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Women and Bolsheviks

# **Bolsheviks and Feminists: In Cooperation and Conflict**

- Features - Feminism -

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Marxist attempts at integrating gender in the class-struggle framework was uneven in the Russian revolutionary movement. A class reductionism often held back the Bolsheviks, but contests with the liberal feminists, as well as the objective reality of more women entering the labour force, led to changes. Women activists took the lead in this. The Revolution of 1917 saw a much greater degree of women's involvement. Women workers provided leadership in the early stages of the February Revolution, though it often remains unacknowledged by mainstream (including mainstream left) historiography of the revolution. At the same time, gendering the practice of class went hand in hand with a sharp rise in class issues against undifferentiated feminism, for liberal feminism supported the war and the bourgeois Provisional Government.

## Classical Marxism and Women's Liberation

Gender was not a conceptual category used often by Social Democrats in late 19th or early 20th century. So, it is possible, and necessary, to point to flaws in Marxist thinking of that period, particularly when shades of "Marxist" dogmatism cites Lenin or Engels in order to shout down women's struggles for equality. But it is also necessary today, in the centenary of the Russian Revolution, to go beyond academic condescension and the liberal-to-right-wing attacks; it is important to look at the concrete achievements of the left wing of Marxism in connection with the issue of women's liberation, with special reference to the Bolsheviks.

Unlike many of its rivals in the socialist movement, Marxism started with the proposition that the emancipation of the working class is a task of the working class itself. This fundamental principle was repeatedly stated by Marx and Engels, as also by their immediate political heirs (Marik 2008; Draper 1971). At the same time, Marx's conception of the proletariat as a universal class meant that the emancipation of the proletariat would have to involve a total social upheaval and the opening up of the potential for the emancipation of all the oppressed and exploited peoples.

The principle of working-class self-emancipation meant that Marxists rejected the two major routes to socialism/communism offered so far: enlightened preaching to the entire society, hoping to convert people, and building up a conspiratorial organisation hoping to make a minority revolution. While this is obviously a simplification, it is close enough to reality. Even the League of the Just—“an early socialist group that both Marx and Engels joined—“had these two trends. This is documented by the internal debate within the League between Wilhelm Weitling and Kriege favouring instant revolution on the one hand, and Schapper and his associates stressing pure propagandism on the other (Forder et al 1970). Marx and Engels wanted to build a party of revolutionary workers. But the working class in capitalist society is often fragmented and polarised. From this, Lenin emphasised the need to unify and concentrate the consciousness of the advanced workers gained from their struggle and merge it with the advances in theoretical knowledge. The massive study of Lars Lih (2008) and the debates over it have suggested that it was a widely accepted position among Marxists even before Lenin that the socialist message and the organised movement of the workers had to be united. [1] In *What Is to Be Done?* this was one of Lenin's core aims.

However, we need to recognise that Lih goes to another extreme in the course of his debunking of the myth that *What Is to Be Done?* represented the essence of Leninism, and that it was absolutely novel. The arguments cannot be made in detail here, but Lenin introduced a political practice and an institutional set-up that was not identical to what German Social Democracy had (Marik 2017). Operating within the specificity of the Russian context, where there was total lack of democratic rights and even the minimum of civil liberties, Lenin stressed the need for an underground party and “professional revolutionaries”—“workers who would be full-time party workers, in a way that German Social Democracy had not done. These were important tactical issues. But an element of core principle was mixed up with Lenin's idea of centralisation and his defence of the professional revolutionary. Lenin argued that the diverse experiences of class struggle had to be centralised into the revolutionary party. Moreover, for him, workers, and not just middle-class intellectuals, could understand socialism through their experiences of exploitation and

struggle. But Lenin believed that sustained class consciousness of the advanced workers could be actualised in form of a vanguard party if they were relieved of their daily factory load. Hence, the professional revolutionary could often be a worker who had been moved from the factory to full-time political work.

Since the class was fragmented, a fact Lenin recognised from an early stage, it made sense to organise the more politically conscious elements separately. But this tended to exclude women, who were perceived very often as backward elements. The problem lay in not recognising, at least in the early years, that women did not come into the socialist movement, or indeed in organised trade union movements, not just due to backwardness, but due to the double burden they faced (Marik 2004: 13–50). The Party Programme, drafted mainly by Plekhanov and Lenin and adopted by the Second Congress in 1903, did not even include the demand for equal pay for equal work (1903: *Second Ordinary Congress* 1978: 3–9).

However, if we move ahead to 1917, the Bolsheviks had a membership of around 24,000 on the eve of the revolution, of whom 2,500 were women. A detailed study by Barbara Evans Clements (1997: 32) shows that among the members, while 62.1% of the men came from worker or peasant background, only 36.8% of the women were workers or peasants. There are reasons for this gap. An average Russian working-class woman was likely to be married by the time she was 18 and a mother shortly thereafter. Seldom were there men willing to take up the duties of arranging for family income, childcare, etc. Without party education to enhance the value of work done by women or to organise them separately, the formal equality of comrades in the party could not erase the real inequality of the private sphere. Women party workers were often from a background where other family members could look after the children (for example, in the case of Alexandra Mikhailovna Kollontai), or where they could take the decision to not have children (as in the case of Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya). Working-class women could not often ensure such conditions. Moreover, the Russian social prohibition against women taking part in the male domain of politics operated with greater strictness on women from working-class and peasant families, in contrast to women from more affluent milieus. That there were still over 36% women members from worker and peasant backgrounds is quite remarkable.

Why did they come? First, within the asphyxiating conditions of Tsarist Russia, the Social Democratic Labour Party (the Russian acronym is RSDRP), whatever its shortcomings, provided far greater equality for women. Second, Marxism did not see women's equality as mere legal equality. It insisted that women's liberation and social revolution were integrally connected, and this pulled many women to the revolutionary party.

Women's work within the party structure showed both the scope for their mobility as well as the limitations they faced. As the party grew in size from the time of the 1905 Revolution, city committees (and district committees in big cities) were set up. Secretaries of such committees were usually party full-timers, with two or three secretaries with different duties assigned. The propaganda work (writing leaflets, ensuring the publication of pamphlets and journals, etc) were usually the duties of male secretaries. Women who became secretaries were technical secretaries, working to ensure the smooth running of the organisation, sending reports to the Central Committee, etc. We can cite the case of Elena Stasova, who was the Technical Secretary of Petersburg for years. Her correspondence with Lenin shows organisational news being exchanged. Political disputes or reports, on the other hand, are found in his correspondence with male secretaries like Radin, etc.

This structure goes all the way to the top. Krupskaya was the de facto organisational secretary of the newspaper *Iskra*, and then of the Bolshevik faction. But apart from the partial exception of Kollontai, political decision-making tended to be concentrated in the hands of men.

## Programme and Theoretical Reflections

The Russian Social Democrats, as Lars Lih (2008) has shown, were greatly influenced by the Germans. But on the question of women, a gap remained for a long time. The Germans were aware that women faced additional burdens; they had drawn up a separate programme for them back in 1896. They had also been tremendously successful in organising women workers through autonomous structures (Marik 2003: 169–223). The RSDRP programme of 1903 did demand stopping the appointment of women in sectors where it was harmful for their health, the opening of crèches in factories where women worked, paid maternity leave, etc (1903: *Second Ordinary Congress* 1978: 7). These suggest a greater emphasis on demands that projected women as “weak” and in “need of protection.” But, in any case, the RSDRP was serious in implementing this programme, which partially reflected its class–gender focus. Strikes in 1905–07 showed that women’s demands were regularly coming up. Moreover, one must remember that issues concerning maternity and crèche are important, vitally connected with women’s right to work.

The first ever pamphlet on women workers by a Russian Social Democrat was the 1901 pamphlet *Zhenshchina Rabotnitsa (The Woman Worker)*, identified by Moira Donald (1982: 129–60) as being the work of Krupskaya. It saw women workers as “backward,” but called for party work among them. Elisabeth A Wood (1997: 29) is rather critical in her assessment and has argued that Krupskaya described the woman worker first and foremost as a burden on her husband’s involvement in political work. However, even the summary she provides permits a somewhat different interpretation. Krupskaya argued that if women were kept out of the political process, half the working-class army would be lost, and that this exclusion would be the reason why women would pose a hindrance to men’s participation in politics. Moreover, Krupskaya’s description of women workers discussed concrete issues they faced, including wife-beating, wage inequality, malnourishment, harassment at the hands of foremen, etc.

Following the Revolution of 1905, feminists attempted to fight for women’s rights. [\[2\]](#) Many of them came together in 1908 to organise an All-Russian Women’s Congress. In effect, it was led by an alliance of Constitutional Democratic Party women (liberal feminists), and feminists belonging to the radical intelligentsia. Wood lists about five prominent feminist organisations active in 1905 (though she prefers the term used by the Russian women, namely, women’s rights organisations). These included the Women’s Union, the Mutual Philanthropic Society, the League for Women’s Equal Rights (often mentioned as Women’s League), the Women’s Progressive Party, and the Women’s Political Club (Wood 1997). Many of their members were also present at the Congress, and would be active in 1917 as well. Kollontai, a left-wing Menshevik at that time, reacted by seeking party support to organise women workers to go to the Congress. The Women’s Congress has found fairly strong defenders in post-Soviet times (Ruthchild 2010: 102–45). 1,053 people officially registered for the Congress. Only four were shown as workers. In fact, the data is based on responses to a questionnaire distributed late, by which time many of the workers had left.

Nonetheless, available statistics show that peasant women were totally absent, while a large section was from the intelligentsia. Kollontai sought the consent of the then united party to organise participation to the Congress. The Petersburg Party Committee opposed her proposal to organise women workers and go for the feminist conference. However, she succeeded in gaining Central Committee endorsement. Rank and file women were more supportive, and the backing of the textile workers eventually led to support from the Saint Petersburg Central Bureau of the Trade Unions. Over 50 preparatory women workers’ meetings were held. Interestingly, at that point of Russian history, the Women’s Congress saw less of a problem with some of the economic demands raised by the working class and socialist women. The real dispute arose around the political demands. The radical feminists argued that a partial suffrage would be a step towards general suffrage, while Kollontai and her comrades stressed that limited suffrage was being used by the bourgeoisie as an antidote to the democratic demands of the working class (Ruthchild 2010: 129–30).

In 1909, Kollontai published her book *The Social Basis of the Woman Question*. Written in response to the Women’s Congress, she was critical of them, but was willing to engage with them in debate. This book came out after the conference, and had interesting points to make. It emphasised the oppressive character of the family and questioned the prevalent RSDRP view that simply getting women into productive work would transform their conditions. At the same time, her analysis stressed that the contemporary state was the protector of “legitimate” marriages and the

family; so, as long as the state remained intact, real liberation for women was impossible (Clements 1979: 57–59).

Real liberation for women, Kollontai argued, could come in a society where the responsibilities of mothers, and the duties of childcare, would be society's collective responsibility. Therefore, her definition of socialism itself envisaged looking at society and politics through a gendered lens.

With liberal feminists, Kollontai had two clear differences. First, liberal feminists were demanding voting rights for women along the same lines as those that men had, which involved property qualifications. Kollontai, however, saw proletarian women as marching with proletarian men against the tsarist state and the bourgeoisie. Second, certain liberal feminists rejected demands for protectionism (crèches, maternity leave, etc) as being opposed to the demand for equality. Kollontai, on the other hand, held that such special measures were essential to make unequals equal, since women were burdened by these duties "not naturally, but due to the social structure. It seems, however, that feminists read and disputed her arguments to a much greater extent than her fellow Social Democrats (Ruthchild 2010: 142–43; Clements 1979: 56–81).

## Organising Women

It was from the Revolution of 1905 that relatively larger groups of women were coming into the party. This shifted the party's orientation for the first time. Feminists were trying to create women-only trade unions. This compelled Marxists to turn more seriously to working-class women. When a few women workers were elected as representatives to the Shidlovsky Commission, appointed by the tsarist government to inquire into the tragedy of Bloody Sunday,<sup>2</sup> the government refused them seats. This led to protests by women workers. In Ivanovo-Voznesensk, around 11,000 women workers took part in a major strike.

Kollontai played an important role in this period. Participating in the inaugural meeting of the Women's Union in 1905, she was appalled at socialist women supporting the liberal feminists (Clements 1979: 44–45). She criticised any idea of feminism transcending class boundaries, and was attacked in response by the liberal feminists. However, after attending a meeting of socialist women in Germany, she was convinced that within the working class, a special effort among women was necessary. But party comrades accused her of showing sympathy towards feminism, which they thought was harmful (Marik 2009: 3550–55). Even among women, Vera Slutskaya, a Bolshevik, opposed Kollontai. But in 1911–12, as the struggles among workers picked up again, the Bolsheviks started to organise women. The lead was taken by women Bolsheviks themselves. When *Pravda* was launched, it occasionally carried items specifically on women. Then, on the initiative of the women Bolsheviks, a journal for women workers was launched.

It has occasionally been claimed that the initiative came from Lenin (Cliff 1987), but this has been contested (Marik 1999: 765–66). The initiative came from Krupskaya, Inessa Armand, Anna Elizarova, Konkordiya Samoilo, and others. The journal was named *Rabotnitsa*. In his letter to his elder sister Elizarova, Lenin wrote that Krupskaya would be writing to her about a proposed women's paper. This has led to the assumption that Lenin must have been the person who took the initiative (Cliff 1987: 101). In reality, Lenin only wrote just one letter to Armand asking her to work for the paper, and another one to his sister Elizarova (Lenin 1964: 143; Elizarova 1923: 63). The word "we" in a letter from Krupskaya in this connection has led writers to assume that she was referring to herself and to Lenin. But Elwood shows that a copy of the letter in the Okhrana archives is signed by Armand along with Krupskaya. The letters of Krupskaya and Armand indicate that they were the ones who thought about the paper seriously, while the funds came partly from Armand's well-to-do friends and partly from money collected by those in the editorial board operating from within Russia (Elwood 1992: 118).

Between Krupskaya and Armand, there was a clear difference in perception. Armand was a feminist, as her

biographer Elwood shows. Krupskaya or Samoiloova were not. But they worked together to collect funds for the journal, with the Bolshevik Central Committee only giving it their formal approval. Krupskaya's article in the first issue looked at how "backward" women were to be mobilised. Armand's article, by contrast, highlighted that the struggle for socialism would be strengthened if women's struggles for rights were supported. *Rabotnitsa* combined articles written by the editors— notably by Krupskaya and Armand, which discussed the situation of women workers and their "double burden" (of housework and childcare in addition to paid employment) as well as their place in the struggle of their class—along with short reports. It is possible to overstress the differences among the editors; so let us also note that generally the paper (it had seven issues in 1914) tended to gloss over abuse that women workers might have faced from male workers, though they recognised that men's attitudes towards women needed to change. Elizarova, co-opted primarily because of her long experience as a professional revolutionary, had a different outlook. The majority of internal editors were arrested before the first issue came out. Elizarova brought out several issues, but was often in conflict with the editors abroad. Her stress on reaching out to "the least conscious women" meant that she tended to omit more theoretical and abstract articles sent by Armand, Krupskaya or Ludmila Stal in favour of stories, poems, and letters from women workers. Moreover, like Kudelli, she was willing to collaborate with Mensheviks, and wanted Kollontai to contribute, while Armand, Krupskaya, and Samoiloova were opposed to it (Turton 2007: 69–70).

In late 1914, some women did come close to the Bolsheviks. Two authors of a major study have noted that the Bolsheviks responded positively to help them improve their educational and organisational skills, though some of the Bolsheviks appear to have remained sceptical about women's ability to organise and shake off their traditional subservience (McDermid and Hillyar 1999: 134–35).

All the way up to 1917, the Bolsheviks were divided. The only article by a male Bolshevik in 1917 on women's issues came from N Glebov. He claimed that, unlike bourgeois women, proletarian women had no demands distinct from men. But Slutskaya and Kollontai, both in the Bolshevik party in 1917, fought for a separate structure within the party for women. While the demand for an autonomous organisation was rejected, mobilising women was recognised as an important task. *Rabotnitsa* was revived.

If we turn to grass roots work, we find complexities developing. In 1905, during the first revolution, demands for minimum wages came up. But the tendency was to demand a lower minimum wage for women than for men. Even in 1917, when trade unions managed to get minimum wages, men received five roubles while women got only four in Petrograd. Only two strikes in Moscow saw the demand of equal pay for women and men being raised (Smith 1994: 141–68).

## Women in the Bolshevik Faction/Party

If only for tactical reasons, both Bolsheviks and Mensheviks attempted to recruit women in the years after 1905 as a result there was growing number of working-class women. We have limited documentation, especially on the Mensheviks. However, despite the scarcity of published sources, women Bolsheviks have to be written about, if only to remove the impression that the women who participated in the various socialist organisations hailed exclusively from the middle or upper classes, especially from the intelligentsia. Even those women who belonged to the intelligentsia— including activists and students who played important organisational roles— often get ignored in dominant narratives.

Nina Agadzhanova was one such woman. She joined the Bolsheviks in 1907 as a student at a time when the first Russian revolution had begun to retreat but the radical pull still remained. In 1914, she was a member of both the Vyborg and the City Party Committee. Arrested and exiled to Siberia, she escaped and was back in Petrograd by 1916, working under an assumed name. Together with her friend Mariia Vydrina, she was involved in organising strikes

and demonstrations of metal and tram workers. Elected by the Vyborg district to the Petrograd Soviet, Agadzhanova continued to organise and participate in struggles all the way up to the October Revolution.

Another woman was Elena Giliarova, who became involved with the Bolsheviks in 1915. She went as a nurse to the Russian–Turkish front, where she also acted as a propagandist for the Bolsheviks among the troops, although she was not yet a member of the party. She formally joined the Bolshevik party in May 1917.

Petronelia Zinchenko came from a very different social background. Born in a poor peasant family, she entered the job market at the age of eight. She had a wide range of work experience, and in 1917 was employed in the naval fortress of Kronstadt making uniforms for soldiers. In 1917 she joined the Bolsheviks and was elected to the Kronstadt Soviet. Able to speak three languages, she was an effective propagandist. In October she played an important role in maintaining contact between Kronstadt and the capital (McDermid and Hillyar 1999: 72–74).

Alekseeva, a woman textile worker, had joined the Bolsheviks in 1909. Sacked for her political work in 1912, she joined a metal factory. Her political activities included collection of funds, distribution of literature, and participation in strikes. The sexist approach of later Soviet writers becomes apparent from how they project the high point of her career in 1917 as one when she served as a lookout and provided tea in a meeting that discussed the October Revolution. They overlook the fact that she participated actively in working-class organisations throughout the year (McDermid and Hillyar 1999: 74).

Anastasia Deviatkina had joined the Bolsheviks in 1904, and she was active right from the first moments in February, organising and leading a demonstration of women workers and soldiers' wives on International Women's Day. Deviatkina was then elected to the local district soviet, and she also played an important role in creating a union of the *soldatki* (wives of soldiers). During October, she was at the Smolny Institute, ensuring regular contact of the headquarters with the entire capital.

Finally, there were women who joined the Bolsheviks in 1917. One such was Liza Pylaeva, who worked in Petrograd from the early part of the war and came into contact with the Bolsheviks through her brother. Joining the party in 1917, she was involved in creating a youth movement.

## The February Revolution, Women and the Bolsheviks

Though 43% of the labour force consisted of women by 1917, lack of gender awareness among men, who headed most unions, meant that organised struggles seldom kept in mind the special conditions of women. Poverty, lack of education, and deskilling due to the double burden meant that “backwardness” did exist among women. But it was not a natural condition. Rather, it was imposed by social hierarchies. Interestingly, we find that when agitations tended to be spontaneous, women raised the issue of sexual assault/harassment quite regularly, as in strikes led by women in 1912 and 1913 in Moscow. But it was only in 1917 and after that the Bolsheviks took this up seriously.

Most general accounts of the revolution of 1917 mention women twice: the start of the February Revolution, and the women's battalion that promised to defend the Provisional Government during the October insurrection. But women were much more active than what this highly biased (and often-repeated) account implies. Feminism-influenced historiography has done much to recover the role of women (Stites 1978; Bobroff 1974; McDermid and Hillyar 1999; Clements 1979; Goldberg Ruthchild 2010). If we move away from century-old narratives that focus only on male workers, considerable changes take place in our portrayal of the revolution. Once we get away from the notion of the revolution as a minority coup and we look at how the masses of workers were reacting, it becomes as important to

look at both women and men. It was because of the growth of female labour force that not only the Bolsheviks but also the Mensheviks attempted to reach out to them in 1914 through papers (such as *Rabotnitsa* and *Golos Rabotnitsy*) meant exclusively for them (McDermid and Hillyar 1999: 141).

As the war continued, working-class unrest grew. From the second half of 1915 strikes were increasing. Food crises, low wages, and inflation hit both women workers and soldiers' wives very hard, and resulted in a heightened political consciousness. Alexander Shlyapnikov (1982: 118), Bolshevik leader and a metal worker, recognised this, though he persisted in assuming that women's actions were apolitical. The strikes saw large-scale involvement of female industrial workers protesting not only over pay and deteriorating conditions of work, but also about the lack of respect shown to them by foremen and employers as well as sexual harassment in the name of search by factory inspectors. But left activists as well as tsarist authorities persisted in drawing a sharp distinction between bread "riots" which they assumed was all that women were capable of and revolutionary struggles. In December 1916 and January 1917 signs of increasing militancy among women workers in various industries were evident. In the munitions plants, wartime conditions had seen an influx of women, though they still remained a minority. In December 1916 many of them agitated, because their pay was considerably lower than the pay of men. In January 1917, women textile workers led a strike for five days (Hasegawa 1981: 201–03).

The International Women's Day strikes of 1917 that toppled tsarism were preceded by a strike among textile workers (mainly women) when a Petrograd mill-owner tried to increase the shift from 12 hours to 13 hours. Some women reacted in the traditionally docile manner and were prepared to go along with the management, but the majority refused and forced the latter to withdraw the directive (McDermid and Hillyar 1999: 146–47). There had been strikes among male metal workers as well. But they had stuck mainly to economic demands. It was precisely the double burden that women faced—working for long hours in the factory, as well as trying to feed their families—which made them turn to "political" militancy. Moreover, it remains unrecognised far too often how during the war many families came to be headed by women. This made women's wages—far from being "supplementary wages"—essential to the survival of families, and hence an important factor behind their politicisation.

So, on 23 February 1917, it was primarily women workers who came out on the streets and urged others to do the same. The slogans the women workers raised indicate they were not waging a purely economic battle. These included "Down with the war," "Down with high prices," and "Bread for the workers." It is also significant that the women did not simply start a "riot." They aimed to persuade workers from other factories, both women and men, to come out on strike. They used violence to do so, which included throwing lumps of ice and snow at windows. If this is seen as a sign of "irrationality," then violently stopping strike-breakers from entering factories is also irrational. Clearly, the men who joined did so because they too felt that ruling-class oppression had gone beyond all limits of toleration. If that is so, then one needs to see women also as part of the vanguard, rather than simply as a "spark" that set the country on fire.

But, as the memoirs of male Bolshevik leaders show, they were not pushing the women beyond a limited degree of militancy. While the Bolsheviks were looking for greater militancy, they were planning on a big show on 1 May. Despite the massive growth of the female labour force, women were being ignored. In fact, it was a few female party members who persuaded the hesitant male leadership to make an effort in the working-class district of Vyborg by holding a meeting on the linked themes of war and inflation. These women, who cooperated with women from the inter-district committee, were part of a circle that had been established by the Bolsheviks in Petrograd in recognition of the growing importance of women workers to the wartime labour movement.

Kayurov, the influential metal worker and leader of Vyborg, appealed to the women on 22 February not to go on strike the next day. When he discovered that they had ignored his appeal, he was upset. He went on to dismiss women as typically emotional, irrational, and undisciplined. Yet, as we have seen, not only did the women display a rationality in the context of the times, but they had been brought together by women on the left, including Nina Agadzhanova and Mariia Vydrina, who organised mass meetings of workers and soldiers' wives, workplace strikes

and mass demonstrations, searches for weapons to arm the crowds, as well as securing the release of political prisoners and setting up first-aid units. Others like Anastasia Deviatkina were also involved, as also some women members of the Mezhraionka, a small left-wing organisation led by Iurenev in Russia and with which were associated Trotsky, Lunacharsky, and a number of others in exile (Lilina et al 1967: 318–19). But the leaflets calling for a general strike also appeared in the names of the Vyborg District Bolsheviks and the Mezhraionka. This suggests that a class and gender combination has to be taken into account (McDermid and Hillyar 1999: 152). Textile workers were proportionately the most mobilised during the five days of the February Revolution, as one early Soviet source suggested (McDermid and Hillyar 1999: 153). Women led demonstrations and confronted soldiers. Bolshevik woman worker Kruglova led the workers of her factory; they faced soldiers of the Novocherkassk regiment and some Cossacks. When an officer told the marchers, “You are being led by a baba [an old hag],” Kruglova responded, “Not a baba, but a sister and a wife of soldiers who are at the front” (Ruthchild 2010: 221). The soldiers and the Cossacks put their guns down at this. The appeal to a gender stereotype was resisted, and the stress on kinship ties caused soldiers to refuse to fire.

However, when the delegates to the soviets were elected, women were numerically far fewer. Skilled men dominated the elections for the Petrograd Soviet and then the factory committees that started coming up a little later. This was true even for industries in which women formed a clear majority of the workforce. There were two main reasons for this: women’s continuing responsibility for household responsibilities, especially with shortages persisting, and a lack of confidence on the part of women themselves, including women’s own lack of self-confidence, as to how far they could carry on sustained “conscious” politics.

## Organising Women after February 1917: Gendering Class Consciousness

Russian radicalism had a feminist current from the 19th century. The revolution of 1905 had seen the emergence of women’s rights organisations of different types. Some feminists, like Anna Kal’manovich, had connections with the socialists. Others, like Anna Miliukova, were liberals. At the founding congress of the Constitutional Democratic Party, she debated in favour of a resolution to include women’s suffrage in the new party’s platform. It was a stormy debate in which she was opposed by her husband, the historian and future leader of the party, Pavel Miliukov (Ruthchild 2010: 65). The first All-Russia Women’s Congress, in which Kollontai’s participation has been discussed earlier, was organised and attended mainly by the liberal women. While a range of positions were adopted, the struggle for the suffrage was their central plank. But the dominant position, led by women who were Constitutional Democrats, called for a limited suffrage, leading to the Social Democratic walkout.

The liberals, who had detested any idea of revolution, now stepped forward to form a provisional government. The moderate socialists of the Menshevik, Socialist Revolutionary (SR), and Popular Socialist parties accepted this government, since according to their schema, this was a bourgeois democratic revolution in which the bourgeoisie should lead.

This Provisional Government started working on the project of elections to a Constituent Assembly. It lifted restrictions on Jews and took some other actions. However, when the government’s programme was announced on 3 March, there was no reference to women’s suffrage. Alexander Kerensky, the only socialist minister in the first Provisional Government, asserted on 11 March that women’s suffrage would have to wait for the Constituent Assembly’s decision, for this was too vast a change to be undertaken immediately. In response, the Women’s League organised a huge demonstration of women in Petrograd. While “universal suffrage” had been promised, there had been a refusal to explicitly state that the “universal” included all women too. The demonstration, nearly 40,000 strong, moved down Nevskii Prospekt, Petrograd’s main street, to the Tauride Palace, which was the seat of both the government and the Petrograd Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies. They first met and put pressure on the

Soviet, whose leaders, after some pressure, promised to support women's rights. Prince Lvov, the head of the Provisional Government, accepted their demand for suffrage after the second delegation led by the veteran revolutionary Vera Figner, who had recently been released from jail. Yet the right to vote was formalised only in July (Ruthchild 2010: 223–29).

A sidelight of the 19 March demonstration was the refusal of the feminists to allow Alexandra Kollontai to speak. Indeed, when she tried to speak, she was pushed off the steps of the Tauride Palace by some women. This is also worth remembering when socialists alone are condemned for being opposed to the (liberal or bourgeois) feminists. However, the success of this demonstration, one in which not an inconsiderable number of workers participated, possibly played a role in convincing socialist leaders of the value of what their women comrades were saying.

During 1917, the untiring work of women Bolsheviks led to tens of thousands of women workers joining the party, coming into the trade union movement, and bringing a gender sensitivity into the struggle for socialism. Immediately after the formation of the first Provisional Government under Prince Lvov, the Menshevik–SR alliance which then dominated within the working class brokered a class truce.

Bolshevik women would work in two areas to break through this. Although both the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet leadership recognised that inflation and food shortages were issues of crucial significance, they did nothing about them. So long as the war was on, these problems could not be resolved; but the bourgeois Provisional Government would not end the war and the Mensheviks and SRs would not go further than the Provisional Government. But women started raising their voices soon. Soldiers' wives started protesting about the lack of any improvement. On 11 April, a huge demonstration of these women went to the Tauride Palace, where sat the Soviet, showing that they trusted the Soviet rather than the Provisional Government. But the Menshevik leader Dan, on behalf of the Soviet, scolded them for demanding money when the treasury was empty. Dan also refused to allow Kollontai, a member of the Soviet, to speak to the women. Kollontai spoke to them nonetheless, albeit unofficially, and urged them to elect their own delegates to the Soviet.

From this point on, Bolshevik women were playing a major role among the *soldatki*. The first strike to break through the "civil peace" was a strike by close to 40,000 women laundry workers, demanding an eight-hour day and a minimum wage. They were unionised and led by Bolshevik women like Goncharova, Novi-Kondratyeva and Sakharova. The strike won a partial victory after a month. By then, the first Provisional Government had collapsed, largely over its war aims (which were expansionist), and some leading Mensheviks and SRs from the Soviet had entered a coalition government with former Duma members [3] determined to continue with the war effort. To this government, the laundresses' action was an irritant that endangered their plans for the country. Organising the laundresses was difficult, since they were scattered throughout the city, rather than working in large or even medium-sized factories. The Bolshevik press reported the strike regularly, and clearly saw it as a model of militancy. All this indicated a *de facto* shift in the attitude of the Bolsheviks to women workers. Women would be engaged in struggles in other sectors too. They were particularly demanding wage rises, improved working conditions (particularly sanitary), maternity benefits, and the abolition of child labour. They were also sharply angered at the sexual harassment they faced in the workplace, and demanded an end to body searches (Figs 1996: 368).

When Lenin returned from exile, one of his early supporters inside the Bolshevik party was Kollontai. It is to be noted that Lenin was initially in a minority in the leadership levels of the party, both in terms of his ideas on strategy of revolution and even on the question of unity with the Mensheviks. For, when he returned, the Bolsheviks were in fact in the middle of discussions with the Mensheviks over the possibility of unity. Kollontai was also one of the first to propose the setting up of women's bureaus.

## Resistance to Separate Organisational

## Structure for Women

The Bolsheviks agreed to some form of separate work among women for practical reasons. Their rivals in the socialist movement, the Mensheviks, and the SRs were initially recruiting rapidly, while the Bolsheviks, with their insistence on a minimum degree of political education before a worker could be recruited, were lagging behind. So separate work among women was deemed necessary for Bolshevik party development. But there was still considerable resistance to special work, particularly on the issue of a separate organisational structure for women. Leading Bolshevik women such as Krupskaya, Kollontai, Samoilova, Stal, and Slutskaya insisted that such theoretical purity was holding back the class struggle on two counts: first, in not recognising that women were a force to be reckoned with and building on their militancy was vital; second, however, despite their militancy, women workers were backwardâ€”in terms of political consciousness and organisational experienceâ€”in comparison to men. Of these women, Kollontai was certainly the most outstanding. But she was not as isolated and unique as some of her early bio-graphies tended to suggest (Farnsworth 1980; Porter 1980).

More recent work, studying other women (McDermid and Hillyar 1999; Clements 1997; Turton 2007) has stressed that a large group of women were working together. Vera Slutskaya had made similar suggestions even before Kollontai returned to Russia. But it is undeniable that there was a Bolshevik fear of feminism/separatism (the two being seen as identical). So, instead of an organisation such as a bureau, what the party agreed to was the revival of *Rabotnitsa*, and work among women through the journal. However, the 19 March demonstration showed that the world would not sit still if the Bolsheviks did not intervene, and this probably gave a push. A militant woman tram worker named Rodionova gave three days' wages to kick-start the paper. This was at a meeting where 800 roubles were collected. From this point, the editors started roping her in for work with the paper, getting her to run errands for it, and eventually to write in it. Through this process she eventually became a party member.

Samoilova conducted classes among women. Krupskaya, a little after her return to Russia, turned to work in the educational and youth sectors in a working-class district of Petrograd (Vyborg). Her biographer R H McNeal (1973: 73) suggests that this was because she felt that Lenin's line of calling for a socialist revolution was doubtful. This was based on a conception of the Bolshevik strategy that transforms it into a plot for a coup. In fact, political education was essential, if the revolution was indeed to be the self-emancipation of the working class.

*Rabotnitsa*, regardless of individual opinions of members, played a vital role in gendering class consciousness. On the one hand, they challenged the stereotypes about women. On the other, the kind of articles and reports that came out showed that male and female workers did not have identical demands and did not face identical forms of exploitation. Bolsheviks also recognised that patriarchal attitudes were not only dividing the class, but were also being used by male workers to position themselves against women in the name of family needs, though there were, in fact, many women who headed families as well. So, as the year wore on, gender became an issue that had to be taken up across classes, and not just with women workers. The Bolsheviks fought to get representation for women in the factory committees, which of course meant persuading men to vote for women. From June, there were calls from male workers' representatives to deal with job losses and lay-offs by protecting men's jobs at the expense of women's, supposedly because women's wages were supplementary while men were the principal breadwinners. The Bolsheviks and the metal workers' union jointly fought this, but they stressed upon class unity rather than gender equality (McDermid and Hillyar 1999: 168).

Women workers were aware of the problems they faced. Tsvetskova, a woman in the tannery industry, wrote in a trade union journal that if socialism did not take women's voices into account, it would create a society with negative attitudes towards women. Another woman, A Ilyina, writing in *Tkach*, the journal of the textile workers' union, pointed out that male workers could attend meetings or go for a stroll after work, while women had to undertake household drudgery. She associated the latter with the Russian word "barshchina" for "drudgery," which meant the labour of a serf (Smith 1986: 155-73).

After the July Days [4] the Bolshevik Party was under attack. Lenin was slanderously accused of having taken German gold. He had to go into hiding. Trotsky and a number of others were arrested. Pravda had to be shut down. For a time, the party depended on Rabotnitsa.

Following the July Days there came the military rout, and then the attempt by General Kornilov to carry out a coup. These resulted in increasing popular discontent with the Provisional Government, in which the Mensheviks and the SRs were now fully integrated; it was headed now by Kerensky, and no longer Prince Lvov. As a result, support for the Bolsheviks increased, including among women workers. Women fought together with men to repel the general's forces, building barricades and organising medical aid by forming the Red Sisters (McDermid and Hillyar 1999: 179).

The liberal feminists' position was the very opposite. They supported the war. A section of these women saw joining the army and fighting for the war as the key issue of equality. But this led to an increase in the gulf between these bourgeois (or intelligentsia) women and the mass of working-class, lower-petty-bourgeois, and peasant women who wanted an end to the war. Maria Bochkareva, a woman who was a committed patriot and one who had served as a soldier in the war, petitioned the Provisional Government to set up women's military units in May 1917. This received immediate support mainly from upper-class women. Bochkareva herself did not see this as another way of championing the women's cause, but many feminists did. A women's battalion was formed. Feminists such as Olga Nechaeva and Ariadna Tyrkova tried to build on Bochkareva's May initiative by proposing to the Prime Minister that women aged between 18 and 45 be drafted into state service, in order to replace men who could then be available for military conscription. Of the 3,000 troops based in the Winter Palace in Petrograd to protect ministers of the Provisional Government, approximately 200 were from the women's battalion. By then, the government had become so isolated that there was little confidence in its survival. And, in a war-weary Russia, the attitude of working-class women towards this battalion was one of contempt and not sisterhood. However, the charge of mass rape of the members of the Battalion of Death has been contested by historians like Stites, though three women are said to have been sexually assaulted (Shukman 1988: 36).

## Stereotypes Challenged

In November 1917, Kollontai, Samoilova, and others organised a meeting of women workers to discuss the elections to the Constituent Assembly, in which there were over 500 delegates elected by over 80,000 women in 70 preparatory meetings. Thus, as the October insurrection was setting up a new order, there was also the recognition that a separate structure for women was not separatism but a dire necessity. At the same time, the Bolsheviks did not take a position that women were incapable of fighting. Rather, they were stressing the question of which class and which goal the women should fight for. While numerically a minority, armed women in the Red Guards were considerably more numerous than the women fighting for the counter-revolution. Slutskaiia played a key role in organising the rising in the Moscow district of Petrograd, as L R Menzhinskaia and D A Lazurkina did in the First City district and A I Kruglova in the Okhta district. The Party's youth workers Liza Pylaeva and Evgeniia Gerr were members of the Red Guards. The tram conductor, Rodionova, who had hidden 42 rifles and other weapons in her depot after the July Days, was responsible in October for making sure that two tramloads of machine guns went off for the storming of the Winter Palace (McDermid and Hillyar 1999: 185–86). This would lay the foundation for the significant numbers of women who would join the Red Army in 1918–20. During 1917–20, then, stereotypes were challenged and, even if in a minority, women played a notable part in the revolution.

Though a study of events beyond 1917 lies outside the purview of this essay, we need to emphasise that the early years of the revolution saw major strides forward. This is reflected not only in lawmaking but also in practical ways in which attempts were made to address women's rights, the question of substantive equality, the issue of marginal sexualities and so on, despite a civil war and in the face of tremendous difficulties. However, at no stage was this an unchallenged process. Goldman and Wood have different assessments of the early years, but both agree that by the

end of the 1920s there was a clear decline in space for women. Yet it would be an error to write off Bolshevism as gender blind, or to assume that Bolshevik support for women's causes were purely instrumentalist. Sharp conflicts occurred in the 1920s, and women's rights also figured there. This becomes apparent when one looks at the attempt made to transform the society of the Central Asian states with large Islamic populations, the new family law and the debates surrounding it, issues concerning peasants and land during discussions on the New Economic Policy, or the question of gender equality within the party. Rather, it is necessary to look at the rise of the new Soviet bureaucracy, and see gender as one of the areas where the retreat was carried out early (Marik 2008: 419–27, 487–88; Goldman 1993: 337).

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[1] See, for example, Blackledge (2010).

[2] On 9 January 1905 by the Russian calendar (22 January by the Gregorian calendar), unarmed working-class demonstrators were fired upon by the Imperial Guards while they were marching towards the Winter Palace to present a petition to the Tsar. The demonstration of about 50,000 was repeatedly fired upon, and estimates of the casualties range from 1,000 killed and wounded to 4,000 killed. Bloody Sunday, as the day came to be called, transformed the image of tsarism in Russia, and led to popular unrest across the country. The revolution of 1905 was triggered by Bloody Sunday, and saw, by the summer of 1906, about 15,000 workers and peasants executed and 45,000 persons sent off into exile (Sablinsky 1976; Ascher 2004; Trotsky 1971; Harcave 1964).

[3] Duma refers to the lower house of the elected legislature established after the revolution of 1905, which lasted from 1906 to 1917.

[4] The July Days saw a semi-insurrection that began against the advice of the Bolsheviks, which the latter continued to support because they felt that abandoning workers and soldiers would be a big mistake. It ended in a confused retreat and a rout.