

Some Ideological Issues of Feminism

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The movement for the emancipation of women currently gaining ground throughout the world is what we might call the 'second wave' of feminism. The first, which arose in Europe and the USA in the late 19th and 20th centuries was largely an attempt to better the position of women by gaining certain reforms such as the franchise, education, property rights, entry into the professions and access to birth control. But these reforms, however revolutionary they seemed at the time, can now only be seen as superficial, because after they were won as they were in the west, only a small proportion of wealthy women could take advantage of them.

The new women's movement, which daily gains grass roots level support from the mass of women at all levels of society, goes far deeper than the first. Feminists are now calling for more than a few reforms; they are now calling for an end to the twin social norms and values which allow men one form of behaviour and prescribes another for women. This includes an end to the code, and cultural and mental conditioning, which dictates that "a woman's place is the home" and that women are fit only for domestic drudgery; and denies them the right to freedom of expression and participation in public life — in short, the whole system which prevents us from taking an equal place in society along with men.

This movement — no doubt due to the efforts of those who find the present system of oppression of women comfortable to themselves — has been ridiculed and distorted in the popular imagination through the focussing on peripheral issues like the so called advocacy of 'bra burning' and the mistaken notion that 'women want to dominate men'. By these tactics attention has been deflected away from a proper look at the real issues and a serious consideration of the feminist case. In this paper an attempt is made to go beyond such naive understanding of feminism and look at some of the ideological issues involved in feminism. But what do we mean by 'emancipation'? Emancipation from what? How did women come to be 'enslaved' in the first place? This question has been approached from different perspectives and let us look at some of them.

The Marxist View

Of the various feminist approaches, perhaps the "Marxist Feminists"

are the largest group. These are feminists who believe that Marx's theories of class domination and capitalist economy are relevant to any analysis of the position of women in society.

According to the Marxists, the enslavement of women came about with the transition from 'tribal collectivism' to settled agriculture. Under the tribal system, which was a subsistence economy, the 'sisterhood of women' (or matriarchy) worked together with the brotherhood of men, with neither being dominated by the other. All had common possessions, common children and worked to sustain the community.

When the change to settled agriculture came about, men played a more dominant role in production, irrigation, stock raising and urban crafts, and increasingly appropriated the profits, since the new mode of its production was no longer a mere subsistence one. Women, who no longer played a key role in production, were increasingly relegated to the home of a single man to keep the house and bear and bring up that man's children — since with the increase in profits came the need to have heirs to inherit ones accumulated private property when one died. And so the institution of family was established along with the enslavement of women, so that man could be certain of the parentage of his children. Along with the birth of patriarchy, or male dominance, came the birth of the class system, and the subordination of the mass of men to the master men who did better out of the new system. In time, the state apparatus (whose power is in the hands of the dominant class), came into being to legalize these institutions of private property, male dominion and the father figure, which were later sanctioned also by religion.

From this brief history of women's oppression can be seen the essence of the Marxist analysis that each historical epoch, based on a particular form of economic organisation (slavery, feudalism, capitalism) produces its own 'superstructure' of institutions, laws, customs and beliefs which are geared to maintaining the economic base (and also the position and reproduction of the people who do well by that particular system). When the economic base changes, so too must the superstructure. This is where the Marxist Feminist's hope lies for the position of women — for when the superstructure

changes, so will the position of the family, and that of women. For women to be liberated, all that is necessary is to have the right kind of economic base, in this case 'socialism'.

Under capitalism (a later mode of production,) the marxist argument continues, women are 'doubly oppressed' — "For the female half of the human race is doubly oppressed under capitalism, the working woman and the peasant woman are oppressed by capital but over and above that, even in the most democratic of the bourgeois republics, they remain firstly deprived of some rights because the law does not give them equality with man: and secondly, and this is main thing — they remain in "household bondage", they continue to be "household slaves" for they are over burdened with the drudgery of the most squalid and back-breaking and stultifying toil in the kitchen and the individual family household," as Lenin said in a speech on March 8, 1921, on International Working Women's day. They are firstly oppressed as workers, just as the men are, and not given a fair share of the profits of their labours, and they are also oppressed as the child-bearers and 'house slaves' of individual men. Although not considered according to Marxist theory to 'produce' anything, domestic labourers, alienated in the single-family home, do have an essential function in the reproduction of labour power. They bear and socialise children, care for the sick and elderly, keep house consume goods... in other words their work has 'use value' and as such is an integral part of the capitalist system.

Until the 1970's, Marxist Feminists in the capitalist world believed that women would be emancipated in the socialist revolution which they held to be 'imminent and inevitable'. Since then there has been a general consensus among them that it would be many years before the revolution could come about. Many are taking new heed of Lenin's words that "Unless women are brought to take an independent part not only in political life generally but also in daily universal public service it is no use talking about full democracy, let alone socialism". They are also rethinking Engels contention that women should "enter into the labour force, which would provide them with economic independence, a necessary step towards equality".

In other words, the Marxists maintain "the current sexual division of labour, (a necessary buttress of the capi-

talist economy) which defines women primarily in the role of 'wife and mother' and allows them only the traditional 'female occupations' such as typing, nursing, teaching and certain manual occupations such as the garment trade — which also happen to be the most badly paid of all occupations — needs to be changed, before the patriarchal capitalist system can begin to be challenged".

Criticism of Marxist View

Although Marxism provides an very useful analysis for feminists to understand the position of women in society today, there are several weaknesses as well.

The first is that it accords no 'value' to domestic labour, and therefore according to some, shows an important flaw, some would say even the manifestation of a male bias by not being able to account satisfactorily for the work of half of the people i.e. women.

Second, is an issue touched upon above: that is, that Marxist theory seems too deterministic: granted, most people acknowledge the link between the economic base and the superstructure in determining the position of women in society but, as Germaine Greer put it... "The housewife who has to wait for socialist revolution for her liberty might be forgiven for losing hope". Surely there is much that could be done now, to alleviate the burden of the "fourth rock"* carried by women? Many women feel that even men in the left movement find it convenient to wait until the revolution for their wives and household slaves to attain their liberty, so that they themselves will not have to get involved.

Lastly the position of women in Socialist countries although undeniably better than that of the mass of working women in other countries leaves a lot to be desired. For example, the Soviet Union has recently made it more

* This refers to the fourth rock or rope as conceptualized by Mao Tse Tung — in the report on the peasant in Hunan in 1927, 'A man in China is usually subject to the domination of three systems of authority (political authority, clan authority, and religious authority) As for women, they are also dominated by men (the authority of the husband). These four authorities — political, clan, religious and masculine — are the embodiment of the whole feudal — patriarchal ideology and system, and are the four thick ropes binding the Chinese people, particularly the peasants".

difficult for women to have access to birth control facilities, being worried about the recent fall in population in the USSR — facilities which before were considered a woman's right in a socialist state. These characteristics in the socialist countries would seem to weaken the whole theory of the economic base determining the superstructure. In their own defense Marxists might say that a shortcoming of their theory is that Marx and Engels did not leave a comprehensive theory of women, and many things still need to be worked out.

Mao admitted that patriarchy was indeed a strong force, and would take a lot of effort in fact a cultural revolution, to be eradicated even in a socialist country. This is one of the many bourgeoisie ideological "pockets" that remain even after the socialist revolution, and which can be eroded away only after a period, during which more cultural revolutions are required to hasten the elimination of these pockets of bourgeoisie ideological remains.

Radical Feminism

Radical Feminists, a second group of feminists with a large following, level yet another criticism at the Marxists. Shulamith Firestone in her book 'The Dialectic of Sex' (1971) put it thus, "It would be a mistake to attempt to explain the oppression of women according to this strictly economic interpretation. The class analysis is a beautiful piece of work, but limited... it does not go deep enough. There is a whole sexual substratum of the historical dialectic that Engels at times dimly perceives, but because he can see sexuality only through an economic filter, reducing everything to that, he is unable to evaluate it in its own right".

In short, Radical Feminists see the oppression of women as rooted in the biology of women — rather than purely in economics since before the advent of contraception, women were at the mercy of their bodies; having no control over their fertility, were dependent on support from men while bearing children. Within class women became a separate caste, (a group oppressed for reasons based in biology rather than solely on the economy). The struggle between the sexes becomes political, she holds, because even now though men have lost the biological edge that gave them mastery over women, they have no wish to give up the mastery. Equality lies for the radical feminist in the eventual elimination of sexual distinction — just like the elimination of class distinction —

in a society where it will not matter whether ones sex is male or female.

Others

Between these two poles, and in addition to them is a whole spectrum of feminist theory based in whole or in part on them, yet all with different emphasis, and adding something to our understanding of women's oppression. The Anti-Imperialist feminists, for example, combine feminism with an objection to "capitalist oppression" of undeveloped countries, and argue that "women from such countries cannot be free until their home lands are first freed from capitalist domination".

Margaret Mead, the famous anthropologist, has emphasised in her work the tenuousness of our cultural values and concepts of the sexual division of labour and norms of what is appropriate forms of behaviour for and the believed attributes of men and women within each culture. "The differences between the two sexes", she says, "is one of the important conditions upon which we have built the many varieties of human culture... In every known society mankind has elaborated the biological division of labour into forms very often remotely related to the biological differences that provided the original clues... Sometimes one quality has been assigned to one sex, sometimes to another... In some cultures, for example, women are regarded as sieves through whom the best guarded secrets will sift, in others it is the men who are the gossips. Whether we deal with small matters or with large, with the frivolities of ornament and cosmetics or the sanctities of men's place in the universe, we find this great variety of ways, often flatly contradictory one to the other, in which the roles of the two sexes have been patterned".

We conclude from this that the large part of our behaviour as males/females has little to do with our biology, and is only 'socially conditioned', something that can change with a change in our conditioning process. These findings of Margaret Mead's gave rise to yet another stratum of feminist: those who are concerned with the influence of cultural conditioning on behaviour. Since the attributes of the sexes seem so arbitrarily assigned, how do we know what the real differences are between men and women — if indeed there are any, apart from the obvious biological ones? An extreme "cultural conditioning" feminist might for example say that there are no differences between male and female, men grow up stronger than women because men are socially encouraged to indulge in activities which build muscles and

strengthen the body whereas girls from childhood are encouraged to remain passive and thus weak. How are we to know what is a valid basis for assigning different roles to male and female? Indeed, is there any necessity to have different roles at all?

A Sex-War

The work of Mead also provides a convenient starting point for a discussion on the believed desire of feminists to 'dominate men'. The kind of questions her work throws up are the ones that most feminists are concerned with — that is — not just 'what can women do that men have not allowed them to do so far', but more like "the roles assigned to both sexes we know to be arbitrary. We know that these assignments have oppressed women by assigning their main role to be household drudgery and childrearing in isolation, and giving to men the most satisfying and well paid jobs. Perhaps the role thrust upon men is as confining to them as women are now beginning to feel theirs to be. The sexes should work together to find new and satisfactory roles for both". For example, given an opportunity to rethink their role in child-bearing (or rather lack of it) men might now decide that they would like to spend more time bringing up and getting to know their own children which the present arrangement of society does not permit them. Women, similarly, might want a chance to prove themselves in the outside world — where at present social prejudice makes it difficult for them to excel. However, it is unavoidable that women, newly waking up to the nature of their oppression will feel angry towards men, even the men who they know and love — for having many of the privileges, and continuing to exercise these that the woman is denied. For example, a sister might resent her brother for his freedom of movement whereas she is confined to the house even though neither of them is at fault for having been born into their particular sex, and is following all the cultural norms for that sex. She will realise however, that even though he could refrain from exercising his freedom of movement to spare her feelings, that this will do nothing to change the whole system which denies her something which it grants to him.

It is also true, however, in the words of an Irish Maxim, that 'he (or she) who will be free must strike the blow'... and that the initiative lies with women to demand and make sure they get as soon as possible, as many as possible of the privileges and freedom they covet. It is their

responsibility to become aware of the factors which conspire to keep them in second place, and to raise the consciousness of their sisters and brothers to these factors. Although men can and must be the allies of women in this struggle, they must not lead it; since their judgement is bound to be tainted by their already privileged status, and it will not be easy for them to give up their privileges to which they have been accustomed from birth, to regard as rightfully theirs.

Relevance to Sri Lanka

What is of relevance in these issues to Sri Lanka? Many in Sri Lanka, particularly men, but including women, view feminism in Sri Lanka as a trivial and slavish imitation of the western trend by a few elitist women. It is in meeting such stereotype perceptions in Sri Lanka that the ideological issues that we discussed earlier are useful. From our discussion of the ideological issues it would be apparent that exploitation of women or the subordinate role assigned to them is universal except for a few traditional societies where as, Margaret Mead points out, the roles have been altered, if not reversed, since the decay of tribal collectivism. In Sri Lanka, too, therefore, women are economically exploited, and their role in society is conditioned by this oppression. Here we refer not only to the manifest female occupations but also to the latent type, the peasant women's under-rated contribution to the agrarian economy — and to the economy of Sri Lanka as a whole. This oppression, is differentially characterised by our colonial experience; the under developed nature of our economy and some of the feudal and traditional structures and values surviving in our contemporary societal milieu.

Before we look at these it is opportune here to deal with another perspective of feminism in Sri Lanka which is equally distorted as the one we just discussed. It is alleged that feminism is centered around elitist and professional women who had encountered problems in their own career development due to the prejudices and attributes given to women in the Sri Lankan value system as well as from the Western value system that have percolated to us by cultural colonialism. It is not totally incorrect that some of the feminists are from elitist and professional groups and it is equally true that they have encountered problems in their career developments due to social values or prejudice associated with the female sex and perhaps they are justified in their protest. But what is pertinent here is that this is only a peripheral issue, and as we stated at the outset, peri-

pheral issues are often distorted to appear as the central problem with the purpose of deflecting a proper understanding of the total problem. What we are concerned with here is the basic structural processes in Sri Lankan society which affect women in all sectors and classes, the peasant as much as the urban; and in understanding structural process at work that the ideological perspectives are useful.

Let us now look at some manifestations of the structural process at work, (uncovered in our earlier discussion on ideological issues), in the Sri Lankan scenario. Firstly, let us look at the role of the mother, wife, housewife and farm-hand that a woman in the Sri Lankan peasant society has to perform. It bears all the stark

PRESS COMPLICITY IN SEX TOURISM

The International Feminist Network's "ISIS Bulletin" of Nov. 1979 commenting on the complicity of the press in "tourism prostitution in Asia" stated "the complicity of the press is seen in the approval reflected in the articles by male journalists on Bangkok, the mecca of trade in women — an approval accompanied by winks of the eye and camouflaged with a fig leaf of concern. We have the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* speaking of "smiling Thai girls who, with their fine and tender hands, massage the huge lobster-red male bellies". (SZ nr. 271, 1976).

Peter Ruhmkofa, in *Konkret* reports on his adventures in Bangkok, Wolfram, Runkel, in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, speaks ironically of the girls "without desire for emancipation but full of warm sensuality and the softness of velvet" whom after a three week sex tour — one would like to take home as wives. Again, the Berlin newspaper keeps publishing "best seller serials" not only on the trade in women, but on the men who have been ensnared in it as well. All the stories have one thing in common; they depict the Thai women as smiling objects without concerning themselves in the least with their feelings or the reasons which led to prostitution".

characteristics of domestic drudgery, intensified by the poverty of the third world peasantry. It reveals the labour contribution that women have to make to the typical third world agrarian economy and also illustrates that in the rural economy of the colonial world it is the woman who bore the brunt of the struggle. The box elsewhere (on page 11) of the reported interview with an agricultural worker of the Latin American peasantry, though an extreme example, is not atypical of the Sri Lankan rural scene. The condition of Sri Lankan women has been further accentuated by the lack of an access to birth control, until recently. This often resulted in a woman having to go on child bearing almost on an annual basis. In the last few decades with the increase in literacy; the drop in infant mortality and less demand for agricultural labour both in the homestead and elsewhere, this is changing. But the cultural and social values and the psychological syndrome of a woman as a wife, housewife, child bearer, farm-hand, baby sitter, socializer of children, mother etc. continues.

When we look at the plight of plantation women the harsh colonial character in the structural process that led to the role and position of plantation women in the plantation economy is apparent. These women, as in countless other instances, were characterised as having the feminine dexterity which was so admirably suited to the delicate task of plucking tea leaves and a bud from the tea bushes of the Sri Lankan tea plantations. It is once again an attempt to introduce the biological arguments to obtain the more crucial objective of reducing labour costs — women were paid far less than men and it was thus far more profitable to employ women rather than men to pluck tea. It is not proposed to go into this aspect in detail as this has been done elsewhere in this journal. What is fundamental from the ideological perspective is that the social characteristics attributed to women have a close nexus to the economic systems and objectives of the society. In this, biological characteristics, (which we noted earlier may be socially derived), are used to buttress the exploitation of women.

In contemporary urban Sri Lankan society the role of women is not markedly different from contemporary societies elsewhere, both in the underdeveloped and developed countries. For example, certain professions like teaching, nursing and typing were given feminine association. Women were employed in large numbers in

these professions which were invariably the poorly paid professions. In recent times we see the same manifestation appear in the form of women workers in the Free Trade Zones. Strangely the old argument of the colonisers, like old wine in new bottles, appears again — that women have dextrous fingers which are highly suited for the delicate skills needed in the garments and electronics industries. This type of manifestation is not confined to Sri Lanka. In many other Third World countries with the Free Trade Zones such as South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand etc. they are clearly present.

Fortunately, a growing form of exploitation of women in the sex tourism industry of Thailand, South Korea and the Philippines has not arrived in Sri Lanka. But it may not be a far cry from the offer of a "taste of paradise" to the offer of "softness of velvet" (See Box). We should strengthen our women's political and social awareness which has so far prevented this trend to resist any such development of the tourist industry into yet another manifestation of neo-colonial degradation and oppression of womanhood.

Before we conclude the relevance of understanding ideological issues to comprehend the Sri Lankan scene in feminism, two aspects of some importance may be noted. In trying to understand some of the ideological perspectives we observed that often religion and religious values are used to buttress the values dominant in society. As strongly argued in a paper titled "Towards a Marxist understanding of the liberation of Women-combatting idealism" Kumari Jayawardena stated "The ancient texts were unambiguous about the position of women, but a characteristic quality of many of the latter-day savants of India and Sri Lanka has been an inability to critically evaluate their country's history and cultural heritage. This may have been partly due to a feeling that one's culture had to be defended against imperialist and missionary onslaughts, but the fact remains that it has resulted in a lot of confused thinking. Many learned intellectuals have descended to justifying practices such as widow-burning, child marriage, dowries and purdah, while at the same time rather incongruously insisting that women in India and Sri Lanka have always enjoyed freedom

and equality and have attained high intellectual achievements... Religion has been used to keep women docile and subservient, in a state of ignorance and fear. Religion is actively encouraged in women in the countries of the sub-continent where the continuity of the religious traditions and rites are often the responsibility of the women. Women who are discouraged from participation in activities outside the home, are encouraged, to spend their time in religious observances and ceremonies, it is often the case that men who are non-believers allow their women folk to indulge in rituals which they themselves regard as obscurantist supercurantist superstition and in which they do not deign to participate themselves."

Kumari Jayawardena, quoting M. G. S. Narayanan continues to argue that sometimes in countries like India and Sri Lanka in order to contend with the imperialist distortion of our own culture and history, equally harmful ultra-nationalist distortions and exaggerations of our history, culture and religious values are made. This included among other things the "anticipation" of contemporary awareness of feminism by the old oriental religions. Now that the phase of history of anti-imperialistic struggle has passed it is time that we rejected all distortions and understand issues on the role of women in Sri Lanka in a dispassionate and objective context.

The second aspect we have to contend with is the allegation of radicals in Sri Lanka and other third world countries that feminism is a device to prevent the oppressed from seeing the true cause of their oppression. In their view peripheral issues such as the oppression of women leads to a disipation of the social bases for liberation movements. Women who could have otherwise been mobilized to fight broader oppression in the society are now mobilized on a partisan basis to fight for feminism and thus reduce the strength of the radical or liberation movements. Answers to such allegations are embedded in our discussion of the Marxist view of feminism and the criticism of this view. One need not go over this again. But the reader would understand that in each country and society the priorities will dictate the course of action that is necessary for women to liberate themselves from the oppression and exploitation they have suffered for hundreds of years.