

The communist movement and the women's liberation

1. The woman's emancipation in the revolutionary thought of the classics of scientific socialism.

According to the classics of scientific socialism, the condition of the woman in human society, after the end of primitive polygamy and polyandry and the forming of the monogamic family, has been dominated throughout many centuries by a fundamental law: the men's predominance on the female sex.

In modern epoch this condition of male predominance and female oppression is partially changed, but remains intact in its ground connected with the existence of private propriety, and it is effectual in all fields of human existence: the sexual and familiar field, the economic one, the social and political one.

Fundamental remains the analysis accomplished by Friedrich Engels in his work *The Origin of the Family, Private property and the State* (1884), which already in its title shows the profound link among these three aspects:

“In the old communistic household, which comprised many couples and their children, the task entrusted to the women of managing the household was as much a public and socially necessary industry as the procuring of food by the men. With the patriarchal family, and still more with the single monogamous family, a change came. Household management lost its public character. It no longer concerned society. It became a private service; the wife became the head servant, excluded from all participation in social production. Not until the coming of modern large-scale industry was the road to social production opened to her again -- and then only to the proletarian wife. But it was opened in such a manner that, if she carries out her duties in the private service of her family, she remains excluded from public production and unable to earn; and if she wants to take part in public production and earn independently, she cannot carry out family duties. And the wife's position in the factory is the position of women in all branches of business, right up to medicine and the law.

The modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife, and modern society is a mass composed of these individual families as its molecules. In the great majority of cases today, at least in the possessing classes, the husband is obliged to earn a living and support his family, and that in itself gives him a position of supremacy, without any need for special legal titles and privileges. Within the family he is the bourgeois and the wife represents the proletariat”.

Already in the *Principles of Communism* (1847) Engels had showed, from a revolutionary point of view, how is put the problem of the relation between the two sexes in the communist society:

“What will be the influence of communist society on the family? It will transform the relations between the sexes into a purely private matter which concerns only the persons involved and into which society has no occasion to intervene. It can do this since it does away with private property and educates children on a communal basis, and in this way removes the two bases of traditional marriage – the dependence rooted in private property, of the women on the man, and of the children on the parents”.

The *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848) vigorously confirmed the revolutionary proletarian position about the family and the woman:

“ On what foundation is the present family, the bourgeois family, based? On capital, on private gain. In its completely developed form, this family exists only among the bourgeoisie. [...] by the action of Modern Industry, all the family ties among the proletarians are torn asunder, and their children transformed into simple articles of commerce and instruments of labour [...] The bourgeois sees his wife a mere instrument of production [...] He has not even a suspicion that the real point aimed at is to do away with the status of women as mere instruments of production”.

In the first volume of *Capital* Marx showed that capitalism, in its development, shakes the foundations of the old family's economy and modifies not only the relations between husband and wife, but also those between parents and childrens:

"It was not, however, the misuse of parental authority that created the capitalistic exploitation, whether direct or indirect, of children's labour; but, on the contrary, it was the capitalistic mode of exploitation which, by sweeping away the economical basis of parental authority, made its exercise degenerate into a mischievous misuse of power. However terrible and disgusting the dissolution, under the capitalist system, of the old family ties may appear, nevertheless modern industry, by assigning as it does an important part in the process of production, outside the domestic sphere, to women, to young persons, and to children of both sexes, creates a new economical foundation for a higher form of the family and of the relations between the sexes. [...] Moreover, it is obvious that the fact of the collective working group being composed of individuals of both sexes and all ages, must necessarily, under suitable conditions, become a source of human development" (*Capital*, vol, I, chapt. XIII).

Lenin denounced in the most vigorous way the condition of oppression suffered by the women in the capitalist regime:

" Under capitalism the female half of the human race is doubly oppressed. The working woman and the peasant woman are oppressed by capital, but over and above that, even in the most democratic of the bourgeois republics, they remain, firstly, deprived of some rights because the law does not give them equality with men; and secondly—and this is the main thing—they remain in household bondage", they continue to be "household slaves", for they are overburdened with the drudgery of the most squalid, backbreaking and stultifying toil in the kitchen and the family household" (*International Working Woman's Day*).

2. What is, nowadays, the general condition of the woman in the world?

In the present world population, which is over 7 billions of inhabitants, women are almost the half of it (about 49%). In their very large majority they are female workers exploited and oppressed. Presently the women represent about the 40% of the world labour-force, but the quantity of work really performed by them is much greater, if is considered the household work in which the women are engaged (about 30 hours weekly).

Generally, the women's participation to the productive process is increased at world level in the last decades, although the employment difference in comparison to men is still remarkable. The highest percentages of female employed labour-force are in the countries of Eastern and South-eastern Asia, of Central and Southern Africa, in South America and Caribes.

In the advanced capitalism countries the feminization of the labour-force has been leaded by the sector of services (public services, cleaning, alimentation, etc.) and by the manufacturing (textile, micro-electronics, etc.), that widely utilize part-time system, flexibility, precariousness, etc., according to the exploitation interests of capitalistic enterprises and monopolies. Women have a wage decidedly lower than that of a man at a parity of work, education and training (also in the developed countries of OCSE the difference is in average the 16 %).

Remarkable is the increase of female force-labour caused by the women's migration from the rural areas to the cities and from the dependent countries to the more developed capitalistic countries. Is deemed that the 49% of the migrants are women, that go to perform precarious works at a low income.

However, in the periods of economic crisis women are dismissed in still higher percentages. In the last few years in Europe the 51,8% of dismissions concerned female workers; in other countries like Mexico and Honduras the percentage was of 70 %.

Side by side of this process of violent loss of jobs, it's increasing the inclusion of children and teen-agers in a labour-force acting in conditions of real slavery.

Women are today the 70% of the world poor people. Many indicators show the women's backwardness and poverty, their difficult access to the basic services: of the 774 millions of illiterate persons existing in the world 55 millions are women; 72 millions are the children that go not to school, and 34 millions of them are little girls. The 70% of the women that are heads of the family have no access to the drinkable water, to the sewerage, to the sanitary services; the 75% of these families are not owners of their house. As for the health right, the women - above all the parturients - are exposed to very serious risks, particularly in the more backward depended countries.

The consequences of the capitalistic crisis that exploded in 2008, and the brutal offensive leaded by financial oligarchy have brought about a moving back of the condition of working women, that suffer a full attack to the achievements and rights previously conquered.

The women of popular levels are the victims of the austerity politics, that deprive them of the public services (female advice bureaus, reception houses, infant houses, etc.), of the social security, of the rights bounded to motherhood. In some european countries, the extreme right governments and parties have launched, with the active support of the Catholic Church, an offensive against the abortion right.

Also the juridical parity with man is becoming more and more aleatory. If it's applied, is only downwards, as in the case of EU instructions about the night-work hours and the elongation of retirement age, that heavily struck the female workers and produce further inequalities.

One of the more detestable aspects of capitalistic exploitation is the violence against the women: a violence that manifest itself in the familiar circle, in the social life, in the job places. It assumes different forms (economical, social, political, sexual, psychological, sanitary), strikes a high percentage of women and its fundament is the women's double oppression.

In the present period of neo-liberalism egemony, more intense is becoming the violence against the women: female murders, sexual abuses, prostitution's exploitation, children traffic, pornography, use of female body in publicity, are the symptoms of a society in decomposition, of social relations more and more aggressive, disdainful of the life, the freedom, the dignity of women.

3. The condition of the labouring woman in capitalism, and the wage differences

Although the equality with man is proclaimed in the Consitutions and the treaties, in the laws and labour contracts, a real and actual parity of work and life is not put in practice in capitalistic and imperialistic countries. There is, on the contrary, discrimination, segregation and oppression - in particular against the proletarian women - unceasingly fostered by the capitalists, who repropose the old inequalities in new forms.

In Italy, for example, there's a strong disparity between men and women in the unemployment rate (a difference of 23 points), and a wide retributive differential, particularly relevant in the private sector: the 16,7 %, with respect to the 7,5 % of the public sector).

In an enquiry concerning the italian metal-and-mechanical sector can be read: *"The women are always - more than the men - concentrated in the lowest framing's levels; even on the same terms of work seniority and educational qualifications they earn, on the average, 200 euros less of their masculine colleagues.... De facto, women earn less than men, on the same terms of any other condition, even when they have the same working time, the same work seniority, the same educational qualifications, and - even - the same kind of contract"* (*The voice of 100.000 workers*, Fiom, 2008).

The question of the wage disparity and of the employment segregation of the labouring women in sectors characterized by low wages and lesser protections, and in the lowest levels of the professional categories, cannot be explained by the bourgeois theories according to which this depends on the women's choices and by the utilisation of sex as productivity's indicator.

Actually the choices are neither casuals nor "naturals", but are conditioned by the present labour-force market, whilst the work's mechanisation and automation assured in many sectors the same productive results.

In order to deal with the problem of the labouring women's discrimination/segregation is necessary to adopt a class point of view and acknowledge that it is due to the present social relations of production and to the particular social condition of woman, subject to a double oppression.

Historically, was the capitalistic use of machines, the automation of the operations requesting particular physic efforts and ability, the reduction of the work to few repetitive acts, that allowed the utilization on a large scale - in the production - of women's and teen-agers' labour-force, extending the exploitation to all bands of sex and age.

Since the labour-force's value is determined by the value of subsistence means necessary to maintain and reproduce the labour-force of the worker and his family, when the worker's wife and children enter into the capitalistic production the wage decreases, both depreciating the women's and teen-agers' work, and diminishing the masculine worker's one. Consequently, even if the total sum of wages paid by capitalists increases, even more raises the level of exploitation and the mass of extorted surplus value.

Marx wrote: *"To purchase the labour-power of a family of four workers may, perhaps, cost more than it formerly did, but, in return, four days' labour takes the place of one, and their price falls in proportion to the excess of the surplus-labour of four over the surplus-labour of one"* (*Capital*, vol. I, chapt. XIII).

In the present relations of production the woman not only contributes, with her not recognized domestic work, to the reproduction of the labour-force, but, on her place of work, produces as much surplus-value as the man; but the price of her labour-force is cheaper.

This is the reality that is keeping until day in the more "civil" countries. What can be our conclusions?

Firstly, the women's low wages, as the minor and migrant workers' ones, are used to reduce the total wage amount, so to worsen the rate of exploitation of the overall working class. The workwomen's wage is reduced as a means of compression and reduction of all wages.

In the determination of the medium national wage is necessary to consider also the role of the women-and-children work. What appears from time to time as a "contribution to family's support" or an "integrative remuneration", is in reality an indispensable wage for many worker families, and it conceals a brutal relation of exploitation, deriving by the capitalistic logic of minimizing the production's costs of the labour-force in order to maximize the profits.

Secondly, in the capitalistic system the quantity and quality of the wages, the organisation of the productive process, the force-labour market itself, foment the divisions and the competition among the workers, since workers identical from the productive point of view are treated in a different way.

It's in the interest of the capitalistic class to discriminate and divide the workers on account of sex, age, nationality, etc. This interest is the origin of discriminatory practices carried out on the ground of characteristics extraneous to the contribution of workers to the productive process, in order to stir up the competition among the workers, to utilize the weaker sectors of them as a lever for breaking the resistance and unity of proletariat, for uncreasing the possibility of extracting the surplus-value.

Without doubt, the problems of the wage discrimination and the segregation of women are connected to the conflict between labour and capital, inherent to the present barbarous mode of production.

4. The condition of equality of women in socialism

The subordinate position of female gender, its condition of social submission and defraudation of rights, the wage and pension differencies, the specific role of woman in the

industrial work's division, reflect the gender oppression existing in capitalist society and are fundamentally determined by the system of private property of the means of production and by its inherent necessity of low cost reproduction of labour-power.

The private property is the ultimate and more profound cause of the condition of oppression, discrimination, subordination of women and of men's privilege.

Only through the abolition of the bourgeois system of private property of the means of production and exchange, and of the pre-capitalistic remainders, only through the radical transformation of the economic basis and the change of ideas and cultural practices, will be possible to abolish the women's double oppression, the existing differentiations and discriminations, will be possible to radically affect the woman's position in the society, establishing her real equality in front of the law and in the social life, free from every form of exploitation and oppression.

A very important aspect of socialist society is the transfer to the collectivity on the whole of many responsibilities that today are weighing upon the individual family, and particularly on the women: to cook, to clean, to look after children and elderly persons, etc.

Engels pointed out that "*with the transfer of the means of production into common ownership, the single family ceases to be the economic unit of society. Private housekeeping is transformed into a social industry. The care and education of the children becomes a public affair.*" (*The Origin of the Family, Private property and the State*).

We communist (marxist-leninist), in spite of feminist movements, are not under the illusion that is possible to obtain a radical solution of the question of woman's emancipation in the framework of capitalist-imperialist society. Only with socialism will fall down the economic predominance of male, and so his predominance within the couple; will be assert the social management of production and consumption, with the full insertion of women in it, that are the conditions for the full equalizing with man. In consequence, also the position of the latter will experience a remarkable change. In the new mode of production the relations between the two sexes can develop on a base of real equality, solidarity and cooperation, in a not conflictual way, in order to attain a whole emancipation of the proletariat.

The radical measures introduced in the Soviet Union since the first years after the October Revolution gave testimony of all that. Lenin wrote:

"We see that equality is proclaimed in all democratic republics but in the civil laws and in laws on the rights of women—those that concern their position in the family and divorce—we see inequality and the humiliation of women at every step, and we say that this is a violation of democracy specifically in respect of the oppressed.

Soviet power has implemented democracy to a greater degree than any of the other, most advanced countries because it has not left in its laws any trace of the inequality of women. Again I say that no other state and no other legislation has ever done for women a half of what Soviet power did in the first months of its existence.

Laws alone, of course, are not enough, and we are by no means content with mere decrees. In the sphere of legislation, however, we have done everything required of us to put women in a position of equality and we have every right to be proud of it. The position of women in Soviet Russia is now ideal as compared with their position in the most advanced states. We tell ourselves, however, that this is, of course, only the beginning.

Owing to her work in the house, the woman is still in a difficult position. To effect her complete emancipation and make her the equal of the man it is necessary for the national economy to be socialised and for women to participate in common productive labour. Then women will occupy the same position as men [...]

You all know that even when women have full rights, they still remain factually downtrodden because all housework is left to them. In most cases housework is the most unproductive, the most barbarous and the most arduous work a woman can do [...]

We are setting up model institutions, dining-rooms and nurseries, that will emancipate women from housework.

And the work of organising all these institutions will fall mainly to women [...]

We say that the emancipation of the workers must be effected by the workers themselves, and in exactly the same way the emancipation of working women is a matter for the working women themselves.” (The tasks of the working women’s movement).

The Constitution of URSS, adopted in 1936, not only fixed the formal rights and the equality of female workers, already free from capitalist exploitation, but also warranted by law those rights through a series of material means:

“Art. 122. Women in the U.S.S.R. are accorded equal rights with men in all spheres of economic, state, cultural, social and political life.

The possibility of exercising these rights is ensured to women by granting them an equal right with men to work, payment for work, rest and leisure, social insurance and education, and by state protection of the interests of mother and child, pre-maternity and maternity leave with full pay, and the provision of a wide network of maternity homes, nurseries and kindergartens”.

What socialism gave and will give to women never will be given by the bourgeois feminist movement.

5. Two opposed points of view on the "female question"

Although the women are generally oppressed, the female question shows different features for the bourgeois women and for the proletarian ones, which put it in different and opposed ways.

For the women of the bourgeoisie the problem is put essentially on the juridic plan, for the access to property and profits, to the institutions of the dominant class. Their emancipation assumes the form of the "free competition" with the men belonging to their same class. The bourgeois feminists never attack the present society's grounds, never question the exploitation of the wage-work. When they enter into the élites of the economic and political life, into the organisations of capitalistic power, they transform themselves from "supporters of the female rights" in enthusiastic advocates of the dominant class's privileges. Their personal "emancipation" is paid by the growing subordination of millions of other women. And when they speak of women liberation they often do that in order to justify the imperialistic wars.

For proletarian women the question of their oppression presents itself in a very different way, because is connected to the requirements of the work exploitation and of capital's reproduction. In order to finish off this slavery is indispensable the passage to a new and superior social organisation.

The women of proletariat and of the popular masses cannot conduct in the same way and with the same purposes of the bourgeois women the struggle for their own economic and social emancipation, as the fundamental aspect of the struggle for the liberation from all forms of alienation and slavery.

They must necessarily conduct it together with the men of their same class against the capitalistic class, for the fulfillment of determinate economic, social and cultural claims in order to enter into the struggle and run the battle in the first person and at equal terms, not staying behind.

In the same way, the workmen have a profound interest for the struggles of female proletariat and to fight together with the workwomen in order to form an united front of struggle against the capitalist ic class.

The struggle for the abolition of the woman's oppression, for the full equality of rights of both sexes in all the social life's sectors, is an integral part of the struggle for the abolition of every exploitation in the human relations, for a real alternative to the bourgeois social relations. It's therefore a question concerning the whole proletariat and has to be included in the context of the struggle for communism.

Moreover, since the historical relation of subordination of the female sex is due also to the power of the traditions, to the persistence of the bourgeois costumes and to the reactionary influence of religions that always justified the woman's subalternity, spread ideologies of resignation and

attacked the women rights (divorce, abortion, etc.), the most resolute struggle must be delivered against these reactionary positions, for the education of labouring women and popular levels in the spirit of communism, for the defence of progressive and revolutionary values, for a true liberation of whole humanity.

6. Briefly, on our tasks

The mass movement aiming to support and satisfy some specific economic and political interests of women cannot be a movement limited only to the women. It has to be a movement common to men and women of proletariat. The aim of this struggle is not the "free competition" of the woman with the man, but the final conquest of political power by the proletariat in order to overthrow capitalism and edify the new society in which the exploitation and the oppression of class and gender will be abolished. Yet the proletarian woman has a fundamental and irreplaceable role in this struggle. A decisive contribution to this anti-capitalistic battle can give the construction, at international level and in the various countries, of a wide female mass movement democratic, anti-imperialistic and revolutionary.

The work of construction and strengthening of communist Parties in every country of the world cannot prescind from the contribution of the more advanced and conscious proletarian women, that have to be militants with equal rights and duties, fully integrated in the communist Parties and in the organisations of the proletarian class struggle.

Therefore we must develop and intensify the work of propaganda and agitation among the female workers, so that they can be conquered to the class struggle and the communist Parties as organisations can get in their ranks the best daughters of proletariat.

Clearly, this very important work has to be developed with particular methods and forms of activity, with specific struggle tasks according to the objective situation, in order to extend our influence, to bring female workers nearer to the cause of socialist revolution and develop their class conscience.

In front of millions of women exploited, unfulfilled, full of resentment against the double oppression imposed on them, worsened by the antipopular policies, by the bourgeois regime's prejudices, we marxist-leninists must intensify our work among these masses, to find the way of arousing this enormous force, of organising and educating it, of inducing the more advanced proletarian women to enter into our organisations and to take part actively in all fields of the class struggle.

The victory of proletarian revolution, the dictatorship of proletariat and the edification of socialist society are unthinkable without the conscient and resolute participation of working-women and female labourers, protagonists of their future.

As wrote with passion and cleverness Clara Zetkin, a great communist fighter for the emancipation and liberation of the woman: *"The collaboration of the wide female masses means not only an increased quantity of forces, but a richer quality too. Woman is not only the bad copy of man: as a feminine being, she has her own characteristics and particular values for the struggle and the edification of socialism"* (*Critical observations on the Draft Program of International Communist, 1928*).

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Communist Platform