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SSP

Reaching Beyond the Fragments

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

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Pam Currie came into politics through the vigil for a Scottish Parliament, which was maintained for several years in Edinburgh. She was an active member of Scottish Militant Labour, the Scottish Socialist Alliance and subsequently the SSP. Here she gives a socialist and feminist analysis of the challenges facing the SSP.

I'm writing this article not as a member of the ISM [1], but as a former member, one of a number of women activists in the SSP who have either left the ISM in the last few years, or who have chosen not to join at all.

While we would all no doubt cite very different reasons for our decisions, there does appear to be a common thread - the debate on 50:50 gender representation on the Scottish Parliament regional lists, and the ISM's theoretical and practical attitudes towards women's equality.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/29ssy-2.jpg>]

This article draws on my own experiences at various times as a member of SML and the CWI International, and latterly the ISM and SSP. References to 'the Left' in are intended in terms of the traditional British Left, as I believe the issues apply to most democratic centralist organisations, with a few key exceptions such as the ISG [2] and the Australian DSP [3], which come from a different background and have a quite different political culture.

While the SSP is clearly different to any of these organisations, our activist base, and the activist base of any new Marxist platform, is still largely influenced by the culture of 'the Left'.

What then, is the problem? If the 50:50 debate was simply a disagreement about an electoral mechanism - an organisational issue - why should it still be such a bone of contention among party activists four years on? Are feminist ideas relevant in 2005, in the SSP, and does a new Marxist platform also need to be a feminist platform?

This is clearly a political debate, going far beyond an organisational discussion about an electoral mechanism. It is not simply a question of how we (re)involve women in the ISM or its successors; it is about how we as Marxists relate to feminist ideas, about how we theorise the oppression of women and about how we create a socialist vision, which encompasses the emancipation of women.

Sexism and the Left

We live in a society that is fundamentally unequal, and which oppresses women on the basis of their gender as well as their class. We know this; we are familiar with at least some of the theory, and many of us have protested at Cornton Vale and debated issues such as prostitution and abortion at Conference. Good for us... but it's not enough.

The SSP - and the ISM as a platform - has a progressive programme on women's issues. The party has a vibrant women's network, and we have made great advances from socialist groups in the past. Society has changed; sexist language is far less acceptable, and individuals are coming to socialist politics with more progressive attitudes towards gender equality than was perhaps the case in the past.

Yet a quick glimpse around an ISM meeting or most party branches indicates that this is not in itself enough to

produce large numbers of women prepared to participate in socialist politics - at least in the sense of attending meetings, 'leading off' in debates, and so forth. The problem is deeper than an organisational issue and less explicit than overt sexism - it's about the wider culture of the Left, a problem that we have largely failed to deal with in the past.

These problems are outlined in *Beyond the Fragments*, a book written more than 25 years ago by three women activists, Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright. While their accounts relate to the IS (now the SWP), the IMG (the Fourth International) and 'Big Flame', a libertarian socialist-feminist group, many of the points made relate directly to women activists' experiences in the SSP today, from speakers' [unconscious] ego-tripping to debates about education, activism and theory, encompassing the range of barriers that stand in the way of women's participation in socialist politics.

No Easy Answers

While some of these problems are organisational in nature, these issues - whether it be organising a crèche, or mechanisms to ensure gender balance on a committee - are also political. A new platform must take on board questions such as where we meet, breaking out of the 'men's space' of pub back rooms, and how we run our meetings.

These issues are political because they are about our consciousness of women's oppression and its insidious nature. No platform or party can operate outside of the culture in which it finds itself, leaving deep-seated prejudices at the door as we come in. As we know all too well from the 50:50 debate, there are no easy answers, but acknowledging the existence of a problem is in itself a huge step forward, and this debate at least forced the question of how the party relates to women into the open.

A new, regrouped Marxist platform must take on board the current debates within the party on political education. The tradition of a lengthy, theoretical 'lead-off' discourages not just many women but younger members and the less experienced.

A solid educational strategy is crucial to raising women's confidence and participation, but education on whose terms? Theory in isolation is of little use without the ability to apply ideas to the here and now. In turn this depends on having the confidence to question, to argue and to put forward a case. These skills are often discouraged in girls and women from an early age.

Equally vital is an understanding of the history of earlier revolutionary struggles, but far too often this 'history' is recorded by men, about men. Willie Gallacher's *Revolt on the Clyde* is an inspiring account of trade union struggle in Red Clydeside, yet the part played by women rent strikers is marginalised to a few paragraphs. If his comrade John McLean had been Jean, would we even know her name?

'Merit'

Rowbotham argues that in the past the (almost invariably male) holders of theoretical knowledge have been placed on pedestals by the Left. Our ideas, our concept of what 'knowledge' is and our understanding of the skills needed to build a revolutionary party all reflect the capitalist society in which we live, our socialisation, upbringing and education.

How do we define a 'good activist', a 'cadre'? When we talk about selecting candidates for public office or internal structures on the basis of 'merit', on whose terms do we define merit? The skills and qualities expected of our leaders and activists, from the structure of debates to the way we communicate, our approach to education and public work - have overwhelmingly been defined by male theoreticians on their terms.

How do we move forwards from this point? To say that 'women would do things better' or that 'men are authoritarian' is over-simplistic and unhelpful. There are many women from these traditions who see nothing wrong with democratic centralist organisations, or with the methods of the past.

Equally, there are significant numbers of women who opposed 50:50, just as there are male SSP members who supported it fully, from a feminist perspective, and who recognise that something is 'not right' about the current situation of the ISM and its dearth of women members.

We cannot blame individual members for being influenced by a wider culture; it is not a question of absolving oneself of guilt for our deep-rooted expectations and prejudices, but of acknowledging firstly their existence and secondly their effect on our approach to revolutionary politics. We know from experience that past attempts to brush them aside and ignore them on the basis that 'socialists should not have such views' or that 'there is nothing that can be done in this society' do not work and simply reinforce the barriers.

Nor is it a question of rejecting out of hand the methods of the past. The men (and handful of women) who led the Left historically made valuable, essential contributions, without which the SSP in its current form would not exist, but the culture they created has restricted the thinking of organisations and development of new ideas, with a particular impact upon women members and would-be members.

Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky are rightly the keystones of our Marxist perspective, but they were not omniscient. While the Bolshevik revolution delivered huge advances for working class women in Russia, many of these historical 'greats' did not fully take on board the question of women's oppression.

Alexandra Kollontai, the sole woman on the Bolshevik Central Committee in 1917, attempted to put forward ideas encompassed half a century later in the slogan of the 'personal is political'. Her attempts to theorise women's oppression in the family and in personal relationships were fiercely criticised by her male contemporaries and were eventually submerged by the advances of Stalinism.

Clearly, the position of women in Scotland in 2005 is quite different from that in Russia or internationally in 1917. Young women today appear to be in an enviable position - the first generation to expect economic independence from husbands and fathers as the norm, better educated and with fewer restrictions than any generation before. Yet despite these advances, women of all ages still face oppression, violence and double standards.

The right to control our own reproduction is again under attack, while a recent survey not only confirmed the 15% gap between average male and female full time earnings in Scotland, but reported that nearly 1 in 3 of the women asked thought that they would never achieve equal pay. Bombarded by the message that feminism is past its sell-by-date, women's consciousness is lower now than for generations, and young women have retreated to a position where oppression is accepted as 'normal'.

Raising Consciousness

Raising consciousness on women's equality is the job of all socialists. Women's emancipation is not a 'middle class' deviation from main stage of the class struggle - it's inseparable from this struggle, and a class revolution that did not also address the fundamental inequality and oppression of women could not be a socialist revolution.

While the Women's Network has a vital role to play, a new platform will be equally important in shaping the political direction of the party. Women's issues and discussions around feminism are not solely the concern of women comrade, and we need a space in the party for discussion and education around socialist feminist ideas, for women and men.

If we are to avoid the mistakes of the Left in the past, a new Marxist platform should also be a feminist platform, and should be at the forefront of raising feminist debate in the party.

Many comrades will squirm uncomfortably when the f-word is used. The backlash against feminist ideas has not only been anti-women, it has cauterised political, socialist feminism, turning IWD into a fluffy celebration and presenting gender inequality as a 'battle for the boardroom' rather than the concern of the low paid mother struggling with childcare.

As socialists we need to reclaim 'feminism' from the chattering classes, to re-politicise IWD through demonstrations like Cornton Vale and take back our proud history of socialist feminism, from Alexandra Kollontai to the rent strikers on Red Clydeside and the National Abortion Campaign in the 1970s. Feminism is not a dirty word - it's a word we need to use much more often.

Personal is Political

The recent crisis in the party provides a useful example of the need for feminist ideas. While many of the discussions on the News of the World and the Executive's decision were peppered with references to 'bourgeois morality', we should be wary of confusing 'bourgeois morality' with principled support for women's liberation and opposition to the oppression of women in our society, inside the party or outside.

The slogan of 'the personal is political' rings as true as ever today - revolutionary politics isn't just about a meeting once a month, it's about our consciousness in every aspect of our lives, our conduct and the application of our political ideas - and attitudes towards women are inseparable from this.

Beyond the Fragments ends with a call to challenge women's self-subordination, the 'acceptance of a secondary role, which underpins most forms of oppression and exploitation', a call as relevant today as it was in 1979. This problem will not fix itself, and it is one that we must tackle if we are not to be having the same discussions in another quarter of a century.

I would welcome a new Marxist platform in the SSP, but any such platform must deal head on with feminist theory and our attitudes towards women, making a decisive break with the culture that has held us back until now.

This article was first published in [Frontline](#).

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[1] The International Socialist Movement, the Marxist tendency to which many leading members of the SSP belong.

[2] The International Socialist Group, the British section of the Fourth International. (The Fourth International developed its thinking on these issues in a [resolution on Positive Action](#) adopted at its 13th World Congress in 1991 - IV eds)

[3] The Democratic Socialist Perspective (formerly Party) a key component of the Australian Socialist Alliance and the leading force in the paper Green Left Weekly