

The Woman Question

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The whole issue of women's oppression and the male-dominated society, or patriarchy, centers around the questions:

A. Who is to do the Housework and bring up the Children?

B. Who is to Control Reproduction?

Marxists will refer to the term "the division of labor," though unfortunately, there are only few who have included domestic labor in their analysis of productive labor essential to the maintenance of society. And there are even fewer who realize the political, economic and social significance of reproduction of human beings, which power only women have, and which power the group in authority seeks to control for its own benefit.

Marx tells us that the surplus value created by the blood, sweat and tears of the laborer is expropriated by the capitalist, the wage of the former being just sufficient to maintain him (and his family), so that he may continue to work for the capitalist. The laborer's actual contribution consists in the *putting together* of the parts of the product, as well as the fetching of the raw materials, the transportation of these to the assembly line and of the finished product to the place of sale.

Let us examine only the "putting together" of the product. In order to make a dhoti (a long loincloth worn by Hindu men, Ed.) several complex processes have to be gone through, some of which are automated, some of which are done by hand. The laborer's energy and the time he spends contribute to the ultimate product in an essential and creative way, giving it value.

The cotton textile worker keeps the blowing machines full by lifting in bundles of raw cotton and he attends to the functioning of the machines. All this is done in a hot and humid atmosphere. In the spinning section, the yarn is automatically wound round the bobbins, but has to be constantly supervised

by the worker who treads it on, removes the completed bobbin and rethreads it if the yarn breaks. All of this is done walking up and down for hours at a stretch in a hot, humid atmosphere filled with cotton dust which sticks in the nose and throat, and is known to cause respiratory diseases. The bleaching department, the stench of bleach pierces the nose and throat, and is known to cause respiratory diseases. In the weavers manage the looms sitting in a hall not only hot and humid and filled with cotton dust, but also reverberating with the deafening noise of the machines.

The miners of coal and other minerals have even heavier work - wielding pickaxes and drills on the bare coal face, loading the coal on to wagons, all of which is done underground in risky conditions. The wealth produced by the laborers, be it in the form of raw materials, or finished products, is created by themselves alone, by their energy, and with their time.

A. Who is to do the Housework and Bring up the Children?

While Marx discussed the contribution of the laborer in production, he completely omitted to discuss the *role of the domestic laborer in life itself*. Marx took mode of production as the basis of his analysis of society, and therefore made a grave error by omitting to analyze first those processes which are necessary to keep life itself going (whatever the mode of production - be it feudalism or capitalism) and which are even more fundamental than industrial production (which only assumes importance when money gives the products value).

Without analyzing society from the point of view of the domestic laborer and reproducer of humanity, we shall never be able to arrive at the truth, and if we do not have an objective perception of which is accurate, then our practice will be misguided.

At this point, this paper wishes to make clear that *women are the most exploited laborers of all in the world. Not only is*

the woman exploited as a laborer in the classical class way, but also as housewife and mother too.

As a housewife she is exploited by those who expropriate the "surplus value" of her labor in the home, that is, all those men and other women, too, who have time to lead a more socially and individually fulfilling and productive existence, all the time denying the housewife this liberty.

"You all know," said Lenin in 1919, "that even with the fullest equality, women are still in an actual position of inferiority because all housework is thrust upon them."

Marxists have, in the main, utterly neglected this from their analyses (perhaps because most of them are men). There are even some who hold that women should in fact remain at home for the men to be able to do revolutionary work! But will anybody achieve anything this way? To recall the words of Lenin spoken in March 1920:

"The working women's movement has for its object the fight for the economic and social and not merely formal equality of women. The main task is to draw the women into socially productive labor, extricate them from 'domestic slavery,' free them of their stultifying and humiliating resignation to the perpetual and exclusive atmosphere of the kitchen and nursery. It is a long struggle, requiring a radical remaking of both social technique and customs. But this struggle will end with the complete triumph of communism."

Domestic Labor. Let us examine in more detail the actual tasks performed by the domestic laborer (all of which are done without wages).

"The modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife, and modern society is a mass composed of these individual families as its molecules." In his *Origin of the Family*, Engels clearly stated that "within the family the man is the bourgeois and the wife represents the proletariat."

We shall describe some of the tasks of the rural woman because she is one of the world's largest majority of unorganized, most hardworking and exploited labor force. All the time, it must be borne in mind that apart from her domestic work, she may be employed as an agricultural laborer or even a domestic laborer in others' homes.

1. *Washing the house.* Every accessible piece of floor and wall space is washed with a rag soaked in muddy water and cow dung.

2. *Collecting water.* This is laborious because rural homes are without piped water supply. When drought conditions prevail, women and girls queue up all night to avail themselves of scarce pumps and wells, even though water may be readily available for a high price.¹

3. *Collecting fuel.* This is another monotonous, strenuous and time-consuming task, becoming harder day by day as resources dwindle or are closed off by Government Act.

4. *Collecting/growing food.* This becomes the woman's responsibility when the man is lazy or an alcoholic. Share-cropping and scavenging are women's occupations in the main. All the world over, women, especially at the subsistence level, spend a substantial amount of time and energy on wageless labor, growing or processing and selling food, which benefits the family. A common occupation of women in West Bengal's

24-Parganas is dehusking paddy. After boiling the paddy and drying it in the sun, the women pound it. The processed paddy when sold by the man in the market fetches a price, most of which frequently pays for the man's drinking bouts.

5. *Cooking.* The time devoted to this is often proportionate to the family income. Women of well-to-do families spend all day preparing spices, chutnies, sweets, curries and varieties of meat, fish and fried dishes. Custom dictates that they serve the men first and give them the best.

6. *Washing utensils and clothes.* Such work does little to develop intelligence or skill. Not only dull and repetitive, the work is tiring when washing facilities are inadequate.



7. *Bringing up children.* This is a full-time occupation in itself. Middle-class families employ other women for the same, freeing the mother from such tasks as cleaning up after the young child defecates and urinates, feeding, dressing, putting them to bed and looking after them when sick. Needless to say, men hardly consider such tasks as theirs too, in any way.

8. *The emotional support, discipline and training of children* are given primarily and mainly to women. Although not considered physical labor, the parental functions are essential to the health of children and society at large.

Throughout her career as a domestic worker, the woman devotes her energy and time to the welfare of her family, like the laborer to his work in the factory or mine. However, her hours are not limited, nor is she paid.

All her tasks are concerned with survival; they are absolutely basic. Yet they go unnoticed except to be criticized. Hers is unpaid labor. If someone were employed to do the different jobs she does, then given the rate of wages under the present system, then half the families in India already below the poverty line would be unable to survive. Thus, it can be seen how capitalism, and indeed society as a whole, exists by exploiting not only the male laborer, by giving him a minimum wage, but also the woman, by utilizing her free domestic labor.

Internalization of her Servitude. Mending and creating throughout the day, the rural and urban housewife lives out her lifetime like a true slave in the service of others. Her mind is so conditioned. Voluntarily she sacrifices her food for her husband and children; takes on the burden of contraceptives and sterilization; controls her own needs so that the other family members may be satisfied. She submits to physical torture and mental cruelty by those around her, not only because of her dependence, but also because she accepts such behavior as normal. She has internalized the myth that because she is a woman she must suffer, and in silence, too. Thus, her

labor and her mind are fully expropriated by the family and by society. And if Marxists do not include the domestic laborer in their theoretical analyses and discussions, then they will never be able to change the world in actuality.

"Therefore, our present task is to lead the peasants to put their greatest efforts into the political struggle, so that the landlords' authority is entirely overthrown" (Lenin). Yet we see that Indian rural women are not only illiterate and superstitious, but also malnourished and exhausted by their slave labor and repeated pregnancies. As Lenin and others have said, the women are at the lowest rung of the social ladder: under the state, the clan, the supernatural systems, and men. Proping up the structure are the landlords who have to be removed, but as Lenin said, "There can be no socialist revolution, unless a vast section of the toiling women takes an important part in it." Yet, even when the revolutionary government came to power in the Soviet Union, women's domestic labor continued to remain undervalued as it was never incorporated into the prevailing socioeconomic theory of existence of the leaders.

The "Master" Right. Lenin himself admitted this in a conversation with Clara Zetkin when he said: "So few men - even among the proletariat - realize how much effort and trouble they could serve women, even quite do away with, if they were to lend a hand in 'women's work'. But no, that is contrary to the 'right and dignity of a man'. They want their peace and comfort. The home life of the woman is a daily sacrifice to a thousand unimportant trivialities. The old master right of the man still lives in secret. His slave takes her revenge also secretly. The backwardness of women, their lack of understanding of the revolutionary ideals of the man decrease his joy and determination in fighting . . . We must root out the old 'master' idea to its last and smallest root, in the Party and among the masses. That is one of our political tasks, just as is the urgently necessary task of forming a staff of men and women comrades, well-trained in theory and practice, to carry on Party activity among working women."

Essential Nature of Her Domestic Labor. The main pressure on the woman conscious of her position, making it practically impossible for her to rebel, is the very essential nature of her labor - maintaining life. The wife and mother could not easily use the strike as a weapon to make her voice heard, like organized workers do. Her labor fulfills such basic needs that even she often, let alone her exploiters, do not question *why* is it that the female is the domestic laborer and not the male. I am aware of exceptions to this, however. Many men do help in various ways with housework. I am discussing what happens in general for the sake of developing a workable theory.

Myths or Feudal Ideology Upholding Patriarchy. Society has developed myths, which are handed down through generations, to convince everyone to believe in lies about women. Particularly responsible for teaching the younger generation are the women themselves. The myths include: women are meant for marriage, to serve men, to be mothers, to do housework, to make the tea when the guests come, and to feed, bathe, clothe, and care for the children and other family members. Other myths tell us that women are inherently

weak, fickle-minded, desirous of attracting men, that they enjoy being looked after, to do nothing all day and so on. These myths are the pillars of patriarchy, because not only men but also women believe in them.

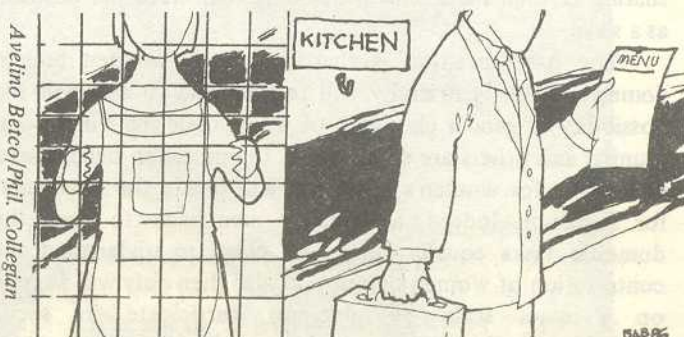
"Formal Equality is Not Enough". Patriarchy is not always upheld by the law nowadays due to theoretical reforms. Nevertheless, the myths are so deeply ingrained in the psyche of all people that women's inferior status remains a reality, even though many may claim otherwise. "Formal equality," as Lenin said, is not enough. Also, when women are ignorant of their legal rights or are too disorganized and inexperienced to handle court cases, then protest is hard and long-term struggle is impossible. Spontaneous efforts, when rarely made, could become effective, if organized groups of women and men together resolutely take up specifically women's issues. Male dominated groups are often the most organized, and consequently could do much for women, but generally do not because of the interest they have in maintaining the "master" status, the status quo of the bourgeois (man) over the proletariat (women) at home. Also, work among women, considered fit for women only, is apparently not glamorous or prestigious enough for many revolutionary men. But, said Lenin, "In the final analysis" such an attitude is "nothing but an underestimation of woman and her work."

Socio-economic Theory of Existence. Having mentioned the main modes of production and that there is little direct relation between these and domestic labor, we may, even so, apply Marxist method of analysis when we include, as we must, domestic labor as a form of social production to make a complete "socio-economic theory of existence." It can help us to understand:

1. The division of labor - who does what in society;
2. The payment system of domestic labor;
3. Utilization of the surplus value or freedom for others produced by the domestic laborer;
4. The character of the possessing class, i.e., all these who benefit from the patriarchy (not only men); and
5. The character of the dispossessed class - women.

Thus,

1. Little girls, women as wives, mothers, sisters and in-laws are unpaid domestic laborers.
2. No payment is given for eighteen to twenty or more working hours, except the nourishment and rest available, and the occasional gift.





3. As the woman is never paid for her domestic labor, freedom for everyone is at the cost of her freedom.

Sexual activity is one aspect of woman's domestic "duty" which becomes "rape" when force is used, and "prostitution" when performed out of duty not love by a financially dependent woman.

4. The character of the possessing class leaves its mark far and wide. Murder, rape, alcoholism, wife-beating and eve-teasing as well as cultural decadence, are some of its features. The most inhuman physical brutality, economic exploitation and mental perversion found in homes and society, have their origin mainly in the minds of men, although some women abuse a positions of authority to perpetuate ill-gained security. Greed, laziness, cynicism and corruption also stem from a system based on slavery.
5. Shyness, lack of confidence and other qualities which the myths tell us are inherent in women, are not inherent, but due to her position in the socio-economic setup.

Women as consumers for capitalism. Not only does the labor of women in the home enable the men to advance, but also women's role as *consumers* of the products of capitalism helps to keep the "throwaway system" going without altering her status. It is generally the woman who grapples with rising prices with a stagnant pay packet, queues for hours at shops, and becomes the prey of advertising agencies and industrialists. Capitalism may have brought more products to the shelves and thus apparently made life more rich and comfortable for some, but it has not made the domestic laborer any better off. She still continues to do the "putting together" alone and to take the responsibility for the family's survival. More goods and gadgets without more support and sharing in their management has only reinforced her position as a slave.

The basic position is that as long as women remain domestic slaves, patriarchy will remain, and so also will the possibility of gender class war, of which male chauvinist communists and others are so afraid, in the mistaken belief that a movement for women's liberation will divide the movement for socialism. Indeed, as soon as men begin to share the domestic tasks equally, they will come to understand the contribution of women better, and also then only will women on a mass scale be able to participate in social activities equally, without having a "double duty." Since

housework had to be done under feudalism, has to be done under capitalism and will have to be done under socialism, as people want to live in houses, eat cooked food and wear clean clothes, the necessary tasks will have to be performed by people. Nor will it be right for men to avoid their responsibilities by advocating communal services as panacea. Housework must be regarded as fundamental to human existence and the domestic laborer must be valued accordingly.

B. Who is to control reproduction?

"The first division of labor is that between man and woman for the propagation of children."³

Due to biology, women bear children, man can only implant the seed. As long as the "mother-right" remained, the women's status remained high, but with the over-throw of this right came "the world historical defeat of the female sex." In his *Origin of the family*, Engels wrote how the monogamous family came about in order to ensure that the property remained in the hands of the male heirs. "Based on the supremacy of man, the express purpose (of the monogamous family) was to produce children of undisputed paternity." As long as women remained free, then the paternity of her offspring would be uncertain. "Mother-right" had meant that her offspring were entitled to property. However, with the decree of the paternal law of inheritance, this situation was changed. Men were no longer willing to nurture or give property to those children whose paternity they doubted. This "doubting" and the reluctance to treat other men's children like his own probably started when exploitation of humans by other humans began, when an individual began to regard himself as more important than the others. It is very clear that the status of woman declines with the growth of private ownership, male domination and the bourgeois mentality for accumulation (at the expense of others.) This is seen today among poor rural households. Agricultural labor by women is stopped as soon as the family wealth increases and they are able to buy land. Thereafter, the woman is supposed to stay at home and be a "good housewife and mother." The family strives to attain the prestige and values of the middle class.

This move to keep the woman out of social production and within four walls, to restrict her freedom and yet exploit her in the home, was the first act of political repression committed by one human against another. Only a reversal of this will bring about the end to women's slavery and the unity of the laboring people.

The first class opposition that appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male. Can it be said that Engels was a feminist who would destroy the working class movement by dividing it along gender lines? I hardly think so. In their role as wives and mothers, women are a separate class.

Thus, it became necessary for man to suppress women biologically, to control her sexual activity in order to ensure that not only would she remain as a permanent, productive and inexpensive asset to his household, but also that all the children born would be his. Herein lies the problem of women's gender being a source of her oppression. Being biologically capable of propagating, it is her body which has to be controlled if property is to remain with men.

How to control woman? Of course, it is practically impossible to imprison her physically throughout life (although some communities have practically succeeded in doing so in different epochs). Hence the need for an ideology relating to reproduction, woman's body and sexual functions, to influence her mind and make her a voluntary "prisoner." Similarly, society was brainwashed over the years to believe in and cherish the ideology. Two main aspects need to be examined:

1. Attitudes to the Woman's Body;
2. The Institution of Marriage.

1. Attitudes to the Woman's Body

a. The tradition of wearing *clothes* which leave no part of the body visible reflects women's oppression. It also indicates the inherent contradiction and difficulty of her situation - the need to be attractive to men (before marriage) and the need to hide her body from the sight of men other than her husband, even though long, tight and cumbersome clothes are a cause of discomfort and sometimes a risk to life. The patriarch knows the mind of his like and how easily he is aroused at the sight of a woman (potential property and pleasure). Thus, partly to protect the woman and mainly to protect his own prestige, the woman is forced to go into "purdah." This tradition exists in most communities of the world. Punishment for the fault of man is meted out on woman, and even in countries where long clothes are not the norm, women still have to

attain the confidence and poise of men when they walk, sit, and stand. Repressive traditions die hard.

Working women have to choose their own clothes otherwise managing machines, planting rice, carrying loads of earth, and even cooking become impossible tasks. Flowing ends are tucked in tightly, excessively long skirts hitched up. The working woman cannot afford to be too modest.

The preoccupation with clothes and adornments reflects woman's socio-economic status. The more she approaches the bourgeois "ideal woman" type, the more attention she pays to dressing up in way she knows will please the patriarch, which usually means making herself look like a painted doll. In doing so, she idles away her leisure time sitting at home waiting for her husband to return, to serve him, and to see him off again.

b. There are many taboos connected with the *menstrual function*. Girls and boys are treated similarly until the girls have their first menstruation. This point marks the onset of her biological maturity. Becoming a potential propagator of the species, she must now be controlled by the patriarchy. Hence, she starts to wear a sari, she is discouraged from mixing freely with boys, she is often taken out of school to be married off, all the while being told that these restrictions are placed on her for her own good! She, not the adolescent boy, is taught to be self-denying and to prepare for marriage.

Menstruation itself is regarded as a curse, and the menstruating girl is branded unclean. She is not allowed to enter the kitchen or the betel fields or to touch males. In this way, a natural "means of production" is made inoperative and thus controllable by others. And what could be a possible source of power - the woman's ability to reproduce life - becomes for the woman an unhappy event, a cause for loss of freedom. It is discussed, in hushed voices, as if it were a crime, a mystery, or something shameful. Under patriarchy, male power insults and humiliates the woman. And her ignorance is exploited. Men indulge in sex with unmarried girls who do not know the connection between menstruation and pregnancy. Many girls believe that menstruation is "due to god's wrath on her for being a girl."⁴ She may even be fed on cow-dung when she has her periods.⁵

c. *Virginity* is a myth whose origin lies in the bourgeois concept of private property, and it only refers to women. Society hardly objects to a man's having sexual relations

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before marriage, but actively reviles the woman who has. The difference in attitude is due to patriarchy's determination to control women's fertility, and to maintain what Engels said was the origin of the monogamous family -- "undisputed paternity based on the supremacy of man."

d. The onus of *birth control* is usually placed on the woman; ligation being much preferred to vasectomy. It is an unspoken belief that women should bear the burden of family planning like so many other unspoken "duties" of hers.

e. *Pregnancy and delivery* used to be managed completely by women as midwives, but nowadays male gynecologists and obstetricians supercede in numbers and sophistication of technique. Deliveries are sometimes done depending only on the timetable or availability of the doctor. Inducing premature delivery is even done because caesarian operation is very lucrative.

The neglect of most of the world's mothers - the rural and urban poor - during pregnancy and delivery reflects a callousness on the part of the establishment. Such an attitude - which may spring partly from a subconscious fear men have of women's capacity for suffering and of her power to bring forth life - has led to the total uninvolvedness of the husband in his wife's condition.

2. The Institution of Marriage

In the institution of marriage, the male succeeds in combining control of both reproduction and management of his domestic needs - from cooking and cleaning to the satisfaction of his sexual urges and emotional needs. He also acquires a stable atmosphere in which his children grow up. His home enables him to make money and a name for himself, to accumulate and thus uphold the system. The control over women exercised by the patriarchy reaches its epitome in marriage, and often resembles the brute force of the capitalist over the laborer - flagging, exploiting and murdering as he wills. The laborer has only his labor to sell to survive. The woman has her labor and her biological capacity to propagate.

The custom of marriage arranged by parents, usually involving transactions in cash and kind, is a reflection of the patriarchy's mercenary mentality and ruthless intolerance of individual freedom, especially girls' freedom. The girl is prepared from her childhood to think of marriage as the aim of her life. Thus, she is brainwashed into accepting what often transpires to be an intolerable situation. Myths tell us that an unmarried woman is peculiar or even a "bad" woman; that a deserted woman is a burden on society and her parents; that a widow, who used to be expected to immolate herself on the funeral pyre of her husband, in the Hindu suttee traditions is supposed to lead a very passive existence, denying herself colored clothes and good food.

In the Christian marriage ceremony; the woman says she will be "obedient" to her husband, while the Hindu woman is carried around her husband-to-be by other men showing her total dependence and submission to the patriarchy. In Islam, the power to divorce rests totally with the male. Myths would have us believe that married life is ideal when the woman exists body and soul for the man, his family and his children,

and while not enshrined in any law, such myths uphold the patriarchy.

a. *The Dowry System* by which the man is purchased adversely affects the woman and her family, with inevitable consequences on the woman's status both within the family and in society. None blows the conch shell at the birth of a girl. Only women suffer from dowry deaths.

b. *After marriage, the woman leaves her parents to go to her husband's home.* This has two main consequences:

1. Her share of property remains with her brothers. Married women who stay with their in-laws find it difficult to cultivate land or maintain property elsewhere, so they usually leave their legal share to the male members of their family who do not move away after marriage. Also, according to Hindu law, "once a girl marries, she has no right to maintenance from her natal family's property, not even if she is divorced, abandoned or widowed."⁶
2. By depriving her of her social base, patriarchy can dominate the woman, keep her disorganized,⁷ and prevent her from uniting with other members of her gender class. By depriving her of land and property, men act like landlords and capitalists who deprive the peasants of their land. These peasants then become laborers in the fields, mines and factories, and the women become laborers in the home of their husbands.

c. The institution of *polygamy* is a trait of patriarchy. It reflects the man's concern for the paternal right and his own pleasure over and above the feelings of his wife.

d. The existence of certain customs of married life indicate the inferior status of the woman, such as the attitude that the husband is god. She cannot call him by name as an equal, she must eat when he has finished, serve him and his family throughout her life, and regard it as her good fortune if she dies before him. Her total identity is inextricably bound to his, but not in a liberating way. Patriarchy needs a willing slave mother of its sons. The subjugation it demands of the woman is complete.

Social Aspects. As mother, the married woman is exploited and discriminated against by her family and society, who leave her mainly responsible for nurturing and bringing up children. The family recognizes the child because it is an asset belonging to the family, and society recognizes the child because the child will become a social asset later. Thus, the family and society recognize the "mother" in the women because of the value they give to the child, but they scarcely recognize *the woman as a person in her own right who is performing a vital social function* for which she should be actively helped and encouraged. The difference in attitude is subtle but significant. It has many manifestations. For example:

1. One of the main reasons behind the concern for *women's education* today is that since women are mothers or would-be mothers, they should be educated for the benefit of

their children, and hence society. Almost nothing is said about how women and girls are people with the same right as men and boys to education.

2. It has been established that 70% of Indian women suffer from anemia due to frequent childbirth and insufficient nourishment. Consequently, efforts are made to see that *expectant mothers are given tablets for building up hemoglobin*, whose doses are stopped after delivery of the child. Women are told by health workers, to eat well during pregnancy and lactation. But when not playing the mother role, they receive scanty advice and attention from the family and society.

3. Women's employment in organized private industry is actively discouraged because women get married and become pregnant. Time off the factory floor for reproducing the next generation is regarded as a source of financial loss for capitalists. The latter have also developed prejudices against women to support capitalist economic policies, maintaining that "woman's work is in the home" and the "man is the bread-winner." From these attitudes stem a host of other values and prejudices held by women and men alike from all strata of society, and these become the consciousness of a society in which the dominant culture is bourgeois and male.

"Women are a financial burden because —

a. the moment she marries, she may have to leave her job, hence all the time and expense put in by the company into training her is wasted;

b. frequent absenteeism of the women due to ill health and pregnancy;

c. frequent pregnancies involving 3 months' leave is an indirect financial burden;

d. maternity benefit has to be given each time, as do equal wages;

e. after two or three children, the physical strength and ability to work of the women deteriorates;

f. the company has to provide creche facilities."⁸

Thus, capitalist patriarchal values, even more than capitalist economics itself, oppress women both socially and economically. Even the Constitution which forbids discrimination in employment on grounds of sex is totally ineffective. Those who hold the purse strings and thrive on excess labor supply are able to throw women out of paid employment, or exploit them at minimum wages and awful working conditions, simply because capitalists value money only and not life itself.

4. Trade union leaders have been heard to say that as long as men continue to be without employment, the unions can hardly think of women's employment.⁹ Such deep-rooted prejudice in the minds of working class leaders also has serious consequences for women workers who lose interest in union activities and in struggling to improve conditions, while the steady decline since the early 1960s of the number of women employed in organized industry in India has had a very detrimental effect on the women's movement as a whole.

5. Government rules concerning women are many, but operating as they do in a middle-class-dominated society, these rules for working women remain generally ineffective. Government bureaucrats themselves possessing middle-class values are unable and unwilling to bring about real change. These who do try are the exceptions, and thus, for the most part, helpless.

a. Factories employing over 30 women are by law supposed to provide a creche, and separate toilet and canteen facilities for women. A random inspection of certain private cotton mills in West Bengal in 1984 revealed that these rules are not usually kept. Government records themselves provide revealing data. Four government — run cotton mills in West Bengal employing over 30 women each had no creche in 1984.¹⁰

b. Government rules have restricted night-shift work for women, even though women themselves would like to do night work because the pay is double.¹¹

c. The rule forbidding heavy work to be done by women is somewhat irrelevant in view of the fact that the health of women standing for hours in front of machines is even more affected. If the concern for women's reproductive organs were less paternalistic and more genuine, then a moving seat could be provided, and women could be given the option to work on heavy machines or not. The requisite training, if provided would increase women's scope for work. As it is, however women's employment has been reduced directly as a result of the above two rules, as well as by, ironically, the Equal Remuneration Act of 1976 and the Maternity Benefits Act of 1961.



THE REPRESSION OF THE WOMAN'S PERSONALITY

As the capitalist seeks to destroy the intelligence and character of the laborer, so does the patriarch seek to destroy all women's potential rebellion by destroying at the outset women's self-confidence, sense of worth, and individualism.

1. *Self-effacement and sacrifice* are considered necessary and natural qualities in a woman. This is another myth, another aspect of patriarchal ideology. Such qualities are inculcated from early childhood.

a. Not only do village girls accept the idea that they must give up school to look after their siblings and help their mother at home, but they also take it as natural that their brother's education should be paid for by their labor - be it at home or in the fields.

b. Women serve food to everyone and eat the leftovers at the end. This is an accepted habit even though the woman may need more calories than other family members because she works hard all day and may be pregnant or lactating.

2. Girls and women are *frowned upon* for talking loudly or walking with large steps. Shyness, helplessness, and coquetry are appreciated by the patriarchy who can dominate such women easily. Why do prospective grooms see how the woman looks, talks, cooks, etc., before agreeing to marry her? This is because the patriarch marries an instrument which will perform certain task for his benefit. He does not marry for love. His wife will not be his equal. Indeed, he prefers to think she has no feelings, character, or intelligence of her own, having for centuries tried to destroy these. He likes women who are meek and passive or, when angry, lose their self-control and break into tears. Such women put the patriarch in his element. He feels secure of his "master" right.

3. In a group, the girl may be deliberately *scorned and teased or ignored* while the conversation takes place between the boys and men. Adults talk to little girls in a childish way about inconsequential matters, but to a boy like he were an adult and about important things. Open favoritism is displayed

the beautiful damsel and the male villain is part of the same thing.

5. It is the age-old story of the exploiter and the exploited, but the battle lines are camouflaged by myths which cloud the consciousness of the exploited and keep them repressed. Many of those myths were deliberately started. The eldest Indian literature is replete with sayings denigrating women. For example:

"After eating, a man is supposed to leave the leftovers for his wife." (Dharma Shutras, 500 B.C.-300 A.D.)

"A woman is a commodity" (which needs to be inspected before purchase, i.e., marriage) (Karma Shutra)

"Punishment for killing a woman is the same for killing a mongoose, a blackbird, a snake and a Shudra." (Dharma Shutra)¹²

"Whenever a man is alone with a woman, the devil makes a third." ('Mishkat,' vol. 1, p. 663, Mohammed)

"After me, I have not left any affliction more harmful to

PHOTOBANK



for the boy in front of the girl who grows up seeing herself and others of her gender constantly discriminated against. It is not long before she becomes totally resigned and plays out her role like a pawn in a game of chess.

4. *Pornography* is patriarchy's way of enabling men to rape all women in their imagination at the flick of a cheap page. Rape being a way of controlling another person's body, the patriarchy benefits from pornography at the cost of the victim's intelligence and character. Pornography is a much more subtle form of control than rape because models appear to enjoy themselves. And some earn well, so the perverted male ego is boosted higher. It seems the victim is willingly making herself available for cash.

The element of cash introduces the social contract which enable individual models to lead respectable lives, and not necessarily as repressed fools themselves. A large proportion of women in Thailand support their rural families as prostitutes in the cities. However, like prostitution, commercial advertising, acting in blue films and cabaret dancing, modelling for pornographic publications socializes the women's body only. As a whole she has not been integrated into society. The patriarchy continues to exploit her to the very last drop of her blood. A shot of a film in London depicted a naked woman with a knife in her vagina being cut up slowly. Even daily drama on Calcutta radio features constantly weeping women and aggressive or heroic male stereotypes. The traditional horror story of

men than women." (Bukhari LXII. 33)

The evidence of two women is equal to one man "because of the deficiency of woman's mind." (Bukhari XLIII 826)

The above are just a few examples which show to what extent the repression of women has been perpetrated, and for how long a period. The attitude to women in these supposedly holy guides to life amounts almost to hatred. Contemporary village language is also full of anti-female sayings.

DENYING WOMEN ACCESS TO SOCIAL INVOLVEMENT AND THE MEANS OF PRODUCTION

Having subjugated the woman in the home as an isolated domestic laborer, controlled her reproductive powers, and suppressed her personality, patriarchy strengthens its control over her by denying her access to social involvement and the means of production. Even minimum social contact is forbidden.

1. In an interview, a 45-year-old Jat woman from Punjab said she never went out except when her husband asked her to. "I cannot go out without his permission." This situation had existed since her marriage at the age of 10.¹³

2. In many parts of India, women do not attend village meetings. There is an unwritten law forbidding their participation. A woman was severely beaten up by her husband for contradicting a decision of his made in a public meeting (to

pay money to another man.)¹⁴

Parallels exist in the running of many political parties, whose male members discuss the policies and make decisions in meetings, while the female members do the typing, serve the refreshments, and clean up afterwards. Yet Lenin said in 1920, "It is essential that women workers take an ever-increasing part in the administration of public enterprises and in the administration of the state."

3. Some women are not permitted to work in the fields. No woman is allowed to use the plough, although women may be used to pull it while the man drives.

4. Working women hand over their wages and salaries to their husbands or mother-in-laws, and never decide about how money will be spent.

5. Women are not given training to handle machines; they are not encouraged to develop skills which would make them as capable as men.

6. Technological advances benefit the patriarchy consequently. Automation in factories makes women the first to be redundant. The rice threshing machine is operated by men, depriving women of their traditional employment.

7. Most development funds from governmental and non-governmental agencies are channelled towards men. Around the world, plans are made which take into consideration the men in the community. In Africa, for example, training and funds for cash cropping are given to men, although women are the traditional farmers. As a result, the status of women declines, and their burden of work increases as they have to help their husband. Economic gains are scanty as the man usually pockets the income and spends it on his own consumption - alcohol, cigarettes, radio.¹⁵ The woman is then forced to seek alternative employment to provide for the family.

In India, the construction of potable water sites is lower on the list of priorities than the construction of roads, presumably because members of the patriarchy do not have to fetch water, but they do need good roads for purposes of travel and trade.

8. *The land tenure system* in India which was changed by the British. Right over land was vested in an individual male "head of the household" who would pay taxes to the landlord state. Engels' theory, evolved from conditions existing hundreds of years ago, still holds true, because of the continuing existence of patriarchy and the unresolved gender class antagonism. "Even among communities where women were, and continued to be, the primary workers on the land, as for instance among most tribal peoples, in the process of converting communal property rights of the clan into individual property rights, women were almost completely excluded."¹⁶

"A daughter cannot be a coparcener in a Hindu undivided family, though a son is from birth. She can only get a portion of what her father inherits if and when the property is divided. In the father's self acquired property, a Hindu daughter is supposed to have an equal share if he dies without making a will. However Hindu father usually make a will disinheriting their daughters. Even when a father dies without making a will, daughters are usually pressured into signing away their rights in favor of their brothers."¹⁷

9. Something of women's deprivation and exploitation can be realized from the following well-known extract from

a United Nations report published in 1980:

"Women constitute half the world's population, perform nearly two-thirds of its work hours, receive one-tenth of the world's income and own less than one-hundredth of the world's property."

10. Examples of the way women have been robbed of land, property, and capital, and denied training, education, and, even freedom to talk and move about could be multiplied. A long-term and steady campaign is urgently required to investigate and compile all the evidence and data available.

CONCLUSION

When a woman does not conform to the wishes of the patriarchy, society chastises her by criticizing, harassing, and even physically assaulting her. The struggles of women to remain alive after her husband dies, to remove her veil, to become educated, to go out to work, to walk undisturbed in the streets, to go to meetings, to marry according to her own choice, to control her reproductive power herself, to lead an independent as well as a family life, to develop her personality and to participate in social development from planning and administration to production in the fields and factories, to be powerful, healthy, wealthy, and happy, have always met with opposition called the patriarchy. Is the patriarchy afraid women will use their new freedom to oppress men like the patriarchy has oppressed women?

It has been the longest struggle so far, and is the hardest ever waged by any group of human beings because it is a lonely and complex one. Isolated in the separate homes of the husbands, and deprived of the experience of organizing which laborers have, women find it hard to change the conditions which oppress them at home - domestic slavery and lack of control over their own fertility. To begin with, women do not realize the significance of both these factors in the socio-economic system. Hence, it is necessary to make women conscious of their true value to society, as all laborers should be made conscious. Once women, like the proletariat in general, realize this, then they can begin to struggle to:

1. bring about an equal sharing with men of the household tasks; and

2. control their own reproductive power themselves.

This struggle is as vital as the struggle of the peasants and laborers to win the land and means of production, and it must be organized by the combined forces of women and men alike. If the responsibility for domestic work is not taken off the women's shoulders, then, as Lenin said, woman will never be free, and socialism will only impose a "double burden" on them - laborer in the home and outside, as what happened in the Soviet Union. Hence, we must analyze the "Woman Question" very carefully. Engels wrote that the liberation of the wife "demanded the abolition of the monogamous family as the economic unit of society," so that "the whole female sex (could be put) back into public industry." Thus, if the family is to be preserved at all as a social unit, it is incumbent upon man to take up domestic labor too, and to allow women the freedom which only men and the possessing classes (including rich women) have enjoyed.

If the position of the lowest proletariat is not improved by revolutionary means, then no proletarian existence can ever

be free. Hence, it is in the interest of all proletarians to focus attention on the weakest link, the most oppressed, the slaves of the 20th century - the women. The "Woman Question" is the question which can only be answered when the poorest of the poor and the most wretched of the earth are liberated.

To close with the words of Lenin' "We need appropriate bodies to carry on work among them (women), special methods of agitation and forms of organization. Unless millions of woman are with us we cannot exercise the proletarian dicta-

torship, cannot construct on communist lines. We must find our way to them, we must study and try to find that way. The women must be made conscious of the political connection between our demands and their own sufferings, needs and wishes. They must realize what the proletarian dictatorship means for them: complete equality with man in law and practice, in the family, in the state, in society; an end to the power of the bourgeoisie."¹⁸ **K**

NOTES:

1. "Just One More Queue," Manushi's "In Search of Answers."
2. "Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism," ed, Zillah Eisenstein
3. "The German Ideology" by Marx and Engels.
4. Letter in Manushi No. 32 from N. Sethi.
5. Annual Report 1984 of Nishtha.
6. Manushi No. 32.
7. Manushi's "In Search of Answers."
8. Conversation of writer with Mr. S.K. Birla, Management, Kescram Cotton Mills.
9. Conversation of writer with Mr. J. Saha, General Secretary, Federation of Cotton Textile Workers Unions.
10. Data provided by Inspectorate of Factories, Government of West Bengal.

11. Report of an Investigation into the History and Present Conditions of Women Workers of the Cotton Textiles Industry in West Bengal by Women's Research Centre, 1984.
12. From an article appearing in "Anrrinya" by Dr. Sukamari Bhattacharyya.
13. Manushi's "In Search of Answers."
14. Ibid.
15. "Work Participation of Rural Women in the Third World" by Bina Agarwal, pubd. in "Economic and Political Weekly" vol. XX no. 51.
16. Manushi's "In Search of Answers," p. 8
17. Manushi No. 32.
18. All quotations of Engels and Lenin are from "Women and Communism" pubd. by New Book Centre.

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