

Women, class and oppression

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Women in Australia today face a contradiction. In 1969 the Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission granted equal pay. In 1972 it said women should receive 'equal pay for work of equal value', to stop employers classifying women's work differently from virtually identical work done by men. Yet the gap between women and men's full-time earnings is widening again. Full time women workers earn on average just over 80 per cent of men's wages and if all workers are compared, the figure drops to 67 per cent.¹

Sex discrimination legislation and Equal Employment Opportunity schemes abound, yet women's bodies are, if anything, more openly used as sex objects in popular culture and advertising than they were fifty years ago. Women are concentrated on the lower rungs of career structures. Griffith University in 1999 was typical. Women made up 62 per cent of general staff and 35 per cent of academic staff. But they were mainly employed at the lower levels of career structures. Women were 86 per cent of the lowest level of general staff, but only 29 per cent of the top level; and academic women were 55 per cent of the lowest level and only 14 per cent of the top level.² Since the 1970s, it has been assumed that women were on the verge of smashing through the 'glass ceilings' to take top jobs. But the huge obstacles to women's career progress, beyond a certain point, still exist. In October 2001, only 162 of the 3 312 board positions in Australia's top 500 corporations were held by women, just 4.89 per cent. 'Rather than glass ceilings, women are confronted with closed doors... Doors of wood, not glass.'³

Structural factors 'keep women in their place'; they are reinforced by bigotry and prejudice at the highest levels. Public figures and opinion makers feel at liberty to denigrate women. In early 2004, the Education Minister, Brendan Nelson, and Prime Minister, John Howard, campaigned against the predominance of women in the teaching profession, claiming that this damages children. They felt sufficiently confident about their biases to attempt to change the Sex Discrimination Act so that schools could offer male-only teaching scholarships. In justification, they invoked the 'crisis of masculinity', the subject of a much reported speech by Labor leader, Mark Latham in February 2004.

The right of women to safe, legal abortion had 65 per cent support in 1998, with only 25 per cent opposed.⁴ Yet politicians have long lagged behind this recognition of women's right to control their own bodies. In 2004, federal Health Minister, Tony Abbott, regularly attacked women's right to abortion. And public figures regularly feel confident to attack women's right to use IVF, because they are lesbians or 'too old'.

In 1961 only 25 per cent of women were in the paid work force; in 2003 it was 56 per cent. This change in the material circumstances of women has helped change attitudes to women's roles in society. In 1971 78 per cent of married women agreed with the statement that motherhood was their most important role in life; by 1991 only 31 per cent agreed. Only one in five respondents among women and men agreed that a married woman should not attach much importance to a career. And over half the men and nearly two thirds of women in the same survey agreed that 'a working mother can establish just as warm and secure relationship with her children as a mother who does not work.'⁵ These changed attitudes have not translated into progressive government policy. The Howard government blatantly favoured women who stayed home with their children over those in paid work, through tax incentives and hand-outs. Comparing two families with an income of \$70 000,

On Senator Vanstone's own figures the double income family is \$2 400 a year *worse off* than the single income family. So the low-paid working woman is not helped as much

by the government as the stay-at-home wife of the rich man who is subsidised by the taxpayers because the prime minister approves her lifestyle. How fair is that?⁶

The changes were precisely designed to promote and entrench the stereotype of the male breadwinner with a dependent mother and children at home.

These policies fit neatly with the neo-liberal agenda that has dominated government thinking since the mid-1970s. They are not just the preserve of bigoted men. Conservative women such as Bettina Arndt (in *The Age*) and Angela Shanahan (in the *Canberra Times*) have columns in which to campaign against single mothers and women who work, to promote schemes to force more women to have babies and to pontificate against feminism.⁷

Women have, however, made some real gains in the last three to four decades. Until 1967 women could not sit on juries, they were regarded as so inferior to men. Abortions were illegal, terrifying and even deadly until well into the 1970s. Contraception was almost non-existent before the late sixties, but women who 'fell' pregnant outside marriage were so ostracised that adoption was a common, if distressing, option. During the pregnancy, many young women did unpaid housework for middle class families, who provided a place for them to hide themselves in disgrace from family and friends who would never know of their 'downfall'. Reforms in the early 1970s were significant steps forward for women. They included the removal of illegitimacy from the law; the establishment of a supporting mother's (later parent's) benefit; changes to practices in the public service, which had meant that women were expected to resign on marriage; and the belated recognition of rape in marriage as a crime in the 1980s.

So there have been genuine gains, making the campaigns for women's rights worth every minute of organising, rallying, protesting, striking, picketing, or arguing by hundreds of thousands of women and men.

But when footballers were accused of sexual violence and rape in early 2004 the response of the clubs and many media commentators highlighted how far we still have to go in the struggle against women's oppression. The clubs seemed to think it was a tragedy for the *men* accused of the crime. Pages of newspapers and hours of TV and radio time were devoted to the clubs' trauma, and the possible damage to the 'game'. Hardly a word about the trauma of the women.

Damien Foster coaches elite sportsmen in 'life skills'. His language set the tone. To him, women are 'girls'; the classic sexist trivialising of adult women, signalling that they don't need to be treated with the same respect accorded men. And they are calculating and predatory. *The Age* gave this misogynist prominent space to perpetuate the sexist myths that help men justify rape, like his accusation that women make up allegations out of spite: 'Girls are, by nature, emotionally more sophisticated ... When the girl realises the total indifference with which she is being treated after intimacy [on a one-night stand], bitterness sets in and it lingers.'⁸

Traditions associated with sport play a big part in sustaining sexist attitudes to women. But it is only one aspect of the wider sexist culture. The sexual stereotype of the male go-getter and the passive, loving female available as his sex object and domestic chattel are still strong. Politicians like Abbott, Howard and Nelson promote them. So do the writings of columnists such as Arndt, who give the arguments an academic, pseudo sociological gloss. Combined with women's very real inequality, such stereotypes encourage men to believe that women have no rights in relationships. Women who do not fit the stereotype are demonised as 'whores', another justification for ill treatment. These two complementary attitudes feed violence. In the case of the football rape scandal, the press, politicians, prominent sports people, commentators--in other words, opinion-makers in our society--propagated ideas that, rather than condemning sexual violence towards women, helped *justify* it. Is it any wonder, when young men are taught 'life skills' by the likes of Damien Foster, that a survey in South Australia found that 31 per cent of men aged 15 to 25 thought it was 'okay for a male to force a female to have sex' in one or more of a range of situations put to

them; for instance, if she had had sex before, she was stoned or drunk, or she seemed interested in sex to begin with.⁹

In 2004 government funded booklets and TV ads urged men to recognise their violent behaviour towards women for what it is: a crime. The hypocrisy was breathtaking, given the statements of Howard and his Ministers in the months before the booklet appeared. This chapter argues that sexual violence will only be seriously addressed when the *material* circumstances of women change, so that they enter relationships with men on a more equal footing.

The fact that women's oppression is a product of class society explains why we can win reforms if we fight for our rights, but cannot achieve liberation while capitalism continues to exist.

Where women's oppression comes from

Most feminists argue that there is a fundamental divide between women and men. Men are said to have power over women because of a system of patriarchy. Juliet Mitchell summed up the idealist theory of patriarchy: there are 'two autonomous areas [in society], the economic mode of capitalism and the ideological mode of patriarchy'. From this perspective, the struggle against women's oppression is one to change the ideas of men. Materialist versions of patriarchy theory take two forms. One argument is that 'the patriarchal mode is predicated on biological differences between the sexes, giving it a historical existence of its own'. Heidi Hartmann, on the other hand, identifies patriarchy as 'a set of social relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women'. This material base is control over women's labour in the family. Miriam Dixon, Anne Summers and others popularised this approach in Australia.¹⁰

Marxists agree that women's oppression is centred in the family. The role of the family is not, however, to service men, but to reproduce the next generation of workers, socialised into habits of deference that fit them for their role in production. In this respect, the family plays an even more important role than the education system (see chapter 5). Marx argued that material production conditions the social relations between humans and their ideas. What seem to be small or incremental changes in the way production is organised lead to changes in social relations in general. They can influence every aspect of life, including sexual practices, forms of leisure and the kinds of families people form. These can, in turn, have a reciprocal influence on the organisation of production.¹¹ Capitalist social relations, not men's control over women, determine developments in women's personal lives.

The ideal family of a male bread-winner supporting a dependent wife and their children was deliberately fostered by middle class reformers first in industrial Britain and then in Australia during the nineteenth century. In order to lower the child mortality rate and to have healthier, better educated workers available, they realised that they needed to free women from the terrible conditions in which they worked in the factories and mills. Working class men, rather than joining in the 'patriarchy' which gave them supposed control over women, strongly resisted attempts to force them into familial bliss.¹²

Today it might seem out of date to refer to this stereotypical family. And to some extent it is: a minority of households are now made up of a woman, a man and a child or children.¹³ But the ideal of the nuclear family gave rise to the gender stereotypes of the aggressive, dominant male and the subservient woman who is chaste, yet always there for sex with her husband. Once these stereotypes were established, they were very difficult to challenge. This is not because they give men power over women. In fact, they underpin sexual repression and homophobia (see chapter 7) that stunt not only the sexuality and ability to live fulfilling lives of women but also men. And it is not difficult to see how they continue to shape our lives. Watch anyone meeting a baby for the first time. Invariably, the first thing they ask is whether it is a girl or a boy. Then and only then do they feel comfortable and know how to relate to the child. Studies have shown that boys are handled in a

more robust way than girls are. Boys are expected to be rowdy, aggressive and confident, while girls are assumed to be quieter, nurturing and passive.¹⁴ Children begin to learn their gender roles at the earliest age, gaining approval when they come up to expectations, encountering disapproval when they contradict their assigned role.

This is not just a question of ideology, or the mass of people being duped; ideas do not simply float around disconnected from reality. Sometimes the material basis for ideas and ideology may be indirect and difficult to identify. There is, nevertheless, always some social and material reason, grounded in the organisation of production, for their continued existence. In this case, the basis for the ideology of the nuclear family is not difficult to trace.

In Australia, Justice Higgins of the Conciliation and Arbitration Court established a 'family wage' rate in 1907. It confirmed the roles of male providers and dependent women, the goal of middle-class campaigners since the 1850s.¹⁵ Crucially, Higgins's decision justified low wages for women even to the extent that they could barely support one person, let alone one with dependents. It was a powerful justification for paying poverty wages to a whole section of the workforce. This saves capitalists enormous amounts of money. Between 58 and 81 per cent of the pay difference between female and male workers is related to feminised work, when gender segregation by occupation, industry, workplace and job classification within the workplace is taken into account. Women who work in industries where close to 100 per cent of the workforce is female earn, on average, 32 per cent less than women with otherwise identical characteristics in industries where the workforce is almost 100 per cent male. Men in such 'feminine' industries earn 37 per cent less than otherwise identical men in 'masculine' industries.¹⁶ Because workers' ability to work, labour power, is a commodity on the market, low wages for any section of workers creates a downward pressure on all wages. Men therefore suffer a loss of income too as a result of labour market segregation and the lower wages women earn. They do not benefit from this discrimination against women. It is capitalists who gain, by reaping higher profits. So, when conservatives like John Howard argue that the family is the cornerstone of society, in a sense they are correct, but not in the way they mean it. The family ensures that the next generation of workers will be reproduced, cared for and socialised at minimal cost to the state and employers.

It is a very contradictory institution. On the one hand, it seems to be a place where people can relate to each other on the basis of love, finding solace from the hardships and pressures of work. In modern capitalist societies, most people do not regard marriage as an economic contract but as a human relationship. There are, however, powerful social pressures on men to be the main breadwinners; on women to carry the main burden of child caring; and on parents to discipline and socialise their children. The most important cause of inequalities within the families is their members' situations in the labour market. Economic inequalities, the law and social attitudes mean that the capitalist family necessarily has an authoritarian rather than a democratic form. This undermines loving relationships. Women have less independence than men; children have virtually none, until their teens. If parents are not caring, even if they are abusive, there are no easy solutions for a child. Many people do find love, companionship and respect in their families. But their experience of families, including single parent and gay families, tends to teach children that their place in society is subordinate, with very little control over any aspect of their lives. Families socialise people into accepting oppression, submission and the structures of capitalism.¹⁷

The sexism reflected in gender stereotypes has another important advantage for capitalists. Like racism (discussed in chapters 8 and 9), sexism serves to divide workers, making it more difficult for them to organise as a class to fight for their interests. This is particularly true if sexist attitudes of male workers make it difficult for women to join their unions. Men have sometimes resisted women participating in picket lines or even the entry of women into their industries. This has been a tragically mistaken response to the use of low-paid women to drag down wages. The alternative has been and remains fighting to unite all workers so that these kinds of divisions cannot be created and exploited by employers. Conflicts along gender lines benefit not *men* but *capitalists*, both male and female. So there are powerful material reasons for the hysterical defence of the family by

conservative apologists for capitalism. As a consequence, the gender stereotypes associated with the nuclear family have not disappeared, despite their divergence from the reality of modern life.

Families have rarely fitted the stereotype. In colonial Australia men often travelled away from their families for itinerant work, such as shearing, whaling or droving. During wars, governments have not hesitated to break up families and leave women to rear the children on their own, while men have gone off to die in defence of capitalist interests. Aboriginal families were deliberately broken up and whole generations of children ripped from their mothers by governments which at the same time promoted the ideal of motherly love and the sanctity of the family.¹⁸ If Howard, Abbott and their cothinkers genuinely believed that the family was so sacred they would not have routinely prevented refugee families from reuniting. Their ideal of the family is a means to control the mass of people, not a means to provide a decent life for them.

Working class women without waged jobs have usually worked for most of their lives and not just as housewives and mothers. This was usually a necessity, given that Higgins's 'family wage' was not even meant to provide for things such as decent clothing, newspapers, leisure pursuits, union dues, or education expenses. To supplement family incomes, working class women have cooked, washed, sewed and knitted for lodgers, neighbours and others who could pay. They have also minded the children of mothers in the formal workforce for a fee. But their lives were centred on the private life of the family.

Changes since World War II had a dramatic impact on women's lives and expectations. During the long economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s, employers keen to tap new sources of labour drew increasing numbers of women into the paid workforce. The proportion of women going on to higher education rose. Improved contraception gave women greater control over their fertility. Women who knew they could get waged work expected respect and greater equality in their relationships. If they didn't get them, liberalised divorce laws and the supporting parent's allowance increasingly meant women could exercise some choice over who they lived with. Sex was no longer tied so closely to procreation and the 'sexual revolution'--never as profound as its critics alleged--created an atmosphere in which more young people ignored the expectations of parents and the authorities. In 1977 only 27 per cent of couples cohabited before marriage. By 2002 it was 73 per cent.¹⁹

In 2001 only 47 per cent of families consisted of a couple with children. The proportion of two-parent families in which both parents worked increased to 57 per cent in 2002. Between 1986 and 2001, the number of one-parent families increased by 53 per cent, while the number of couples with children increased by only 3 per cent.²⁰

Fertility rates are a dramatic indicator of the way wider economic and social developments influence the most intimate decisions women make. In 1934, the fertility rate fell to a low of 2.1 babies per woman. Once the worst of the poverty and disruptions to family life that resulted from the Great Depression were over, the birth rate increased steadily until it reached 3.6 in 1961. But then it began to fall rapidly, to 2.9 by 1971, reflecting the changes outlined above. As women's place in the paid work force was established and attitudes changed, a further fall took place during the 1970s to below the replacement level, where it has remained at 1.65. The number of children women have shows no sign of increasing. As it has become increasingly difficult to maintain decent living standards for most families without two incomes, and women's expectations have changed, women have tended to have fewer children, later in life.²¹ The median age of women having their first child was over 30 in 2003, the highest on record, compared with 25 in 1971.²² The social relations of Australian capitalism are an obstacle to the reproduction of the most fundamental force of production, the labour force.

In the 1980s conservative commentators, sociologists and bigots fumed about 'broken marriages', berating women about the dangers of trying to raise children on their own, campaigning against abortion rights and generally trying to stem the tide of historical development.²³ On the left, some argued that the family had been so seriously undermined by contradictory capitalist developments that it was disappearing. Whether this would mean an end to women's, gay and lesbian oppression

was unclear. Such thinking was wishful. If capitalism was a system that could indefinitely sustain healthy economic growth, then socialised child, health and aged care--perhaps paid for out of corporate profits *if* big business could be forced to pay higher taxes-- could replace the family. Even then, gender stereotypes are so entrenched that it would take a struggle of revolutionary proportions to root them out. You only have to think of the massive struggles of the sixties and seventies that were needed even to begin to challenge some of the worst aspects of sexual oppression.

Capitalism, however, is a system that suffers from unavoidable economic crises (see chapter 1). The boom after World War II could not last forever. Since the early 1970s, lower rates of profit have meant lower growth rates, on average, and deeper recessions. To restore the rate of profit, governments and the capitalist class have sought to drive down working class living standards and government spending, while cutting taxes on corporations and the rich.

The family has provided a vital ideological justification for cuts to welfare and other government support. The Labor Government of Bob Hawke, for example, asserted that families should be more responsible for young people when it replaced the Unemployment Benefit for people aged 16 to 21 with the less generous Job Search Allowance in 1988. Further cuts in social security income for young people were justified in similar terms by Labor and Coalition governments. The closure of mental health institutions was defended on the basis that people were better off with their families. Of course, without extensive specialist support, most families cannot cope with the needs of those thrown out of care.

Some academics and social commentators have advocated strategies to co-opt the dispossessed and those who dissent, in order to maintain social stability. During the 1980s, they argued that, in order to keep the ideal of the privatised family alive, we should talk about 'single parent families', rather than rage against 'broken families'. Rather than moralise about how people lived their personal lives, it was more important to create a model of the family that could accommodate different lifestyles. This would preserve the central, economic role of the family. It was 'partly accommodation, taking the heat out of the social movements organised around the family ... If families were essentially healthy, then interventionist demands [made by feminists, gay activists etc] were defused.' And it was also 'an instrument of welfare policy. The "legitimisation" of de facto unions and ex-nuptial births nipped in the bud the potential for new welfare claims. Moreover, "family" and "community" increasingly became the rhetoric of governments bent on cutting their mounting welfare budgets.'²⁴

Gradually, these attitudes gained a following. There were less frequent attacks on 'working mothers' and more talk about the need to provide childcare and 'flexible' working arrangements to allow women to juggle their 'family responsibilities' with work. So the family, whether with a single parent or a heterosexual or same sex couple, continues to play a critical role in providing privatised, unpaid work to reproduce the workforce and to care for the sick and the elderly, accounting for the equivalent of 48 per cent of Australian GDP each year.

The family, essential for the stabilisation of capitalism during the industrial revolution, is still a crucial prop for the system. It sustains the stereotypes which justify low wages for millions of women the world over, creates sexist divisions and undermines women's confidence. All of this hampers working class unity and organisation, while providing the ideological justification for ripping the heart out of the welfare state or for not even beginning to build it in poorer, less developed countries.

The reciprocal relationship between the so-called private life of the family and the 'public' arena of the workplace ensures that women continue to enter relationships with men on an unequal footing and still carry the overwhelming burden of childcare and housework, in spite of the professed attitudes of both women and men. As early as 1988, only one in five married people under 50 years of age agreed with the traditional view that the husband should earn the money and the woman stay home to look after the family. However, about half thought family life suffers when the woman has a full time job. This contradiction reflects the reality of family life under capitalism. Lack of

childcare, tiring work for long hours patently *does* affect family life when both parents work full time. So in spite of progressive *ideas* about what women's role should be and evidence among working mothers of a strong commitment to participating in the paid workforce, 60 per cent said they would prefer part time work and 14 per cent even said they would prefer not to do paid work at all.²⁵

No matter what the individual attitudes of women and men are, it is virtually impossible for them to change their gender roles in most families. Men are far more likely to work longer hours than women for two reasons. They tend to work in jobs where overtime is normal. In 2002, 35 per cent of full-time male employees worked 50 hours a week or more, compared with 'only' 19 per cent of full-time working women. In 2003, 45.7 per cent of female workers were part time compared with 14.8 per cent of men.²⁶ Men's work is generally paid at higher rates than that of women. This means a man is likely to earn more than his female partner and is more likely to be in a job that offers some degree of permanency. Faced with these facts, few families can afford to lose the man's income or risk his job while he takes time off to care for children, simply to make a point about gender roles. But even when they try, employers remain an obstacle. In 2003, a case in the Equal Opportunity Commission highlighted the power bosses have to thwart individual couples' attempts to reject gender stereotypes. A man was sacked because he had to leave work *on time*, not early, to care for his child. His boss's attitude was that it was his wife's responsibility. He may have doubts after having to pay compensation. But the man did not get his job back.²⁷

Many men and women too accept sexist ideas about women. Bombarded with sexist, even degrading images of women which are reinforced by the reality of the unequal relationships between men and women (whether married or not), a minority of men take out their frustrations and violently vent their alienation on women in their lives. A 1995 Crime Statistics report in South Australia showed that 80 per cent of women who had been raped knew the man who attacked them.²⁸

Anne Summers wrote in her first book, *Damned whores and god's police*, that men oppose equal rights for women at work because it threatens their 'power' in the home.²⁹ But it is clearly not in the interests of working class men to perpetuate women's oppression. All members of families that depend on the wages of both parents suffer when one works for low wages. Because of the attacks from the capitalist class over more than two decades, workers have increasingly been condemned either to work long hours, many of them unpaid, or to accept low-wage, insecure, part time work for too few hours. While both women and men are constrained by their gender roles, it is not the case that most working class men enjoy lives of relative ease while their over-worked partners toil many extra hours to service them. On average, in 1997, Australian men spent about five hours less a week than women doing unpaid plus paid work.³⁰ Hardly a privilege worth defending by siding with your class enemy. It is not men's intransigence that keeps the oppressive role of housewife and mother alive, but unequal relationships, a consequence of the gendered workforce from which, not working class men, but both male and female capitalists gain.

Theory and Practice

This is why theory matters. Feminists who argue 'that men have a material interest in women's continued oppression'³¹ unintentionally help keep alive one of the aspects of that oppression which most benefits the capitalist class: the divisions between workers that make it more difficult to organise to fight for our rights. Once we understand that not all men benefit from women's oppression we can begin to propose effective strategies to resist it. Upper and middle class women may fight for equal rights with men of their class. But, because women in the capitalist class gain from the oppression of working class women, they are unreliable allies when fighting for the rights of working class women. The arguments that justified cross-class organisation contributed to the decline of the women's liberation movement from the mid 1970s. They did not prepare working class women for the kinds of campaigns that were needed to resist attacks by the Labor

governments of Hawke and Paul Keating, or provide strategies for winning working class men to the struggle.

Many of the gains that we have made came in the form of legislation that granted equal access for women to education and careers. The result has been the rise of a larger layer of middle class women who, while still subject to the sexist oppression all women face, nevertheless experience it differently from women who have to cope with low-paid, insecure jobs and appalling working conditions. Middle class women, for example, can afford to pay for abortions if they are legal but not available free of charge. The women's movement was divided over whether to campaign for 'freedom of choice' or for 'free, safe abortion on demand'.

The backlash launched by the Howard government favoured women with highly paid partners, as we saw. Howard's cuts to community based childcare made it so expensive that many women in low paid jobs may as well stay at home. But surveys indicate women do not just work for money. They benefit from and enjoy the social interaction with adults and the sense of worth that comes from some degree of economic independence, in a society where money is central to all social relations. Women know that if they stay out of the work force too long they are likely to be condemned to years of harassment by Centrelink, as they battle to receive unemployment benefits and eventually drastic poverty as they get older. With the aged pension being whittled away, workers without a substantial superannuation payout increasingly face a grim future. The majority in that situation are women, simply because they have carried the burden for society of caring for the next generation.

But a minority of women who have gained most from the struggles of the past are no longer allies in the struggles to come, because they share so little of the majority of women's experience. Wealthy, secure women can pay nannies, which is an incentive for them to *resist* rather than support decent wages for childcare workers. Future struggles are likely to depend on working class women as they fight for decent wages and conditions, childcare, access to the education and health systems, and improved social welfare. These are issues of concern for working class men too.

The difference between the interests of working and ruling class women were apparent when, in early 2003, over a million people marched against the impending invasion of Iraq. This military adventure was designed to strengthen the global capitalist system that underpins the oppression of women. The Howard Government saw it as a chance to reinforce the influence of Australia's rulers at home, in the Pacific and South-east Asia (see chapter 11). Pamela Bone, prominent small 'l' liberal feminist and associate editor of *The Age* used her column to support the war.³²

Writers like Summers and Pocock exposed the oppression of women with a genuine sense of outrage. The solutions they proposed are, however, inadequate. Pocock wrote approvingly of families reducing their consumption and hours of work. Such a course of action is simply not an option for most working class families and is counterposed to long-standing working class demands for shorter hours *without* reduced pay. Rather than considering what we can do ourselves to impose changes on employers and governments, she suggested improvements in public policy, implying that a Labor government would be more likely to respond to women's needs than the Liberals. But can those who know the history of the last Labor government really believe electing the ALP to office will make much of a difference? Latham is not to the left of Howard on questions of women's oppression and the family.³³

Summers concluded *The end of equality* with a chapter promisingly titled 'Acting up'. Its three pages of argument did not suggest that women could become activists in political campaigns. Yet that is the only way they can take some control over their lives and build movements capable of *forcing* reluctant employers and governments to grant much needed reforms. In spite of her background as a femocrat working for Labor governments, Summers did not even mention that, before you make a complaint about conditions at work, it is wise to join a union! At the end of a book which very effectively demonstrated how unresponsive government bureaucracies and bosses are to women's needs (or any workers' for that matter), she recommended complaining to those

very bodies; or perhaps you could *support* one of the women's groups listed.³⁴ The women's movement of the 1970s was keen for women to *get involved*.

The strategies of feminists such as Pocock and Summers focus on conventional political and bureaucratic channels. They are constrained by the mistaken belief that working class men cannot be allies in the struggle for women's liberation and their preoccupation with achieving equal rights for middle class women. Even if there was equality between the sexes at work, the shape of job pyramids means that the vast majority of women (like the vast majority of men today) would not even be able to get close enough to tap on the glass ceiling. The main problems the vast majority of women face are inadequate wages and conditions in their current jobs rather than their prospects for promotion. The alternative approach looks to the capacity of working class struggle and mass mobilisations to overcome women's oppression. It is not only a more effective means to achieve the limited goals of reforms; it also has the potential to go much further, to challenge the foundations of women's oppression in the structures of capitalism and the capitalist family.

Understanding that working class women and men share a common class interest is not only relevant to some future struggle to overturn capitalism, but today when we oppose sexist attitudes. If we recognise how sexist ideas are based on the real social situations people experience and that they do not benefit anyone but the capitalist class, we can more effectively make the kinds of arguments that touch a nerve with working class men.³⁵ As people fight to improve their lives, the need for solidarity makes it easier to persuade men to abandon their sexism. When workers next find their voice and rise in struggle as a class, men who now think women's place is in the home, who treat the women they live with disrespectfully or even violently will have to face the divisive and destructive consequences of such attitudes, if they are to build the unity needed to defeat bosses and governments.

So the struggle for women's liberation is not a separate, autonomous fight focussed only on 'women's issues'. Women will only be liberated when the structures of capitalism that perpetuate their oppression are destroyed and replaced by a society which is organised around satisfying human needs, rather than making profits. Only then could childcare genuinely be a social responsibility, given the status it deserves, instead of a burden on individual women. Only then could women be genuinely independent economically, so that they can enter personal relationships on an equal footing with men.

Further reading

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Endnotes

- 1 Anne Summers *The end of equality: work, babies and women's choices in 21st century Australia* Random House Australia, Milsons Point 2003, p. 168. Full time male adult earnings in November 2003 were \$1 061.30; women's \$852.70. The figure for all workers was so low because 45.7 per cent of working women are part time, Australian Bureau of Statistics *Average weekly earnings, Australia* catalogue 6302.
- 2 Paper prepared by the Human Resources Committee at Griffith University for the National Tertiary Education Union, copy in the author's possession.
- 3 Summers *The end of Equality* op. cit. pp. 173-174.
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