminists who, on the basis of their analysis of the existence of sexual classes, consider the struggle between the sexes as the only element in the struggle for women's liberation.
- Various strands of bourgeois feminism, chiefly characterized by their strategy of making gains for small and privileged layers of women through an alliance with the ruling class and its parties.
- Reformist feminists, who either do not take into consideration the factors which determine women's condition as a gender or consider them as a product of the dominant ideology or reduce them to the economic aspects. They have the perspective of reforming the state and thus place the struggle for women's liberation simply in the context of reforms and a "democratization" of society.
- Socialist feminists who see the struggles of women as more closely linked with the struggles of the labour movement.
- Revolutionary Marxist feminists - including ourselves -: we try to integrate into our theory, analysis and political practice the different contradictions which shape women's reality (gender, class, race), situating women's struggle in a revolutionary perspective and recognizing the importance of an alliance with the labour movement as a whole.

We should emphasize that the frontiers between these different currents are relatively fluid and the categories can often not be rigidly applied. Moreover, our relationship to these currents can vary: on some questions we have united-front work with radical feminists. At the same time the ideas of radical feminism, for example, have a stronger impact on women when the workers' movement turns out to be incapable of responding to women's aspirations.

#### **IV. The orientation of revolutionary Marxists**

Confronted with those who deny the specific oppression of women, who situate it in the cultural terrain, who consider it a product of biology or think that it is possible to do away with domination, subordination and oppression in the framework of this society, we affirm the existence of a material

and social basis for gender oppression and the need for women to constitute themselves as a social subject, with their own political expression. The feminist movement makes possible the reaffirmation of women's identity, both individually and collectively, and is the only movement able to give a political expression to women as a gender.

The process of feminist consciousness-raising is complex and takes very different forms: on the basis of the contradictions generated by participation in social production or in the public sphere; on the basis of a political practice in other movements which makes possible a greater reflection and understanding of their particular reality and conditions for participating in the struggle; on the basis of a process of individual affirmation in the search for their individuality. All these roads can lead women to fight for their economic, emotional and sexual independence. But this often individual rise in consciousness will not become a collective strength if it is not transformed into collective consciousness, into a desire to change her own reality and that of other women.

Women's liberation work is not simply a sector of work in itself but something that must influence every other area of our work and our entire organization. Every section has to identify the layers of women that they are going to work among on a consistent basis. This is necessary in order to be in a position to take political initiatives to defend and extend women's rights.

Starting from their aspirations and the radicalizing movements in which they participate, we do everything possible to ensure that women become conscious of their specific problems, encourage their self organization to defend their specific interests and thus strengthen the autonomous women's movement.

We also take initiatives each time we can in the workplaces and unions to defend and extend women's rights. We systematically highlight the link between women's domestic responsibilities and their position in the workforce. We support women's right to self-organization and representation within the labour movement.

### **A. Central axes of our work**

We intervene in defence of women's rights, particularly those of the most exploited women - black and immigrant women, women workers, young women and women of the oppressed nationalities. We particularly emphasize:

- The fight for women's right to control her own body, participating in campaigns against any legislative backsliding on abortion and contraception; and for liberalization of laws in countries where abortion is still not a right.
- Intervening around the themes of violence against women (rape, battered women, against any kind of sexual harassment in the workplaces or trade unions...) through campaigns explaining the issues or by participating in women's or social movement structures concerned with these questions. Our objective is that laws should be introduced which defend women's rights and define violence against women as a crime.
- The fight for shorter working hours, with no loss of pay. This brings women into the fight against unemployment and flexibility and responds to women's need for leisure and time for their own personal needs.
- Wage equality between men and women, and the recognition of women's qualifications. We link wage demands to the themes of the right to work and economic independence for women, including through a national guaranteed minimum wage.



- Refusing all forms of temporary employment. We understand that some women choose to work part-time, but we emphasize the dangers (low wages, marginalization, de-skilling) and we are resolutely against imposed part-time work. We encourage collective struggle against super-exploitation in the form of temporary work, home-working and insecure “fill-in” jobs and for full rights to time off, job security and trade-union activity for part-time workers.
- For education, training and retraining programmes that make it easier for women to gain the necessary skills to challenge their traditional employment patterns. For positive action, including where appropriate quotas in employment and training.
- Demanding the abolition of all discriminatory measures limiting women’s rights to social security.
- Participating in campaigns for the maximum extension of social services (crèches, nurseries etc.), we continue to propagandize for the sharing of domestic tasks.
- Opposing all discrimination against lesbians and defending women’s right to freely define and exercise their own sexuality.

## **B. Our participation in building an autonomous women’s liberation movement**

What we have said before shows the decisiveness of the existence of an independent feminist movement, able to carry forward struggles on all aspects of women’s daily lives, that is against their specific oppression, particularly inside the family.

This is the condition for consistently defending the specific interests of women and for transforming the trade unions into revolutionary instruments. This can only be achieved if there is a radical questioning of the traditional divisions of the working class, beginning with the sexual division of labour.

The form or shape of such an independent women’s movement will vary from country to country, depending on history and present struggles. But the need for continuity - that is, passing on theoretical gains, strategic debates, the experience of previous struggles - makes this a permanent and central question. Without that - and one can see this in our own ranks and in particular in our youth organizations - we will be faced with a very alarming steps backward from the programmatic gains of the 11<sup>th</sup> World Congress.

The way forward is not simply given by the overall political situation. We do not give up actively contributing to building trade unions and forming class-struggle currents within their ranks on the pretext that political perspectives are difficult. Nor do we abandon our full involvement in building an independent women’s movement where we defend our line and where we struggle to be a part of the leadership.