

TOWARD INTERNATIONAL FEMINISM

Asoka Bandarage

Feminism today is an international issue and the struggle against women's subordination must be international in character asserts Asoka Bandarage in this paper. She is assistant professor of sociology at Brandeis University and serves on the International Committee of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective and the editorial board of the Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars.

She maintains that women's subordination is a systematic feature of the world political economy and ideology and that it is in the common struggle against those aspects of women's subordination rooted in the "world system" that different groups of women and their culturally specific movements can come together.

Spurred by the women's movement in the West, women's liberation has rightfully emerged as a global issue. The internationalization of feminism is one of the most controversial intellectual and political developments of our time. Women around the world have begun to address the age-old, deep-seated phenomenon of female subordination and the strategies to overcome it.

In 1975 the United Nations inaugurated the International Women's Decade at the Mexico City conference. Many governments established women's bureaus in preparation for the mid-decade conference in Copenhagen in 1980. Extensive arrangements are now under way for the end of the decade conference scheduled for 1985 in Nairobi. Meanwhile, a new field

known as "Women in Development" has emerged giving legitimacy to academic inquiries and policy planning pertaining to women in the Third World. Women social scientists and international aid agencies including the World Bank and the U.S. Agency for International Development are identified with this field. Their ideas and strategies are exported to the Third World to integrate women into the processes of economic modernization. Many non-governmental organizations and networks have also begun at the international, national and regional levels to deal with issues specific to women such as reproductive control and sexual violence. Even the multinational corporations now give the liberation of women as a reason for their expansion overseas.

But the solidarity among women is tenuous. At every international women's gathering the divisions of race, class, nationality and ethnicity erupt, tearing at the unity that bring women together. The official U.S. delegation is already discussing strategies to avoid the infiltration of such divisive issues at the Nairobi conference. Indeed, we can pretend that differences do not exist, or we can explore them and, in the process, reformulate feminism itself. The latter is more difficult and painful, but indispensable, if sisterhood is to become more than a slogan.

In spite of all the conferences, declarations academic treatises and women's projects, many women around the world have yet to hear of feminism or the women's movement. It is unlikely that they will until opportunities for literacy and a general improvement in living standards are available to them. But it is also the case that some women who know of the women's movement show great antipathy and resistance to feminism. Such negative reactions are more apparent in the United States, the center of modern feminism and the women's movement. But why should any woman oppose feminism's attempts to eradicate those social constraints placed by sex which inhibit women (and men) from realizing their human potential? Indeed, why do so many women who stand to gain so much from feminism see it as either irrelevant to their lives or are threatened by it?

To a large extent the anti-feminism of such women is attributable to dominant interests, especially male ideologies which succeed in manipulating these women's fears about the risks and dangers of feminism. The new right in the U.S., which depicts the women's movement as a threat to the alleged security of women's lives, and reactionary nationalist movements as the one in Iran, which denigrate feminism by the media of constituting mostly the pranks of bra-burning, white, middle-class women has also played its part in alienating some potentially sympathetic women from the fundamental concerns of feminism.

Does this mean that women who are alienated from feminism are ridden with "false consciousness?" If the feminist vanguard were to enlighten these irrational women of the objective conditions of their oppression, namely male dominance, could a mass-based, international feminist struggle be launched?

Obviously, the answer is not that simple. We need to move beyond the familiar factors of male manipulation, media distortion and the implied false consciousness of the masses of women. Being careful not to blame feminism for the deteriorating conditions of many women around the world, we must ask nevertheless if the feminist theories and strategies currently available are adequate for comprehending and changing the oppression of most women and the alienation of many from feminism. Have the class and cultural biases of contemporary feminism and the women's movement, for example, contributed in any way to the successes of anti-feminist forces among certain groups of women? If reactionary blacklashes against some of the hard-won victories of the women's movement such as women's reproductive rights are to be countered, a reassessment of the objectives and strategies of feminism is clearly necessary.

We need also to ask if in fact most women are opposed to the broad ideals of feminism - increased social and psychological freedoms for women - or if their resistance is to that particular brand of feminism arising out of the white, middle-class experience in the West, but popularly projected as "the Women's Movement" by the media and most Western, middle-class feminists themselves? Those studies which have inquired into the consciousness of poor and Third World women without resorting to Western feminist concepts are quite instructive. They have revealed a great enthusiasm for and acceptance of the broad principles and objectives of feminism among such disparate groups as "untouchable" women in India and poor black women in the United States.

It is necessary then to make a clear distinction between feminism as a universal ideology potentially accept-

able to most women and the middle-class, predominantly Western feminism which has become synonymous with the contemporary women's movement. This distinct is at the root of many of the conflicts that break out among different groups of women at international women's conferences.

What is problematic of course is not that there are differences among women but that there are inequalities and conflictive interests among us, as among men, based on the hierarchies of social class, race, nation, ethnicity etc. For example, it is obvious that imperialism (Western economic, political and cultural hegemony) has given white women a higher social status in the world over Third World women (women of color in Asia, Africa, Latin America as well as the racial minorities in the West). Similarly, women from the privileged social classes in the West and the Third World, thought themselves subordinated to their men, are placed in relations of dominance vis-a-vis poor women and men. The radical feminist assertion that all women are oppressed by all men, developed around issues of sexual control and violence, needs qualification in the context of such realities as the racist use of the rape charge against black men in the United States. In the last forty years or so four hundred and fifty-five men have been executed for rape. Four hundred and five of them were black. No white man has ever been executed for raping a black woman in this country.

Note too that the contrasting racist and sexist images of white and black women here depict the former as passive, dependent and delicate creatures to be protected and the latter as strong matriarchs or bad black women to be cast aside. These stereotypical images alone should raise questions about the prevalence of uniform models of womanhood and manhood for all groups.

Not surprisingly perhaps, feminist analyses and the women's movement arose within the ranks of the relatively deprived white, middle-class women in the West rather than the absolutely deprived majority of poor Third World women. What is important to note is

that the analytical categories and social change strategies produced by Western middle-class feminists, while couched in universal terms, are derived from the unique historical experience of their own social class and culture.

WESTERN FEMINISM AND MIDDLE CLASS VALUES

Both the nineteenth-century women's suffrage movement and the contemporary women's movement in the U.S. have emerged largely as responses by white, middle-class women to the contradictions created in their lives by the processes of capitalist industrial development in particular can be seen as the challenge of educated middle-class women already engaged in "public" activities, notably the abolition movement, to the ideology of femininity that confined them to the "domestic" sphere. Their aim was to legitimize their integration into public life through the vote and eventually to become the legal and social equals of the men of their class.

Similarly the contemporary women's movement emerged among middle-class women (some confined to the home and others already in paid employment) seeking greater integration into public life through satisfying careers and eventual equality with their men. This movement must also be seen in the context of increasing commercialization of domestic services and rapid absorption of women into the wage labour force.

The liberal integrationist strategies and their emphasis on legislative change unite the two women's movements in the U.S. What distinguishes them is the emergence of a newer more radical branch of feminism in recent decades which has politicized personal relations between men and women within the family. Extending its critique to other social institutions, radical feminism argues that women's liberation cannot be achieved without the overthrow of male dominance or patriarchy, which is the very foundation of social life everywhere.

Many of the popular categories of feminist analysis today, such as the private-public dichotomy and the patri-



Women working in a processing plant

archal nuclear family, have been formulated by white, middle-class feminists in the process of reassessing their unique historical experience under industrial capitalism. Like much of Western male scholarship then, feminist analyses and practices too are ridden with middle-class and Western biases. Feminist thinking which takes the middle-class experience as the norm may not only be irrelevant and alienating to most women, but the social change strategies emanating from such thinking may have negative consequences for poor and Third World women and men.

In this regard, we should remember how the nineteenth-century women's movement in the U.S., which emerged from within the abolition movement, later capitulated to the racial and class politics of the time. When white supremacist politicians pitted the vote for women against the vote for black men, the suffragists, in their exclusive concern for the vote for women - that is white, middle-class women - went along with the racist forces. During the early decades of the twentieth century, some feminist searching for allies in their campaign for birth control took positions supporting the reduction of "undesirable" elements in the population, such as blacks, foreigners, (immigrants) and the lower classes. Such positions fed into the eugenics movement and the racial

hysteria of the time. Unless the scope of feminism is broadened, the contemporary women's movement (in spite of its roots in the civil rights struggle) can again be aligned with white male politicians seeking to keep women, minorities and the working classes divided and conquered.

Perhaps the most important strategy of liberation advocated by contemporary liberal feminism is the incorporation of women into the paid labour force as the equals of men. Indeed, for middle-class women formerly confined to domestic chores, a professional career can offer greater self-fulfilment despite the new stresses that come with those careers. Women from the privileged social classes in the Third World have also benefited from higher education and integration into paid employment.

But for the majority of other women, integration into the wage labour force entails at best working as a factory or field labourer and at worst as a maid or a prostitute. Can absorption into the prevailing structures of employment bring liberation to most women? In the absence of changes in those hierarchical structures at the international and national levels, integration results merely in prestigious careers for a few women and men but continued underpaid and undervalued work for the majority that

unequal integration further deepens the class, racial and national cleavages among women rather than helps build sisterhood.

Demands made in the name of women's liberation by liberal feminist organizations in certain Third World countries only exacerbate this trend. Take for example the cry for imported luxury kitchen equipment that would supposedly lighten the household chores of busy professional women. It is no secret that the conspicuous consumption of the privileged classes diverts scarce foreign exchange from the survival needs of the masses of poor women and men in those countries.

Turning briefly to radical feminism now, it can well be argued that some of its basic postulates such as the "personal is political" are broadly applicable everywhere. But a closer analysis of some of the specific institutions, such as the male-headed, nuclear family against which radical feminism directs its critique, helps recognize the limits of this analysis. Research into social classes and cultures outside the Western middle class reveals a diversity of family structures. At least one third of the households in the world today are headed by women. Research also shows that the family is not the primary focus of women's oppression everywhere. In some communities, especially those subjugated by racism as under slavery in America or apartheid in South Africa, black women have experienced family life as essentially supportive rather than oppressive. Women in such situations may consider labour for their families as their only labour of love.

It should also be noted that while sisterhood may be a new discovery for Western, middle-class housewives isolated in their suburban homes, it has long been a reality for women in many sex-segregated societies whether in Asia, the Middle East, in the female-headed, kin networks of the Caribbean and perhaps even in working-class communities in the United States. Of course it could be argued that the sisterhood prevailing in such communities is essentially conservative and directed toward women's survival rather than the overthrow of male dominance. Lesbianism, when it

exists in these situations, is not politicized that the conjugal role relationship is not the central relationship for women in many of these communities and that their emotional needs are met primarily through their relationships to other women. To this extent, women in these alternative class and cultural contexts may be psychologically freer from men, especially their spouses, than their Western, middle-class counterparts. Women's liberation then cannot be a uniform exportable ideology. It has to be defined and achieved contextually.

My purpose here is not to denigrate either the legitimate concerns of white, middle-class women or their efforts to find freedom from their own particular oppression but rather to begin placing Western feminism and the women's movement in comparative and historical perspective. The contemporary women's movement is of world historic importance. It has the potential to improve the quality of human relations elsewhere. But given the tremendous diversity and deepening inequalities among women we must work toward an inductive and comparative feminist framework within which the concerns of wider groups of women can be adequately addressed. If not, the very legitimacy of feminism and women's movement is seriously threatened.

**CAPITALISM AND FEMINISM —
ARE THEY COMPATIBLE?**

Where do we turn then for theoretical direction towards a more inclusive definition of feminism and strategies for broadening the concerns of the women's movement? Few of the alternative theoretical frameworks and women's networks now emerging do carry the potential toward making feminism relevant to wider groups of women.

Socialists have long argued that most women, and men for that matter, cannot find liberation within the unequal and exploitative social relations under capitalism. The prerequisite for the liberation of women, that is non-bourgeois women, they point out, is their absorption into economic production within a socialist economy. The growing body of feminist research on the effects of capitalist development on women, particularly in the

Third World, gives much credence to this position.

The processes of capitalist development in the Third World have led to the marginalization of women in the least productive and least remunerative sectors of Third World economics. While a handful of women have gained access to prestigious jobs, most women are confined to either unpaid or underpaid and exploitative work as subsistence producers, maids, prostitutes, etc. The expansion of private property, wage labor, new technology and the cash nexus have disadvantaged women categorically. In many places in Africa for example, these new developments have robbed women of the relative independence and mobility traditionally associated with their role as the central subsistence producers. In India, the disparity between the sexes with regard to both employment and chances for physical survival have steadily increased with the socio-economic changes of the recent decades.

At the mid-decade conference in 1980 women accounted for half the world's population; two-thirds of the world's work hours; one-tenth of the world's income and less than a hundredth of the world's property. Less than one-third of women are literate and in many African and Asian countries only one in ten females even enters school. "Feminization of poverty" is a structural feature of capitalism in the Third World. It is fast becoming so in the United States (and Europe) too where women are pushed into the permanent "underclass" in larger and larger numbers as domestic work is subsumed by capitalism and the nuclear family weakens.

The structural analysis of women's oppression and long-term vision toward liberation presented by socialists are highly compelling. But in the absence of practical strategies leading to social revolution, the socialist vision can result merely in an evasion of the daily realities of poor women's lives.

The concluding part of this paper will be published in our next issue.