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Women and party

Sanctions policy in a feminist party

- Features - Sexual politics -

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The following criteria of internal sanctions in the party, in regard to oppression of women, were approved at the VI National Congress, held from the 1st to the 5th of November 1989 in Mexico.

The present document is a contribution from the PRT Women's Commission to the thinking about a sanctions policy in relation to women's oppression. We thought it was especially important to start the thinking in writing now, since we decided at our last congress to initiate new efforts to make this a feminist party. We believe that, since our last congress, women militants have been feeling more confident about denouncing cases of aggression against them, which motivates us to make the following observations with an eye to continuing to deepening the discussion begun two years ago.

A party like ours, whose revolutionary principles include a feminist perspective, finds itself up against challenges and contradictions when trying to set norms and rules about internal functioning. When we join a revolutionary party we usually assume a certain world view, implicit in our principles, and that becomes an accepted common identity, establishing therefore in practice a social form of control between the members of the revolutionary party. This social control is found in our party norms and bylaws, and is enforced fundamentally by the control commission, and by all other party bodies. This is where sanctions come in to the picture. And this is why they are accepted by the militants as a necessity.

There are certain values that have historically been accepted by Marxists regarding a revolutionary activist's behaviour. Nevertheless, when confronted with feminist questioning, we have fewer common values, due to several reasons, including for instance, the youthfulness of the mass feminist movement (with respect to the revolutionary movement). The changes in behaviour and in values that feminism proposes are not accepted by society as a whole, nor by all revolutionaries, because they are part of what has historically been considered as private. For that reason, creating norms for party life using feminist criteria is no easy task. We know that it is not a matter of giving recipes or models for life. The search for new men and women is just that: a search. We know that the total liberation of both men and women is not possible in the capitalist system, but precisely that is one of the contributions of our internationalist current, to recognize the necessity of struggling for change, starting today. We do not assume the cynical attitude that says "we can't change this today; it will change under socialism." Our revolutionary commitment is to fight for change starting today, however painful this process might be, and with all of its contradictions. After all, the lives of revolutionary men and women are not characterized by their comfort.

In our new revolutionary Marxist current, we have a conception of feminism as a movement that seeks profound change, the subversion of the established order. We do not limit ourselves to assuring women access to careers, professions, posts, rank, encouragement, resources, etc. Our feminist struggle is not simply for formal equality, but to revolutionize gender relations, as a whole, between men and women. It is for this reason that our feminist conception includes also the private sphere. Our purpose is to feminize both the public and the "private."

Women's oppression is expressed in a fundamental way in the private sphere. To us, the private sphere is not only the home and intra-family relationships, but fundamentally the whole aspect of male and female identity in which the relationships linked with gender domination are felt the most deeply and painfully. Centuries of training for both men and women are concentrated in the formation of the differing male and female identities. To change this is no easy task, but let us hope it does not take us yet again as many centuries.

We considered it necessary to start with these observations in order to put the complexity of women's oppression in

that framework, and to call attention to the need deepen our understanding without using clichés about women's oppression and liberation. Also we think it's important to explain why we say that the party is not an island, neither men nor women militants can really liberate themselves individually or in groups. We live with the contradiction of fighting every day for a new world, against the current of the rest of society, as well as in relation to ourselves.

The greatest problem is that, regardless of the difficulties implied in our reality, we have to establish certain social, internal control in regards to gender relations. In this field we have taken several important steps forward, if we take into account the adverse context. Affirmative action, and minimum quotas in the leadership are two important measures towards building a feminist revolutionary party.

Nevertheless, there are other aspects of party building where it is more difficult to apply feminist criteria. Social control to protect women militants against aggression by male comrades is not commonly accepted. In other words, feminizing the public sphere (access for women to the leadership, delegates, etc.) is less problematic than feminizing the private sphere. The biggest problem is that that is where we find the worst of women's oppression.

We think that we, as militants of both sexes, have to make serious efforts to change our behaviour and our ideas, but this is obviously a long and sinuous process. In no way do we think it is a matter of finding the answers in recipe books or department manuals, and therefore neither do we believe that the establishing of sanctions would be a solution in itself to the problems of oppression. We don't like to reduce the issue to "crime and punishment" or exemplary punishments, nor do we think that people learn by fear. But then, what do we do?

First of all we recognize the need for sanctions. The sanctions are necessary to preserve the party, and this includes the women. Minimum norms of respect are required among militants, minimal norms of interacting, which give women a place to act politically in our country, with certain confidence. We believe that these minimal norms can be listed in three categories: Violence (threats and blows), sexual violence (harassment and rape) and sexist verbal aggression (sexist remarks against comrades). Of course all of these categories can be broken down a bit more, and they require different levels and kinds of sanctions, but we consider them to be the minimum aspects around which each man and women in the PRT should establish rules for working together. If we fail to regulate these three aspects, women would be left completely unprotected in our life in the party. The sanctions are a defensive action so that we, as women can remain in the party with at least minimum conditions guaranteed.

Since we don't see this issue as a matter of crime and punishment, we know that, in order to minimize the aggressions against women within the party, it is necessary to do other things other than just to sanction. It is fundamentally a matter of ideological struggle, we are consciously trying to combat patriarchal ideology, its value system, its customs, etc. For this purpose, we need to seriously discuss in an organized way, the different aspects of gender oppression in relation to what is called private life: sexuality, subjectivity, maternity-paternity, etc.

The party can in no way regulate our militants' intimacy; we are not a police force to regulate the thinking and sentiments of our cadre. That is a practice of Stalinism and Nazism, which does not belong in our revolutionary Marxist conceptions. But it is obvious that, in order for us to really undertake the gender question, the party must discuss personal and subjective questions, trying to establish equilibrium among three aspects: the objective conditions in the society, the respect for individuality each person's individual process, and the questioning of the private sphere, showing up its political and social nature. We also need to take into account the different levels of consciousness among militants in the party, so that we can situate our measures in the contradictory reality within the PRT.

This means that we need to integrate the discussion of these issues into the party life and into cadre education. We have to create materials and methods for the education appropriate for different levels, but most importantly, the leadership must make together with the women's commission must make a commitment to organize the discussion.

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It is fundamental for the whole leadership to be involved, because the issue in question is to eradicate the notion that women's oppression a women's problem. The responsibility of feminizing the party belongs to us all. What is clear is that we as women require certain balance of forces so that the gender question can be present at all times. Obviously, for this to happen, we need to have an active women's movement in our country, but we also need to create discussion space for women where there is none, and where there is, we must strengthen it.

We don't want there to be just a few specialized feminists, but for all the women in the PRT to find a gender identity, and for that to happen, we need to discuss among us. The experience of Central Committee women is an important step forward, but we need to go deeper in our search for a better balance of forces.

We think that we will better our balance of forces and our self-confidence when we begin discussing our oppression as women in our base committees. Sometimes this is more effective than a sanction. We need to go much deeper in our discussion regarding the different levels of consciousness inside and outside the party. It is important to discuss about how militants should act in the mass movement, and try to explain what we understand as militant feminist conduct in the mass movement, without being violently confrontational.

We have confidence in the PRT, just as we also trust that it is possible for the men and women within it to initiate a profound change. We want this VI Congress to mark one more step on the road we started to build at our last congress.