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## On the contemporary experiences of women: a Marxist interpretation\*

= 1985 =

**T**he concept of "Oppression of Women," has been widely abused and emptied of all meaning and determination by petty-bourgeois and pseudo-radicals as well as feminists, shades of honest progressives and humanists. Despite this and perhaps partly as a result of this, the oppression of women remains a stubborn reality in our society. There are several manifestations of this oldest of all oppression.

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Today, in the Nigerian social context, women suffer oppression not only as human beings living under the historical social structure called neo-capitalism or peripheral capitalism, but also as that section of the Nigerian people called women.

Although we shall attempt to separate the two forms of oppression, in reality dichotomy is impossible since they largely and continuously reinforce each other. This objective mutual reinforcement is what many feminists and anti-feminists often fail to appreciate.

Let us first examine the overall social terrain on which women are oppressed as women. The social reality of Nigeria today is that she is embedded in the periphery of the world capitalist economic system which has been created and is continually being recreated by, and in the interest of, the central capitalist countries of America, Japan and Western Europe. Nigeria, by this position, continues to be permanently forced to develop in a direction which serves the needs of the "metropolis of capitalism". Neither the social forces of production nor the social relations (including the man-woman relationship) can develop freely under this condition.

The material oppression of the working people of Nigeria has its roots in the world capitalist economic structure in which Nigeria is embedded. Both men and women are subjected to this oppression but under other specific conditions. On the level of day-to-day life, what is the objective contemporary situation of Nigeria, 22 years after what is now popularly known as "Flag Independence?" What have been the experiences of Nigerian women?

Let us take up the objective contemporary situation first. The situation today is that Nigeria still provides raw materials on an unequal basis for the imperialist industries. The "modern" sector of the Nigerian economy is essentially that of buying and distributing luxury consumer goods among the various strata of the Nigerian ruling class and elites, namely: businessmen and businesswomen; party leaders; members of the legislative, executive and judicial institutions; executives of parastatals and other economic institutions, etc. The interests of this class rule, over the basic and elementary needs of the rest of society (roughly 95%) and women constitute the majority of the "underdogs."<sup>1</sup>

Nigeria today harbours hundreds of foreign companies and banks through which a large part of our national surplus is transferred daily abroad while the working and toiling people are subjected to harsh economic deprivations. The vast majority of our toiling and working people still live below subsistence level and reproduce their lives in physical and mental conditions not better than their conditions before 1960. While the toiling and working people are subjected to a minimum wage much below subsistence level (in the face of mounting inflation) capitalist employers, "public officers", leading members of the state apparatus continue to allocate to themselves millions of Naira in fraudulent contracts, allowances and "contingency funds".

Nigerians have always been promised increased and better housing, more food, "qualitative" or "free" education, "free" or "qualitative" medical care, etc. In short, verbal promises of "life more abundant" is what the Nigerian ruling class has for the masses. In reality, however, every policy turns out to be at best illusory and empty and at worst, manifestly anti-people.

A stratum of the Nigerian ruling class (a small fraction of parasites who, however, control the means of producing and expropriating the wealth of our country) literally live in obscene affluence. On the opposite side of the "paradise on earth", there exists mass poverty for the working people - a reality which is continually being reproduced and intensified by policies and measures such as the so-called "austerity". These are, of course, meant to ensure the continuity of the affluence of the opposite extreme.

There are some forms of oppression imposed essentially on the working and toiling people of Nigeria by the neo-colonial (or peripheral) capitalist structure of the economy. On the most general (i.e. abstract) level, working and toiling people of both sexes suffer these forms of oppression. This, we think, is the correct starting point for the consideration of the specific oppression of women in our society.

The specific oppression of women in Nigeria can be considered under the following categories:

- a) oppression by the state, i.e. socio-political oppression;
- b) oppression within the family;
- c) oppression in the "civil society"

We shall not follow this division strictly - as this is almost impossible - although we appreciate its analytical value.

The various agencies and institutions of the state operate from, and on, the premise (explicit or implicit) that a wife occupies a subservant position in relation to her husband. Countless examples can be cited. We pick out only a few. In an institution such as a university, where medical services are provided for the workers, a wife can be treated on the ticket of the husband if the husband is the employee. But if the wife is the employee no such privilege is extended to the husband. The assumption here is that the wife is an appendage of the husband. It is the working wife who feeds and clothes her family and sometimes pays fees for the children but her tax is higher because the employer assumes that the husband caters for the family.

Several categories of positions in private and public institutions are exclusively for men. Some institutions will not employ women because of the time lost to the employers when working women go on maternity leave. These positions are occupied by men who go on endless non-

productive tours. The sum total of the time thus fruitlessly consumed by a "senior" male official in a year is often greater than the period of maternity leave. These same employers who detest women going on maternity leave would divorce their wives if they did not bear children. Thus the ability to bear children, that is, to reproduce the human species, has been transformed into a liability.

There are several other forms of discrimination against women as regards privileges granted to employees. The evolution of the institution of marriage and especially the monogamous transformation of the nuclear family established the family as a basic economic unit of society within which a woman and her children - through exploitation of biological and emotional factors - become dependent upon an individual man.<sup>2</sup> The fundamental element of this transformation was that women became the "beasts of burden" in the mundane task of ensuring the day-to-day care of the family. Arising in conjunction with exploitative class relations, this transformation resulted in the well-known and all-pervasive forms of oppression of women that have persisted to the present day.

The subjugation of the female sex can therefore be traced to the transformation of an important socially necessary labour - housework - into private service through the separation of the family from the clan.<sup>3</sup> It was in this context that women's domestic and other work came to be performed under conditions of virtual slavery, that is, without recognition or remuneration. It is crucial to the organization of women for their struggle for liberation to understand that the monogamous family<sup>4</sup> as an economic unit is basic to women's subjugation. Several revolutionary conclusions can be drawn from this. In ancient communal society, decisions were made by those who would carry them out. Thus the participation of women in socially necessary labour did not place them in a position of subjugation (as it does today) since women also took part in decision-making. It is therefore a paradox in European history that the only public area in which individual women claim equality with men is that associated with stereotypes of masculinity - leadership, power and decision-making.

In Nigeria, the socialization and domestication of the female sex on the material,



ideological, and psychological levels start in the family and are continued, extended and intensified by the state and the society at large. A girl is from the cradle trained to assume a role similar to that of her mother. Result? Perpetuation and reproduction of the same subservient relations. The society regards a woman as incomplete without a husband; but a man without a wife is tolerated - and may even win public applause. It is regarded as normal for a man to have an emotional relationship with his housemaid but abnormal for a woman to do the same. A radical woman is regarded as eccentric or she engenders condemnation or murder for being an embarrassment to a bourgeois husband. Where a radical woman is not stoutly opposed, she meets with a mixture of applause and surprise. In the latter case, derogatory explanations are offered for her activities. It is a historical fact that not only bourgeois men but socialists and revolutionaries as well justify and live these sexist stereotypes. This is a sad indicator of the level of consciousness within the revolutionary movement of our time.

Constitutionally, women are equal with men but practically today women are still

regarded as appendages of men. 1975 was declared International Women's Year. That same year in Nigeria, an important "national event" – the formation of the Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) – took place. It is on record that no woman was included in the CDC even though the CDC was to draft a constitution for the entire Nigerian Population, 50% of which is female.

The Nigerian President and Vice-President are both men. (The Nigerian ruling class could not even pretend to concede the position of "Vice" – to a woman as they do in many institutions). Nigeria is divided into 19 states, and the political head of each state – the governor – is a man. Of the 449 seats in the House of Representatives, very few are occupied by a woman. There are 95 senators – all male! The Chief Justice of the Federation is a man, etc, etc. Thus, even at the level of the bourgeois concept of women's emancipation, Nigerian society is still men's exclusive domain – at least at the level of government. It is however, also part of the Nigerian social reality that there are even more staggering differences in positions and opportunities among women themselves. There are women in our society who occupy senior posts

in economic, social and political institutions, government and para-government departments, and enjoy comparable privileges as their male counterparts.

On the other hand, a large percentage of our women serve as slaves for the privileged few, just like the working and toiling people of the male sex. A large percentage of our women still scratch the land to support a bare existence. Therefore, given these realities, we must be careful when we talk of women's oppression in general. The question is: When we talk of oppression, which group of women are we referring to? Is it the 5% that aid the ruling class in exploiting the labour of the other 95% or is it the down-trodden 95%?

We are not by any means anti-feminists. Women are oppressed as a social category, everyone agrees. The point we are making is that the experience of this oppression is not even. However, no amount of verbal denunciation of the present condition of women will negate the reality of the existing social inequality of men and women, nor can we hope for bourgeois laws which will ensure the equal involvement of women in social affairs.

We agree with Lenin:

The chief task of the working women's movement is to fight for economic and social equality, and not only formal equality for women. The chief thing is to get women to take part in socially productive labour, to liberate them from domestic slavery, to free them from their stupefying and humiliating subjugation to the eternal drudgery of the kitchen and the nursery.

### **Conclusion**

Historically, oppression in the human society has been based on the institution of private property and division of labour. Before the emergence of the institution of private property, there had been divisions of labour along physiological lines, not class lines, e.g. along man-woman, strong-weak, adult-child lines. But with the development of productive forces and the emergence of social classes and private property, the social division of labour assumed new class-physiological forms.

Today in the world capitalist system to which Nigeria belongs, the social division of labour is primarily along class-lines, with the

physiological division being relegated more and more to the sphere of the nuclear family. This has not made the social burden on women any lighter. If anything, it has become heavier. The oppression of women did not originate under capitalism but took a most alienating form under capitalism where all things including human beings and their values have become commodities. It has now become historically necessary to pose a concrete alternative to the oppression of women in particular and other forms of social oppression in general.

There must emerge a movement whose central demand would be that the Nigerian working and toiling people<sup>6</sup> should assume the role of *directly* and *collectively* controlling the economic, political and social affairs of Nigeria. Such a movement must evolve specific programmes and tactics for the mobilization of women for their liberation. Such programmes must take cognizance of the additional dimensions of women's oppression while at the same time also recognizing that even these additional dimensions cannot be completely superseded without the liberation of society as a whole.

## Appendix

### End of debate

"It is not logical to assume that sexism, which has flourished throughout most of human history and long before the rise of capitalism, will be eliminated merely by equitable distribution of material wealth and the abolition of reactionary laws. Sexism has survived through the ages because it embodies privileges that men are unwilling to surrender. These privileges are not only material, but sexual and psychological. The willingness of women to believe that men will repudiate all dominance over us in the name of socialism - or any other - without a fight, is putting the ultimate victory of feminism in danger. Under a socialist system, sexism will not die out unless people are conditioned and propagandized from childhood into antisexism, just as surely as the present system and previous generations were indoctrinated with sexism. Once the material conditions of sexism are eliminated, its psychological and sexual privileges must be made as immoral and horrible to a new generation as Satan was ever made in the eyes of any Puritan child."

Angela Denis Powell: **Socialism and the Fight for Women's Rights** (1976).

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“Men lean on their sexist attitudes and sense of superiority like a crutch to help hold them under the weight of a society that strips them of real opportunities for self-fulfillment. But these very male attitudes that oppress women also dehumanize men and confine them in narrow sex stereotypes as well. When the material basis for narrow sexual definitions of male and female roles is eliminated and all human beings are given new opportunities to develop their potential, men will not need to bolster their egos at the expense of women. This is not to say that men will automatically come to support the women's liberation struggle; it is the mobilization of women themselves that helps educate men about the fact that their real interest lie in supporting equal rights for all. Women must build a massive movement of women to fight sexism. We should unite with men in a revolutionary socialist party to fight capitalism.”

Linda Jenness: **Socialism and the Fight for Women's Rights** (1976).

## Notes

1. Since women constitute more than half of the population, and the ruling class is dominated by men, it follows that women constitute the majority of the "underdogs" - the popular masses.
2. Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. (International Publishers, N. Y. 1975), pp. 137-138.
3. Ibid.
4. By monogamy, we mean strictly "monogamy for women".
5. V. I. Lenin, *On the Emancipation of Women*, (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1972), p.81.
6. More than half of whom, as we have said, are constituted by women.



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