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"Women" file

# Understanding a Sister's Struggle

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A short history of the women's movement in the West and its relations with African women

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The United Nations Decade of Women has ended and women everywhere have been asking themselves how much progress was made towards its goals of equality, development and peace. Few could deny that women have a long way to go to achieve equality – or that peace and development are still not assured for the vast majority. But one achievement of the Decade is that it has highlighted the multiplicity of forms which women's condition takes, the range of issues which concern women and the widening gap between women in the Third World and women in the West.

Fragility, flimsy womanhood  
flowers on her birthdays  
luxurious apartments and flashy cars  
have never been her aspirations

Distorted women's lib  
refusing to mother kids  
and provide family comfort  
harassing a tired enslaved dad  
have never been her deeds.<sup>1</sup>

Like many women from Africa the poet has grave misgivings about the women's movement in the West. This article will take a closer look at that movement, its history and thinking in an attempt to understand why it adopted certain strategies, what its achievements and shortcomings have

been and why it has come under attack by women from the Third World. As well as participating in the general movement for human rights, women in many Western countries have for a long time engaged in separate struggles against the special forms of oppression they have experienced. The women's movement first emerged in England with the rise of capitalism, at the time the bourgeoisie were demanding equality. The first recorded mass activity in the history of women's struggles took place in 1642. Four hundred women marched to the House of Commons demanding the same religious freedom as men and protesting at their subordination within the family<sup>2</sup>. More than four hundred years before this the Magna Carta of 1215 contained a clause: 'No widow shall be forced to marry so long as she wishes to live without a husband . . .' What led to the inclusion of this clause remains shrouded in the past. It is only now, towards the end of the twentieth century that women historians are beginning to piece together and record the history of early women's struggles – and to explain why the women's struggle has been called 'the longest revolution'.<sup>3</sup>

### Early struggles

Industrialisation in Europe disrupted the traditional roles of men and women, and removed many productive activities from the home. Together with men, many women were forced into the labour market in order to live, with severe repercussions for themselves and their families.

It frequently happens that women are at work one evening and delivered the next morning, and the case is none too rare of their being delivered in the factory among the machinery. And if the gentlemen of the bourgeoisie find nothing particularly shocking in this, their wives will perhaps admit that it is a piece of cruelty, an infamous act of barbarism, indirectly to force a pregnant woman to work twelve or thirteen hours daily (formerly still longer), up to the day of her delivery, in a standing position, with frequent stoopings. But this is not all. If these women are not obliged to resume work within two weeks, they are thankful and count themselves fortunate . . . Naturally, fear of being discharged, dread of starvation drives her to the factory in spite of her weakness, in defiance of her pain.<sup>4</sup>

The wives of the bourgeoisie, to whom Engels appeals, had also been affected by industrialisation which had confined them to their homes, where they were unproductive and totally dependent on their husbands: men's lives expanded while women's contracted and the gap between them widened<sup>5</sup>. 'Men to rule, women to serve' was a current axiom. However, by the nineteenth century there was a growing awareness of the terrible living and working conditions capitalism had given rise to and middle-class women were amongst those who became involved in charitable work.

In the course of this they became aware of their own lack of rights and powerlessness to change things. Unlike their working class sisters, they had the education, skill and time for rebellion.

In America the early women's movement had its roots in the movement to abolish slavery, 'probably the only circumstance in American life sufficiently glaring in its injustice and monumental evil to impel women to break the taboo of decorum which stifled and controlled them'<sup>6</sup>. Women were brought up to serve others and they first banded together to win rights for others. But once involved they became aware of their own lack of rights within these movements, being excluded from public platforms and restricted to traditionally women's tasks. As in Britain, some found they couldn't work to free others without working to free themselves.

Feminist societies were formed in America and later in Britain. The demand for the vote was initially considered to be too revolutionary: early campaigns were for women's right to control their own earnings, to own property and to have custody of their children. In 1867 John Stewart Mill presented the first women's suffrage petition to Parliament – it was greeted with an uproar: Women were physically and intellectually inferior to men and were unfit to exercise judgment on political matters! The country would be doomed if they were given the vote! Women's purpose in life was to be supported and to minister to men! This attitude, observed Virginia Woolf<sup>7</sup> illustrated a masculine complex which had considerable influence on the women's movement: 'that deepseated desire not so much that *she* shall be inferior as that *he* shall be superior, which plants him, wherever one looks, not only in front of the arts, but barring the way to politics too.'

At the same time as the women's movements were growing, other changes were occurring which were to transform the lives of women. The growth of higher education for girls and expanding white collar employment led to increasing numbers of middle class women working before marriage in offices, shops and semi-professions. With this went reform in women's dress, which feminists had long advocated but failed to achieve. Hair was shorter, shirts were shorter, corsets were discarded. Feminism had to come to terms with the changes advanced capitalism was bringing to the lives of women. Up to the early years of the twentieth century the majority of feminists were puritanical in their attitude to marriage, they condemned birth-control as a means of allowing men to indulge in sex at the expense of women – they wanted both sexes to limit sex to marriage.

The women's suffrage movements in Britain and the United States were denounced in the press and the pulpit. But by dint of hard work and dogged campaigning, sometimes in the face of violent opposition, they built a women's movement that could not be ignored, with dedicated leaders and a mass following amongst all classes. By 1917, when full women's suffrage was won in America, the suffragist movement numbered well over two million members. A qualified vote was granted to British women

in 1918, ensuring they remained a minority until full franchise was granted in 1927.

The hopes of the women's movements that their leaders would be elected to government and they would have a real voice at last were not realised. The movements were composed of women of different classes, religions and politics. By the time the vote was finally won after a struggle which had taken over seventy years, it was about the only thing that united them. Once the battle was over the bond was broken and women's voice was fragmented. Some claim that women used their new power to seek welfare rather than equal rights – concentrating on women's special needs as potential mothers rather than on their needs as citizens.<sup>8</sup>

The 1914-18 War had advanced women's economic position in that they were indispensable as workers, keeping factories and government machinery running. They entered fields of employment previously closed to them and achieved new levels of responsibility. But when peace came they were unable to hold these gains – they were urged back into the home, the marriage-bar was re-introduced in certain jobs and they were once again restricted to low-paid, menial jobs. This economic reversal coincided with the granting of votes to women and undoubtedly contributed to their failure to gain a foothold in government or the press. The women's question faded from the political scene, prompting the observation that, when it came to women's struggles there was no such thing as winning a battle once and for all<sup>9</sup>.

### History repeats itself?

During the 1939-45 World War women were once again told it was their patriotic duty to go out to work and were drawn back into employment in large numbers. Nurseries were opened to care for children and again women rose to senior positions. But when the war was over there was another drive to get women out of the labour market to make room for returning soldiers – around twelve million men in the United States. Women were encouraged to be full-time wives and mothers: theories of maternal deprivation stressed the damaging effects upon children of separation from their mothers. Women responded: fewer graduated from college, they married earlier and had larger families. By the end of the 1950s there were staff shortages in the traditional women's professions of teaching and nursing – women workers began to be looked upon as an asset and not as competitors to men for jobs. Married women began to enter non-manual occupations in increasing numbers, the birth rate started to fall, more women students graduated and the marriage age rose.

1960 was a decade of dissent in America: civil rights, student revolt and anti-war protests led to general politicisation. The women's liberation

movement of the 1960s, like the first phase of the women's struggle in the 1830s arose in the context of natural rights and justice for blacks. Again women were assigned a limited role in the civil rights movement and the more educated among them objected. They were met with a level of hostility, contempt and ridicule that did a great deal to stimulate incipient feminism and led eventually to open revolt<sup>10</sup>.

In 1967 women's groups were founded in New York and Chicago, followed by many other American towns and cities. Publications were started and demonstrations organised. These groups were not simply feminist but female – the exclusion of males, which still characterises radical feminists, seems to have initially been the result of male rejection. The new women's movement introduced the concept of sexism to describe practices that were dismissive or derogatory to women and questioned the benefit of legal rights in the absence of changes within the home and family – to which so many women had been confined and isolated since the War and where so much of women's oppression occurred. 'The personal is political' became the slogan of the women's movement.

Where earlier feminists had seen women as the victims of male lust in and outside marriage and had retreated from sexuality, the revived women's movement, while also concerned with male violence to women, chose to explore female sexuality maintaining that in the past the sex act had been defined solely in male terms. Greater sexual freedom was seen as operating in the interests of men and as a trap into which women were led. They sought sexual freedom rather than domination for women, campaigning for women's control over their own bodies, for abortion law reform and against male dominated medicine. They were critical of beauty contests and the presentation of women as sex objects. Demands for new laws protecting women from discrimination and unequal pay were raised, and for better health and childcare facilities. But the focus was at the inter-personal level. Women in Britain and other West European countries were quick to follow the example of their American sisters. Consciousness-raising groups were started and similar campaigns mounted.

Gradually women gained entry into trades and professions previously closed to them. Affirmative action programmes in the United States helped many women get better jobs. There was a mass entry of women into trade unions in Britain – bodies traditionally committed to excluding women from the organised work-force in order to preserve men's jobs and wage levels. The equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts were passed. But there was no law to force employers to employ women in preference to men and control of the trade unions remained firmly in male hands. The Labour movement accepted women as members and activists without taking their needs seriously.

As the 1970s drew to a close it became clear that the equality which the women's movement sought continued to elude women – their represen-

tation in government remained tiny, they were concentrated in the lowest paid, least skilled jobs and they continued to bear the main burden of child care and home management.

Between 1911 and 1971 women's share of skilled higher paid manual work had fallen by nearly half, from 24 to 13.5%. Over the same period their share of unskilled manual jobs had more than doubled – from 15.5 to 37.2%<sup>11</sup>. Nearly half the workforce is now women but 45% of women in employment work half-time where they generally earn low wages and are ineligible for sickness and unemployment benefits<sup>12</sup>. Women in Britain are still not regarded as 'real' workers – for instance a 1983 survey showed most women still believed that male breadwinners had a prior claim to jobs<sup>13</sup>. The combination of less skill, easier replacement and the still prevalent ideology that a woman's place is in the home make women more vulnerable to unemployment. And the continuing shortage of child care facilities, reduced still further by Tory Government cut-backs, is a reminder that the limited concessions to women over the years are qualified by the needs of capitalism.

Within the women's movement consciousness raising groups have given way to a variety of women's ventures and projects: women's publishers and journals, women's study courses and work place groups, women's peace groups, women's centres against rape and violence. There has been a profound change in many women's consciousness and a wider acceptance of what it is possible and permissible for women to do. But the women's movement, both in Britain and the United States remains fragmented and largely middle-class.

Perhaps the single biggest weakness in both countries is the absence of a mass-based political organisation of women with a programme acceptable to the majority of women. Divisions within the women's movement have contributed to this. On the one hand, socialist feminists argue that the majority of women will continue to be oppressed as long as capitalism survives and so their struggle must be combined with the class struggle. However, although the movement is divided and is not making obvious advances, there is continuous debate and discussion on its shortcomings and on the way forward.

### What went wrong?

Strong criticism of the direction taken by the women's movement in the United States has been voiced by black feminists: the over-emphasis on personal change and development as opposed to political analysis and struggle have led to the adoption of individual strategies for coping with sexism rather than political ones, the movement has concentrated on the importance of women entering and advancing in male dominated professions and has overlooked the fact that women as a whole are losing

ground in terms of economic power. In practice, observes Hooks, the artificially cultivated sisterhood has blurred the influence of race or class experiences on consciousness. It takes no account of the aggressiveness and power to dominate which characterises many white middle class women, nor of the negative encounters black women have had with white women who have exercised power over them<sup>14</sup>. These distortions have limited the appeal of the movement and have contributed to its becoming dogmatic and intolerant of dissent.

In Britain from the early 1970s black women began to leave the women's movement and set up their own conferences, centres and demonstrations 'But the women's movement, so self-conscious about "hierarchy" and its own disassociation with the male left which had systematically excluded its interests, was conspicuously unmoved by the disaffection and flight of black women'.<sup>15</sup> The movement could not acknowledge differences between women and the complexities of their experience. Because the Western women's movement was the most developed in the battle of the genders it seemed to think it held the key to women's liberation everywhere.

### Reaction in Africa

The hostility in Africa and the Third World towards the women's movement in the West to some extent reflects the prejudice which still permeates much of the Western media – perpetuating the myth that feminism is responsible for developments taking place in advanced capitalist countries such as birth-control and family breakdown – developments which contributed more to the growth of feminism than were influenced by it. But the women's movement must take some responsibility itself for this hostility. Radical feminists, denying the influence of culture, race or class on consciousness, assume African women's concerns to be identical to theirs – displaying in the process a level of ethno-centrism which inevitably leads to charges of cultural imperialism. And socialist feminists, after identifying strongly with liberation struggles which mobilised women became disillusioned with the slow pace of women's advance after liberation and made their continued support conditional upon policies being adopted which were acceptable to them<sup>16</sup>.

So the image of feminism which reaches women in Africa has been generally negative. Women's liberation is portrayed as a threat to traditional roles and values and as synonymous with war between the sexes.

But the main reason why there is so little sympathy or understanding in Africa for the women's movement in the West is that the experiences and problems of women in the two worlds are of such a different order. Where in the West women have to fight against being isolated and marginalised in their homes, in Africa women play a crucial role in the economy, as

food producers, though they have the least access to modern technology. Women in Africa have a long history of struggle but by and large of struggle alongside men against imperialist invaders and colonial domination. Most women in the West have not experienced anything like this, or the systematic interference and destruction of their culture and traditions over a prolonged period. When Western women argue for separate organisation out of fear that the battle against patriarchy might otherwise be subsumed or postponed indefinitely they overlook the consequences of the colonial experience. Traditional practices which might naturally have fallen into disuse became symbols of revolt against the colonists who tried to alter them. In the process they were given new life. This was the case in Algeria when the French outlawed the veil and it became a symbol of opposition to French rule for its wearers<sup>17</sup>

It is essentially up to African people and in particular African women to decide to mobilise and fight against certain aspects of their reality – those which seem most urgently in need of change, and to decide how that struggle should be waged<sup>18</sup> So declared the Association of African women for Research and Development in 1980 in reaction to campaigns in the West against genital mutilation. They pointed out that no change was possible without the conscious participation of African women and they warned women from the west to avoid ill-timed interference, maternalism, ethnocentrism and the misuse of power – all of which would only serve to widen the gap between them.

A recent debate in Zimbabwe (referred to in an earlier issue of JAM) seems to illustrate the discord between women in Africa and the West. The latter were instrumental in setting up a Women's Action Group in Zimbabwe in 1983 following a government drive against prostitutes. Their main critic was Nyaradzo Makamure, initially chairperson of WAG. She criticized the initiatives of expatriate women and accused them of misjudging the situation and of disregarding Zimbabwean women's organisations (see JAM No.6). In defence, WAG's secretary, Peggy Watson, claimed they had a duty to share their skills and education 'in a spirit of internationalism'<sup>19</sup>. Apparently these women attached less importance to the experience and understanding which Zimbabwean women had of Zimbabwean society than to their own skills, and were not willing to be guided by them. This insensitivity to issues such as the embryonic stage of Zimbabwean women's movement and the vicious, racist character of the pre-independence regime – both of which would militate against a partnership of equals – reflects the same attitude that has provoked such widespread resentment in the Third World.

At the close of the Decade of Women there are hopeful signs that the criticisms of the women's movement in the West are being heeded, and that they are modifying their stance in relation to other women's struggles. At the Decade of Women conference in Nairobi there seemed to be greater appreciation of the autonomy of women's movements in the

Third World. There was no sign of the 'crusading zeal' shown by Western women at the mid-decade conference in Copenhagen in 1980 which had distressed African women. At Nairobi the workshop on female circumcision was dominated by African women who were directly affected by the practice<sup>20</sup>.

Looking ahead to the year 2,000 the Nairobi conference noted that women had made significant advances in some countries and in some areas but that overall progress during the decade had been modest. But women's consciousness and expectations had been raised and it was important that this momentum wasn't lost.

The changes occurring in the family, in women's roles and in relationships between women and men may present new challenges requiring new perspectives, strategies and measures. At the same time, it will be necessary to build alliances and solidarity groups across sexual lines in an attempt to overcome structural obstacles to the advancement of women.<sup>21</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Gloria Mtungwa *Militant Beauty* in *Malibongwe ANC Women: Poetry is also their weapon* published in Sweden 1985.
- 2 Lawrence Stone 'Early Feminist Movements' in *The Women Question* Ed. Mary Evans. Fontana 1982.
- 3 Juliet Mitchell 'Women: The Longest Revolution' in *New Left Review* November 1966.
- 4 Frederick Engels *The Condition of the Working Class in England* Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow 1962.
- 5 Olive Banks *Faces of Feminism* Martin Robertson Oxford 1981.
- 6 Kate Millet *Sexual Politics* Virago 1977.
- 7 Virginia Woolf *A Room of One's Own*.
- 8 Olive Banks (see note 5 above).
- 9 Dale Spender *There's Always Been a Women's Movement This Century* Pandora Press 1983.
- 10 Jo Freeman *The Politics of Women's Liberation* Longman New York 1975.
- 11 Bea Campbell *Sweet Freedom* Blackwell 1982.
- 12 *Guardian* Newspaper 8 June 1985.
- 13 *Guardian* Newspaper 5 August 1985.
- 14 Bell Hooks *From Margin to Center* South End Press 1984.
- 15 Jenny Bourne *Towards an Anti-Racist Feminism* Institute of Race Relations, 1984.
- 16 Judy Kimble and Elaine Unterhalter, in *Feminist Review* No. 12 1982.
- 17 Frantz Fanon 'The Revolutionary Transformation of Algerian Women' in *Revolutionary Thought in the Twentieth Century* ed. Ben Turok, Zed 1980.
- 18 'AAWORD' in *Third World Second Sex* compiled by Miranda Daview, Zed 1983.
- 19 *Sunday Mail*, Harare, Zimbabwe 11 and 18 November 1984.
- 20 Tsehai Berhane-Selassie 'Decade Conference: A Soap-Opera in the Sun?' in *Spare Rib* September 1985.
- 21 Document 'Forward-Looking Strategies of Implementation for the Advancement of Women' Item 8 of *Provisional Agenda* United Nations Nairobi 15-26 July 1985.