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Socialism and feminism

Why socialists need feminism

- Features - Sexual politics -

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The idea that socialists should be feminists too is uncontroversial to many revolutionary socialists. But why socialism needs feminism is still worth spelling out.

The relationship between socialism and feminism has been getting more attention in online discussions recently. This is both for good reasons – such as the article by Sharon Smith of the International Socialist Organization in the US [1] that looks critically at how the Socialist Workers Party in Britain, which greatly influenced the ISO's politics, has dealt with feminism – and bad, above all the current crisis in the SWP set off by the disgraceful way that allegations of rape by a leading member were handled. [2]

Every society in the world today is shaped by the oppression of women on the basis of their gender (patriarchy/sexism). There are, of course, importance differences in what form this oppression takes because gender relations are always interwoven with class, race, sexuality and other social relations, which vary (for example, patriarchy in Canada isn't identical to patriarchy in Cuba).

Around the world, women taking action to challenge sexism commonly (though not always) identify themselves as feminists. If we define feminism in its widest sense as opposition to sexism – which is what it means in everyday speech today – it should be obvious why socialists should be feminists.

However, some socialists who are dedicated supporters of women's liberation don't consider themselves feminists. As Smith notes, some Marxists including some in her own political current haven't "understood the need to defend feminism, and to appreciate the enormous accomplishments of the women's movement, even after the 1960s era gave way to the backlash" against feminism and other movements of oppressed people.

But some socialists who have defended and appreciated feminism and been active in struggles against gender oppression have still insisted that socialism doesn't need feminism and so they're not feminists (this is what I was taught in my early years as a socialist, in the late 1980s as a member of the International Socialists – some of whose members had the kind of really sectarian anti-feminist stance that Smith criticizes). Why?

The best case for this position is that revolutionary socialist politics are deeply committed to liberation from all forms of oppression, including gender oppression, and therefore don't need feminism. This often goes along with the belief that socialist-feminism is flawed because it advocates both united working-class struggle against exploitation and all forms of oppression (seen as the correct orientation) and autonomous (women-only) organizing against patriarchy. Women-only organizing is seen as undermining working-class politics because it allegedly means cross-class politics that don't recognize that the interests of working-class women aren't the same as those of middle-class or ruling-class women.

But even at its best this "socialist, not feminist" approach won't do. Its claim that "because socialism is about universal human emancipation, it doesn't need feminism" evades a real problem: actually-existing socialist organizing and politics aren't the ideal that these socialists talk about. They exist within patriarchal societies. As a result, the actions and thinking of socialists will inevitably be limited and deformed by the patriarchal gender relations that we're committed to uprooting. So socialists need to develop our politics by learning from the actually-existing struggle against patriarchy (as well as learning from history). To do this we need feminism.

It's feminists who are shedding light on how women are oppressed and grappling with how to challenge various

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manifestations of oppression, from violence against women including sexual assault to eating disorders to how families, workplaces, schools and other institutions pressure women to conduct themselves in particular ways to sexism in contemporary science and many more. Not all feminists equally, of course. Feminist politics range from revolutionary socialist-feminism all the way to pro-imperialist liberalism, and there are lively debates within feminism.

But it's feminists who are on the cutting edge of whatever progress is being made in understanding and fighting patriarchy. Socialists should be part of that action. Socialists need to learn from the best feminisms (both socialist-feminism and others) to deepen our understanding of oppression and how to fight for liberation. The "socialist, not feminist" approach is a barrier to doing this.

"Socialist, not feminist" politics downplay the reality that patriarchy has its own dynamics. These aren't separate from capitalism and class, but they can't be reduced to them either. Marx's theory of capitalism has been developed by Marxist-feminism to explain why specific features of the system perpetuate gender oppression. This is extremely important. However, it doesn't fully explain patriarchy. To do that we also need to draw on "and develop" feminist theory in a historical and materialist way.

Socialist opposition to combining mixed-gender and autonomous women's organizing is a mistake. Far from detracting from united working-class struggles, women-only organizing can be an effective tactic for making them possible. In patriarchal societies, mixed-gender organizing is never a level playing field for women. Organizing independently can help women to identify and tackle sexism in mixed-gender activism and make mixed-gender organizing more anti-sexist. It can be a way for women to take initiatives without having to wait for men to catch up with them. And there's no reason that it inevitably sacrifices the interests of working-class women to those of middle-class or ruling-class women.

Another problem with the "socialist, not feminist" approach is that it tends to promote a culture among socialists in which sexism isn't challenged as vigorously as it needs to be. To the extent that it insulates socialists from feminism, it makes it easier for socialist men to avoid dealing with tough questions about our own behavior. Insulation from feminism can also make it harder for socialist women to challenge sexism among socialists.

Socialists worthy of the name are committed to universal human emancipation. But there's a big difference between proclaiming a commitment and making it real. To make our politics more truly what we say we want them to be, socialists need feminism. We should be feminist socialists, and proud of it.

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First published in [New Socialist](#).

[1] [Marxism, feminism and women's liberation](#) posted on socialistworker.org on 31 January 2013.

[2] For links to the extensive material on this that exists online see [Jim Jepps site](#).