

Socialist Feminism

A Strategy For the Women's Movement

By Hyde Park Chapter, Chicago Women's Liberation Union

Introduction

We have written this paper to express and share with other women ideas for a new strategy for the women's movement. Currently there are two ideological poles, representing the prevailing tendencies within the movement.

One is the direction toward new lifestyles within a women's culture, emphasizing personal liberation and growth, and the relationship of women to women. Given our real need to break loose from the old patterns and given the necessity for new patterns in the post-revolutionary society, we understand, support and enjoy this tendency.

However, when it is the sole emphasis, we see it leading more toward a kind of formless isolation rather than to a condition in which we can fight and win power over our own lives. The other direction is one which emphasizes a structural analysis of our society at its economic base.

It focuses on the ways in which productive relations oppress us. This analysis is also correct, but its strategy, when taken alone, can easily become, or appear to be, insensitive to the total lives of women. As socialist feminists we share both the personal and the structural analysis. We see a combination of the two as essential if we are to become a lasting mass movement.

We think that it is important to define ourselves as socialist feminists, and to start conscious organizing around this strategy. This must be done now because of the current state of our movement. We have reached a crucial point in our history.

On the one hand, the strengths of our movement are obvious: it has become an important force of our time, and it has also succeeded in providing services and support for some women's immediate needs. Thousands of women see themselves as part of the movement; a vaguely defined "women's consciousness" has been widely diffused through demonstrations, action projects, counter-institutional activity, and through the mass media.

Women in the movement have a growing understanding of common oppression and the imperative of collective solutions. With the realization that what we saw as personal problems were in fact social ones, we have come to understand that the solutions must also be social ones.

With the realization that all women lack control over their lives, we have come to understand that that control can only be gained if we act together. We have come to understand the specific needs of various groups of women and that different groups of women have different ways in which they will fight for control over their own lives.

On the other hand, the women's movement is currently divided. In most places it is broken into small groups which are hard to find, hard to join, and hard to understand politically. At the same time, conservative but organizationally clever entrepreneurs are attaching themselves to the movement, and are beginning to determine the politics of large numbers of people.

If our movement is to survive, let alone flourish, it is time to begin to organize for power. We need to turn consciousness into action, choose priorities for our struggles and win. To do this we need a strategy. Our movement's strategy must grow from an understanding of the dynamics of power, with the realization that those who have power have a vested interest in preserving it and the institutional forms

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which maintain it. Wrestling control of the institutions which now oppress us must be our central effort if women's liberation is to achieve its goals.

For each out to most women we must address their real needs and self-interests. At this moment we think that it is important to argue for a strategy that will achieve the following three things:

1. it must win reforms that will objectively improve women's lives.
2. It must give women a sense of their own power, both potentially and in reality.
3. It must alter existing relations of power.

We argue here for feminist organizations. We are not arguing for any one specific organization but for the successful development of organizations so that we may be able to learn from experience and bring our movement to its potential strength.

To make this argument we have written this paper. It has been designed as follows:

1. Socialist Feminism - the concept and what it draws from each parent tradition.
2. Power - the base of power in this society, and our potential as women to gain power.
3. Consciousness - the importance of consciousness for the development of the women's movement, its limitations, and its place in socialist feminist ideology.
4. Current issues and questions facing our movement - A socialist feminist approach to respond to and develop a context for our programs and concerns.
5. Organization - the importance of building organizations for the women's liberation movement and some thoughts on organizational forms.

The ideas that we are presenting are probably shared by many women in the movement, but so far they have not been articulated or identified nationally. We are not organized partly because our tolerance for different approaches, which our ideology encourages, makes it hard to present a new or contrary position.

Furthermore, certain factors in our movement work against any kind of organization. Fears of elitism, the emphasis on personal alternatives and strengths, fear of failure, disbelief in the possibility of winning, and even fear of winning, have all played a role in our hesitancy.

We are addressing this paper now to women who share our ideas of socialist feminism, whether they are women working in the moment, women who have never been active, women who have dropped out of the movement, or women working in mixed organizations.

We hope it may provide a common language in which we can begin to talk, a context in which we can meet to plan how to move.

1. Socialist Feminism

We choose to identify ourselves with the heritage and future of feminism and socialism in our struggle for revolution. From feminism we have learned the fullness of our own potential as women, the strength of women.

We have seen our common self-interest with other women and our common oppression. Having found these real bonds as women, we realize we can rely on each other as we fight for liberation. Feminism has moved us to see more concretely what becomes of people shaped by social conditions they do not

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control. We find our love and hate focused through our feminism - love for other women bound by the same conditions, hate for the oppression that binds us.

A great strength we find in feminism is the reaffirmation of human values, ideals of sisterhood: taking care of people, being sensitive to people's needs and developing potential. From feminism we have come to understand an institutionalized system of oppression based on the domination of men over women: sexism.

Its contradictions are based on the hostile social relations set into force by this domination. This antagonism can be mediated by the culture and the flexibility of the social institutions so that in certain times and places it seems to be a stable relationship.

But the antagonisms cannot be eliminated and will break out to the surface until there is no longer a system of domination. But we share a particular conception of feminism that is socialist. It is one that focuses on how power has been denied women because of their class positions. We see capitalism as an institutionalized form of oppression based on profit for private owners of publicly-worked-for wealth.

It sets into motion hostile social relations in classes. Those classes too have their relations mediated through the culture and institutions. Thus alliances and divisions appear within and between classes at times clouding the intensity or clarity of their contradiction.

But the basic hostile nature of class relations will be present until there is no longer a minority owning the productive resources and getting wealthy from the paid and unpaid labour of the rest. We share the socialist vision of a humanist world made possible through a redistribution of wealth and an end to the distinction between the ruling class and those who are ruled.

We have come to understand that only through an organized collective response can we fight such a system. Sisterhood thus also means to us a struggle for real power over how our own lives and the lives of our sisters. Our personal relations and our political fight merge together and create our sense of feminism.

Through the concept of sisterhood, women have tried to be responsive to the needs of all women rather than a selected few, and to support, criticize and encourage other women rather than competing with them. Our vision - socialist feminism is desirable but not possible under the existing system.

The following would be among the things we envision in the new order, part of everyday life for all people:

- Free, humane, competent medical care with an emphasis on preventive medicine, under the service of community organizations.
- Peoples' control over their own bodies - i.e. access to safe, free birth control, abortion, sterilization, free from coercion or social stigma.
- Attractive, comfortable housing designed to allow for private and collective living.
- social respect for the work people do, understanding that all jobs can be made socially necessary and important
- Democratic councils through which all people control the decisions which most directly affect their lives on the job, in the home, and community.
- Scientific resources geared toward the improvement of life for all, rather than conquest and destruction through military and police aggression.
- Varied, quality consumer products to meet our needs.

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- an end of housework as private, unpaid labour.
- Redefinition of jobs, with adequate training to prepare people for jobs of their choice; rotation of jobs to meet the lifecycle needs of those working in them, as well as those receiving the services.
- Disarming of and community control of police.
- Social responsibility for the raising of children and free client-controlled childcare available on a 24-hour basis to accommodate the needs of those who use it and work in it.
- free, public quality education integrated with work and community activities for people of all ages.
- A popular culture which enhances rather than degrades one's self-respect and respect for others.
- Support for internal development and self-determination for countries around the world.

We outline this vision to be more concrete about what a socialist feminist society might mean or try to be. This vision of society is in direct opposition to the present one which is based on the domination of the few over the many through sex, race and class.

While there are concessions that it can make, the present form would not or could not adjust to the kind of people-orientated society outlined above.

Contradictions – An Alternative is Necessary

Socialist feminism is not only desirable but it is also necessary because the current system of capitalism is not stable and cannot last in its present form. However, this does not mean that the society will inevitably become socialist.

A fascist or barbaric form is also an alternative. The system that will replace capitalism will be determined by the orientation and power of groups fighting for alternatives. Hence, we must struggle to bring our vision of socialist feminism to fruition.

Contradictions are phenomena necessary to maintain the system but by their own internal logic produce forces destructive to it. A knowledge of them helps explain the chaos around us, giving a stable context to understand the historically changing process we are in.

Such an understanding also helps us pick out weak spots of the process, points for defense and attack. Examples of these contradictions are all around us in varying degrees of severity. Sexism and capitalism reinforce one another, shape each other and have shaped us.

Contradictions in Our Power

Any analysis of the distribution of power and its effect on society's institutions must recognize the historical context of our oppression. Our oppression is different from that of our sisters at the turn of the century who had no legal rights, were confined to the home, and more children from maturity to death.

Thus, what is liberating at one time may be a factor of oppression at another. For example, women were denied their own sexuality because of social attitudes, inadequate birth control, the shelter of the family, women's private role in the economy, and lack of knowledge about their bodies.

The development of more advanced technology - the pill and machines - and education objectively gave more freedom to our sisters. At the same time, these developments also made possible new forms of the oppression of women, increased sexual objectification and abuse.

In the realm of women and work, legislation which protected women was of great benefit in easing their burden. Currently, however, in the name of easing our burden, such legislation is used to deny women equal opportunity.

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Of course, women and all people have a right to save and good working conditions; but these need to be fought for all workers. Understanding our changing history helps us to avoid stereotyping our opposition or our own notions of what liberation means.

The development of a strategy makes it clear that technological advances, legislative changes or educational developments are not good or bad in themselves. When we know the context in which any specific change occurs, we can judge the value of that change for our goals.

We have learned from history that, in fact, what is progressive for the system as a whole is also the seeds for its destruction. For example, increasing the availability of jobs for women and encouraging talented women to enter the labour force helps employers strengthen capitalism but at the same time gives women an opportunity to come together physically and unionize as a collective force for change.

Other women, seeing this, will raise their expectations and demands on the system for a larger share than it can offer all. Knowing that these contradictions are the reality in which we live, we can fight that otherwise supposed "monolith" of control at its weak points and gain strength for ourselves.

If our analysis is correct, on the basis of those contradictions, women and other powerless people will find concrete bases for unity to struggle in their self-interest. Now we see severe contradictions and possibilities for fights for structural changes on issues of childcare, inclusion in the political system, jobs and working conditions for workers' control etc.

Multi- Level Contradictions

Many analyses have identified various institutions as the crucial contradiction of sexism. However, these contradictions reflect the social relations of a sexist society, or institutions in which sexism occurs. Eliminating these "prime factors" would neither eliminate sexism nor necessarily create supportive alternatives for women.

As the factory may be the locus for capitalist exploitation, it is not the basis of that exploitation. Private ownership and profit is the basis, giving rise to the class relations. Similarly, the family is a crucial locus of sexist oppression but it is not the basis of that exploitation.

Control by men over women and the relegation of women to secondary roles is the basis of sexism, giving rise to a sexist society. We do not find helpful the constant cry that before we organize, we need to develop a complete theory of the nature of our oppression or find the prime contradiction of our oppression.

Some analyses, in fact, have led us only to further inaction with the rationale of not having the total picture. Every institution oppresses women as long as the society is based on the oppression of women. Our struggle against sexism is against those institutions, social relations and ideas which divide women and keep them powerless, and subservient to men.

At different periods our oppression may be greater in one area than another, and this should direct our struggle. The social relations of society - its institutions, culture and ideology - grow out of this system. But these ideas take on a life of their own, no longer dependent on or necessary to the economic base.

In fact, they can develop in contradiction to that base. So, for example, racism or sexism serve much more than narrow economic function. Thus, what is important is not just redistribution of goods but a change in authority, control and ideas.

Clearly, all elements of a class society are not reflections of the economic relations; however, in the last instance economic relations are the crucial link. Contradictions at every level of society influence each other and within each level they are mirrored and overdetermined.

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That is, the pace at which contradictions develop is complex, sometimes reinforcing, sometimes cancelling each other. Thus, long range planning and a carefully worked out strategy are needed to continually respond to the complexity of the contradictions in society .

But we reflect on our theory that there are contradictions and that an alternative system is 1. desirable and not possible now, and 2. necessary to provide a true end to hostilities between classes, sexes, races, and nations.

We find it futile to argue which is more primary - capitalism or sexism. We are oppressed by both. As they are systems united against our interests, so our struggle is against both. This understanding implies more than women's caucuses in a "movement" organization.

What we as socialist feminists need are organizations which can work for our particular vision, our self-interest in a way that will guarantee the combined fight against sexism and capitalism. At times this will mean independent organizations, at other times joint activity recognizing specific situations and general conditions.

The American Context of the Contradictions

The forms of oppression we face are filtered through the unique conditions of the American situation. We have a very heterogeneous working class, more diversified by ethnic background, race and job status than most other countries.

This gives us many different strengths but also many internal divisions. Also, we have a heritage of slavery with an oppressed black and minority population. This now is as basic to the society as is sexism and is linked with it.

In addition, the power of the ruling class is widespread and disseminated through every aspect of the society. This makes for a difficult enemy - hard to isolate, focus on at its root, and hold accountable while its ideas filter into our minds.

As the leading world imperial power, our national struggle must consider strategic relationships linking our struggle with those around the world. Also, we live in a society with relative material comfort. This means that what we have to offer must not be just economic solutions.

The question of quality of life is not only to be raised but also ideas for a new social order. We also are cut off from our history of left struggle since the destruction of the left in the fifties. To our great lack this has sometimes denied us a sense of long-term struggle and strategy development.

One of our overriding responsibilities at this particular historical period is to develop a strategy which will both call into question the validity of current economic and social relations and at the same time make socialist feminism a meaningful possibility.

This will not occur except as more and more people gain the political experience necessary to develop a concrete understanding of the viability of our vision.

Role of Ideology in the Development of Strategy

The preceding section outlines our ideology - socialist feminism. It is this ideology which guides the development of our strategy and tactics, sets our priorities, and gives us an overall focus for our work. The key ideological understanding is that all issues are political, are based on power, and that our actions have political implications.

We develop this ideology both out of practice and in reading and discussion - matching theory to the real world. To an extent ideology plays the role of consciousness - it is a clear picture of reality which strengthens our ability to communicate and argue for our position.

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Stated explicitly, ideology helps provide links for women, in seeing how one struggle is related to others. Some individuals, aware of many social contradictions, may make an intellectual leap - understand the parts as a whole through a socialist feminist ideology.

Most people are guided by an ideology. Our own particular relationship to ideology has two special functions. First, it provides ideas which guide us, defining the frame work and reason for our actions. Second, it defines our view of the world concretely, thus providing a system of analysis through which women can understand socialist feminism as a world view.

The ideological underpinnings for a socialist feminist strategy are laid out here and should be evident in the paper. But this paper is designed primarily to propose a strategy. It flows from and should help us define our ideology even better in the future; but it is a different undertaking - determining what we should do NOW.

This is one reason we feel confident in describing a strategy when we do not have the full blueprint for how revolution will occur. One is not developed full blow and then the other becomes possible. Neither is this an attempt at overall strategy.

Overall strategy helps us to see the way to seizure of state power and the critical break from the past, developing new institutions and a new social order based on equality of people and redistribution of wealth and resources.

We can only develop an understanding of exactly how this will occur as we gain experience in building our movement. Continually moving from political work to further theoretical development and back to political work is a necessity.

Revolution has several stages and it is important to have an understanding of the historical period we are in. Therefore, given the ideology presented here, we have developed the following priorities for this particular point in time:

1. We must reach most women. We must work toward building a majority movement. Our analysis tells us this is possible if we proceed in the right way.
2. We must present intermediate goals that are realizable as well as desirable to show the necessity and possibility of organizing.
3. We must develop collective actions.

Now the crucial need is to weaken the power of the ruling class, give women a sense of their own power, and improve our lives so that we are welded together as a force prepared to struggle together. Concern with these issues is the basis for the socialist feminist strategy we outline in the next sections.

Power and Sisterhood

As socialist feminists we have an analysis of who has power and who does not, the basis for that power and our potential as women to gain power. Sisterhood is powerful in our personal lives, in our relationship with other women, in providing personal energy and maintaining warmth and love.

But sisterhood is revolutionary because it can provide a basis on which we can unite to seize power. The focus on power is an institutional focus, one that examines the structure of existing institutions and determines who, specifically, has power and how that power is used to oppress women.

This includes understanding the interrelation between the economic sector and the social institutions which reinforce ruling class control. The family, church, schools and government priorities which oppress us reflect and reinforce this control.

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These are reflected in and are served by the dominant ideology, a cultural dominance which controls our everyday private lives. In America, our culture so reflects the ideas of those in power that it is often difficult to identify who the enemy is.

The opposition seems to be all encompassing and everywhere, hard to pinpoint in origins or basics. The ruling class, so reinforced, often appears as a monolith of control. However, as feminists and as socialists we are able to analyze the basic structures of society and how these are used to oppress women.

This focus on power provides a framework for analysing how power relations can be altered. In this section, we focus on a strategy for developing mass women's organizations by focusing on the relationship that we see between reforms and power.

There are three questions crucial to our conception of this relationship:

1. Will reform materially improve women's lives?
2. Will the reform give women a sense of their own power?
3. Will the reform alter existing relations of power?

The Self-Interest of Women

Women are for liberation not just for abstract reasons and a sense of what is "correct" for women, or because they will be the "wave of the future". They are attracted because we present a picture of reality that they also know, as well as hold out a vision that they wish to share.

But talking of such a reality is not sufficient. If we are going to be a movement of all women, we must be able to serve our own self-interest. Unable to fully offer alternatives for women, ourselves, we must be able to hold out the realistic promise of obtaining some of these alternatives through struggles which can be won.

We emphasize self-interest because we feel that recently the movement has gotten far away from thinking about it or what moves women to act, or what moves us to act. Idealism alone now guides us abstractly. We argue it, we live it, we see it.

But we cannot always count on it. We raise the subject of self-interest to insure that we really are speaking to women's needs. However, we do not emphasize self-interest in any narrow sense. Self-interest is not just the accumulation of all physical and concrete needs.

We know women do not live by bread alone and want deeply for themselves and others the enjoyment of culture and relationships that express their hopes and accomplishments. Self-interest is the interest of our sisters and our class.

It means bringing into being and recognizing our consciousness, culture and control of the society. We must develop ways to transform women's currently felt interests in line with our vision. Real sisterhood changes concern from individual needs into concern for one's group, organizational and class needs.

With strategy and struggle for short-term goals, women can come to perceive a long-term self-interest. Abstract social goals are defined and given concrete form in program. We should choose issues for our direct action campaigns around which women will unite, can win, and on which their views of what is advantageous to them will change.

For example, while destroying racism is a deep concern of ours, we would not organize white women around racism as an issue. Stated as such, it is not concrete enough to do something about, and it is not a concern for most white women.

However, uniting white and black groups around common concerns would be a concrete way to objectively also fight racism. We also can develop means to discuss and make explicit these ideas. But direct action for concrete reforms makes our ideology have real content.

Winning

If we want to speak to most women, we have to be serious about winning. Women have been losers too long. Women will only flock to women's liberation ideas when they know that it will help them and others to become winners, gain something that they want for themselves and their daughters and others.

This differentiates us from many groups more concerned with the correctness of political principles than in converting a simple, true idea into a means for winning something for the people involved. We want better lives for ourselves and others now.

We would not want success for some at the expense of others, but we want to fight to win for success. Out of this commitment to our sisters, we have challenged our own thinking, our own sense of weakness, and our own inability to push ahead, so we may solidify the gains our movement is making and move to greater gains.

We know this treads on our fear of success. "If you can win do you really lose?" Women have been losers so long, we often resist any chance at material victories. It is important to consider how we define victories to avoid co-optation.

This goes back to our original criteria for strategy. We fight for reforms that will improve women's lives but we place priority on developing struggles which will also give women a sense of their own power and limit the arbitrary power of those in control.

We do not believe that reform built on reform will eventually lead to socialism or women's liberation. We anticipate a severe rift in social relations or many such breaks prior to full alterations in power. But we think that the increased demands for real benefits created by this strategy will heighten contradictions and prepare us for struggles leading to the rift.

The nature of this revolution and the future that follows it will be defined by the struggles leading up to it. As long as we are not effective, winning, feeling our strength, sometimes there is a danger of resentment toward our sisters with statements like, "why is it they can't see and they won't join us?"

This will happen to an extent as long as we're not effective. The main burden is on us to provide activity that women will want to join. If women do not join us, our first thought must be what are we doing that is not clear enough, nor related sufficiently to the specific problems women are facing that they are not joining us?

Of course, there are many reasons women may not join us at certain times, for example, threats from their husbands, fear of social identification, lack of baby sitters or real disagreements. Our task is finding ways to develop and build our strength as a movement. To this end we propose this strategy.

The socialist feminist strategy aims at realigning power relations through the process of building a base of power for women through a mass movement united around struggling for our self-interest. Our goal is to build this movement.

We oppose the utopian position which argues against any change until the perfect solution is possible. On the other hand, we also are not for working on any and every reform action that presents itself. Our strategy allows us to define priorities and timetables to lend structure to issues in terms of particular situations.

Decisions about what reforms to fight for and how, must be made on the basis of the following three criteria.

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1. Will the Reform Materially Improve Women's Lives? Our lives as women are oppressive in many ways; therefore we want to work to improve our lives now. Whatever our priorities, we must focus on meeting our immediate needs.

When we can show that we can meet women's needs they will want to join us. While we believe that sexist capitalism cannot implement all of the reforms we are for, it is possible to use its own rules against itself.

That is, we can force change through pressure. Thus, our strategy is quite different from that of raising maximalist demands - demanding something that can't be done under capitalism in order to prove that capitalism is bad.

Many reforms are really beneficial to us, can be won and build our confidence. Nevertheless, the reform itself is not the only end. We also are oppressed by our real lack of power to control that reform.

2. Will The Struggle For The Reform Give Women A Sense Of Their Own Power? We need to struggle around issues where success is obviously our victory rather than a gift from those in power. Our struggle for reforms must build our movement.

Our movement's strength can only be sustained through organizations. Through organizations, individual women can collectively have a sense of their power. Otherwise, even when we win, we don't know it or can't claim it.

Through organizations, one victory builds on another. They have a life longer than the individual participants and strength greater than their parts.

3. Will the Reform Alter Existing Relations Of Power? Women in American society have little control over any aspect of our lives. We want not only concrete improvements but the right to decide on those improvements and priorities.

We want power restructured, wealth redistributed, and an end to exploitation. Those most closely affected by institutions have the right to decide what those institutions do. This means councils of workers, consumers of an institution's services, parents in childcare centers etc.

Most projects now, of great value to our movement, work on only one or two of the above points. The third is the most difficult and least developed in our movement. Specific battles may not win or even try to work on all three levels. But our lasting success will depend on interrelating the three points on and among projects.

Tolerance and Priorities

We want to emphasize the need for a multi-level approach to women's liberation. Having such an approach, we can avoid some of the pitfalls of dogmatic sectarianism about the correctness of a single issue or program.

We must be open and encourage alternatives. The need for a coherent strategy which encompasses education, service and action cannot be emphasized too much. There are some moments when an issue is ripe and other times when it is important, but will not move women, cannot be won and does not speak to women's felt needs.

But we cannot degenerate into a vague pluralism that says any effort is as good as any other effort. We can be anti-sectarian, encourage a variety of approaches and know that we must move to many approaches and reach the many aspects of our lives as women.

At the same time, we can follow a coherent strategy to set priorities for immediate work that we think are important. Of course, the test of tolerance and sectarianism is in reality. We must see how we are perceived, received and grow. Re

ality is a good cure.

Applying the Three Criteria

We welcome almost any activity that works for women. At this time, however, we wish to emphasize the importance of all three criteria mentioned earlier: improving women's lives, giving women a sense of their own power, and altering relations of power.

The three criteria should be applied to any proposed activity. On the abortion issue, for example, the socialist feminist approach is different from seeking only legislative change by working through closed channels and thereby maintaining the right of those in power to make the rules.

Victories on the abortion issue must be WON by women actively fighting for their rights. During the struggle it is important to focus on who is making and influencing decisions about abortion and to identify these individuals and institutions to women.

This approach is broader than a "write to your senator" campaign. It means, for example, finding out and publicizing the church groups lobbying against abortion and challenging their tax-exempt status for lobbying.

It also means finding out what corporate executives are on those church boards and launching consumer action against them and their businesses for their support of the church's lobby. Any campaign undertaken should identify such interconnectedness.

We must unite women in direct, political action to change such repressive measures as the abortion law and at the same time focus on the power relations of those involved. Victories can be achieved and our campaigns are specific enough so that we can measure our success and failures.

Positive action may include a variety of activities, such as:

- Confrontation with specific demands
- Negotiation
- Forcing an issue at a public hearing
- Embarrassment pressure - picketing, for example
- Public expose in the press or in a hearing
- Mass public protest meeting
- Mass demonstration tied to a specific campaign
- Guerilla and dramatic activities
- Legal, disruptive action - strikes, boycotts, stockholders meetings, for example
- Civil disobedience - This may be useful on occasion, but we think at many times other tactics may be just as effective, less alienating to potential allies, and less costly.

The point is activity selected should be related to an overall strategy around a particular issue and with an eye toward what will achieve the reform and build the movement. The political action approach

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described above is different from many activities of such groups as Moratorium which organized direct actions without a permanent mass organizational framework.

Such groups do not involve a mass of women in continuing, persistent work and do not focus on targets that can result both in reform victories and a shift of power relations. Large demonstrations are fine to focus attention on an abstract issue of generalized principle, such as free abortion on demand, no forced sterilization, free 24-hour client-controlled childcare, etc.

However, to win in both the above senses, the demand must be directed toward some individual in the institution from whom a response is demanded and who actually has the power to do something.

Issues for Further Consideration

No strategy is without difficulties, or right for every circumstance. This strategy we have found most useful for a great variety of current situations. We need to further develop the ideas, learning from action, so that we not only win, but win what we want. As we develop, we need to keep in mind issues such as the following:

- This is an intermediate strategy. We must re-evaluate our work to ensure that we move along a revolutionary trajectory.
- We must provide ways that people can move from an understanding of specific issues, to an understanding of inter-related social reactions.
- We need keep both ultimate and immediate concerns in mind. We must be conscious of ways in which our ideology is defined and implied in specific struggles. Doing so, we must take into account the needs and strengths of the individuals, their understanding of what is possible and the nature of the opposition.

To help do all these things, we need reference groups which can put our organizing efforts into context. Such groups help us choose priorities between struggles and develop strategy for revolutionary struggles.

Role of Counter-Institutions

A major trend in the current women's movement is to organize counter-institutional projects to directly meet the needs of women. This work is important for the women's movement but must occur in the context of a movement which has other foci as well.

Counter-institutions can do a number of things. They can help raise the expectations of women who use and staff the institutions as to what is possible. They can provide services that meet the needs of women now. They can demonstrate that the problems addressed are social in nature and in solution.

They convey to the broad constituencies we seek to address that we have positive programs to offer for solving the problems we draw attention to, and that we are not simply negative in orientation. In contrast to consciousness-raising, such programs dispel the specter of endless problems without apparent solutions.

For example, a feminist-sponsored health center provides a needed service that materially improves our immediate condition. It demonstrates that women acting together can change some of their circumstances.

It can contribute to building an organized base of power among women ready to fight on an ongoing basis for their rights. However, counterinstitutions have some limitations. They may foster false optimism about change by indicating that problems can be solved in the spaces between existing institutions.

Such programs could take up all the time of more than all of us involved in the present movement and never meet all the needs. Such activities cannot alter the power relations if they make no demands on those in power.

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WE argue the importance of combining counter-institutions with direct action organizing to build on the strengths of each. Such organizing focuses demands on social institutions, thus countering the conclusion that society is unchangeable.

It also counters an over-optimism about the potential of self-help to change women's lives by pressing the point that significant changes can be made for all women only through far-reaching changes in power relations.

The most useful role of counter-institutional projects is providing a vision for an alternative and at the same time demonstrating the need for demanding change from those in power.

How Do We Get Power? – Building and Maintaining Real Sisterhood

Focusing specifically on political or direct action, how do we incorporate this approach into our movement? We believe that many women would join us if we had the structures and activities so they could become involved in struggles on concrete issues.

We need a perspective which will allow us to undertake both short and long term struggles and campaigns which have focus on winning. Following is a partial summary of the criteria we feel must be considered in selecting and planning a program for direct action.

The goals of the movement should be ones which can:

- Broaden and relate to many aspects of women's lives.
- Convert a vision into specific activity
- Help women gain self-respect
- unite women and build a mass organization because it focuses on women's needs.
- Identify the felt needs that would move women to fight on the issue.

A project should be chosen so that it

- moves women into direct action and groups where they can evaluate their efforts.
- can identify specifically what institutions and who within those institutions exercises control over the issue and has the power to make reforms in response to pressure.
- identifies what a victory would be.

The Project Should:

- be broken into parts and fought as reforms that can conceivably be won
- provide step-by step activity for involvement.

Application of the strategy: an Example

In developing a concrete strategy, it is necessary to plan full campaigns having many aspects which translate a general issue into an implementable program. Here is an example of how some of us developed one project - fighting for child care with the Action Committee for Decent Childcare.

We based this project on the kinds of ideas offered in this paper.

Ideology: We had decided that a struggle for free, 24 hour, client-controlled childcare would meet our ideological criteria. However, this position, as an initial statement of our goals, had an immediate weakness.

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Raising this demand before we had an organization alienated us from even the women who later became our strongest allies. Our vision seemed so wild-eyed, so far from the existing situation, that it appeared completely unrealistic.

Once we won some specific demands, raising these same ideals became more rational and acceptable because the possibility was real - women began to gain a sense of their own power.

It should be pointed out that we had decided to form a mass organization. We were attempting to reach a different group of women from those already in the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, an anti-capitalist feminist organization.

We felt that women who worked with the Action Committee for Decent Childcare would, at some point, become interested in the C W L U. Such women would probably never join a women's liberation organization without some intermediate alternative.

But whether or not they joined the C W L U, the movement's ideas and strength would grow with this mass form. This is not to say that it is necessary to have an organization like C W L U before a more mass based organization can be built.

Rather, in individual cities, women will need to determine who they are attempting to reach, and the specific political context of their situation. We are also not opposed to raising our vision as a demand; and in fact, there are some instances where that may be very important.

Out of our experience, however, we learned the significance of fully understanding who the constituency is, and what the organization is attempting to accomplish. A second problem we faced was our understanding of our oppression as women.

We knew that childcare was an issue for many women, but failed to take into consideration the problems such women face. The very women we hoped to involve - those with young children, were among the least likely to ever be active in any kind of social movement.

They simply don't have the time, because they don't have childcare, are less mobile, and don't think of themselves as active community members. The prevailing notion that women need something to do after their children are in school also makes these women less likely to consider becoming involved.

Development of a strategy: We spent three months gathering information about every aspect of the issue of childcare and considering all the alternatives for vying for power. After the initial period, research was used to serve actions.

We immediately eliminated the federal level since it is too remote to attack without a national organization to force some change. However, in instances where local offices really have power they might be appropriate targets.

State and local agencies appeared to be easier and more successful targets. With the state level dominated by Republicans and the local level by Democrats, we also considered ways to pay one off against the other.

In carrying out this research we attempted to determine the real sources of power versus the window dressing or public relations functions. With childcare, a problem exists, because there really is no money allocated. Therefore there is little real power than can be fought for.

It is much more ambitious to demand that childcare be a priority than to redirect existing funding, increase it, or control it.

The specific focus of our initial work included consideration of:

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1. Whose Problem is it? Who is our possible constituency? How do they see the problem? Each aspect should be considered, and specific appeals and actions developed for each. For example, women who need child care are those who:

- a. work days or nights.
- b. are in schools or training programs
- c. can't afford child care - poor or middle class
- d. are accused of child abuse or are in rehabilitation programs i.e. drug abuse programs of then have large budgets.
- e. want to go off welfare or are being pushed off.
- f. want to influence the type of care available for their children - including part time and nursery school users, who often see themselves separately from child care users.
- g. need child care to go shopping or on other errands.
- h. need it for social service work or civic responsibilities i.e. churches, hospitals, and shopping centers could be made responsible to their constituencies and supporters and people who keep them in business.
- i. are single parents and must work
- j. want a few hours away from their children. Setting up tot lots where housewives can socialize might bring such women together, breaking down their isolation doing private work in the home.
- k. just like to work with children.
- l. own day care centers and can't keep them going with the high cost and rigid requirements
- m. as taxpayers, want their money to be used in the interests of women.

What Are the Sources of the Problem?

This included research into the various public and private interests involved, such as:

- State Level: Department of Children and Family services; Community Coordinated Childcare; Department of Public Aid; State Legislature.
- Local Level: Department of Human Resources; City Council; City Departments with responsibility for licencing.
- Private sector: industry, hospitals, colleges, department stores, building contractors, churches, shopping centers etc.

3. Who Has Information About the Problem?

Here we talked with various bureaucrats, researchers, lobbying groups, social service agencies, local community organizations, social service groups of women working to open childcare centers.

The Initial Strategy Undertaken: We considered institutional targets such as colleges, students and staff; churches - parishioners and local communities; industry - employees. Each had some limitations as an initial project. For colleges, this seemed to be more localized struggle where we would need to engage in campus organizing from the beginning and where we did not have an initial base.

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For churches there seemed to be some interest but most could not move ahead because of licensing laws in the city. For industry, we focused on developing contacts with unionized plants, for the union is the agent of the employees and had no reason to trust us before we had developed a real organization.

We also considered welfare but here, too, we did not have the initial base for our first project. After examining each of the above areas with the continual question of what we could do to meet women's real needs, give women a sense of their own power and alter power relations, we decided on an initial strategy.

Given the funding situation, we focused on licensing, an equally great problem, but one that was more manageable. Existing licensing laws prevented centers from opening rather than encouraging new centers. Women became involved because of their need for childcare.

Day care operators joined because we could provide services, communication and expose their problems with the city government in order to win real changes. This meant they took risks of retaliation by the city.

When enough operators were involved and singling out any one individual became difficult. Those who were vulnerable had parents organized for protection. Another important aspect in this issue of women's concern as taxpayers that their taxes are being used against their interests.

This also broadened who joined us - women who were not mothers, but concerned about women and as taxpayers felt they had a right to speak up. Although initially we believed our constituency would be all white, we very successfully developed a black and white organization on the basis of self-interest.

In a black area, women demanded the creation of child care centers, because there were none. In an adjoining white area, women demanded that the few existing centers not be closed down. Once united, other common issues were raised.

We discovered that a few initial victories were extremely important for self-confidence. A reputation that you can win brings others into the organization. In one year, the Action Committee for Decent Childcare:

1. forced the city to undertake a complete review of all licensing procedures.
2. forced the Department of Human Resources to end closed-door meetings on childcare.
3. sponsored the first public meeting with the Department of Human Resources on day care licensing problems.
4. forced the city to set up a committee to review licensing.
5. written an analysis of the current codes, with recommendations for change that were used as the basis for the new licensing codes.
6. sponsored a series of community meetings in Hyde Park, the Southwest Side, and the North side areas to which state representatives, senators, and aldermen were invited to present their positions on day care and to pledge support for specific proposals.
7. started moving toward community control of childcare.
8. made existing childcare groups more active in pressing for changes.

The next struggles will be to win changes, institution by institution, while other struggles are going on for women's community decision making over licensing and funding in the city.

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Organization: Our initial work focused on how to build an organization that could implement our strategy. Locally-based community groups working both on their own local issues and on concerns which required city-wide action seemed the best alternative.

Such groups are particularly important when working with a group of women who are not very mobile and at the same time heighten the democracy of the organization and provide for the development of skills among the women involved.

We also found it necessary to develop different structures for the many different roles women wanted and could play - local chapters, forums, day care operator councils, plus a steering committee for coordination and decision-making in the organization.

Out of our experience, we believe that it is important to continually assess how the activities of the organization build its base and its power. All actions should be geared toward building the organization as well as the importance of the issue.

When a decision is made to do an action because it is abstractly worthwhile, ways should be built in to expand the organization - in resources, finances, new constituencies, prestige, and publicity, that will later add to our strength.

We also discovered that it is crucial to have full-time organizers for sustained activity. Initial funding is also necessary to ensure the maintenance of the day-to-day operations of the organization. Once off the ground, an organization can raise its own funds but the initial period is most difficult.

Lacking funds, the Action Committee has been forced to suspend operation.

Consciousness

Consciousness-raising is a process by which women come to understand the nature of reality so that they may change it. One's consciousness is related to one's objective conditions. It is the subtle interplay between the two - consciousness and conditions - which we emphasize in this section.

Consciousness is a word that has been used very loosely and has meant many things: the development of a positive self-image, individual change and growth, new emotional and sexual relationships with other women, or any of these coupled with the more general notion of a women's culture.

It also means an understanding of how power is used in society and the experience of changing that society. The conception of consciousness-raising has been an extremely significant contribution of the women's movement.

The whole notion of support and sisterhood has arisen as a result of women's realization of their prescribed roles and attitudes toward one another. Women have come both to feel less isolated through consciousness-raising and to learn that women's isolation is a social phenomenon.

We have come to understand more about the incredible problems which women confront in daily life and to respect the solutions we have been forced to make for survival. Consciousness has therefore been both a source of strength to women and a source of personal analysis.

We have learned, for example, some sense of how power is used because we can see how it functions in individual relationships.

Consciousness and Objective Conditions

Consciousness is one's awareness of her own ideas about her situation and how the world functions. What excites us about women's liberation consciousness is that we think it is the most useful description of reality for most women.

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This is the key to a socialist feminist understanding of consciousness. We believe that we see a basic reality, and it is this picture of how things are and how they got that way that, primarily, we have to offer.

We are not suggesting one of many ways that things might be working now - we offer a description of the underlying relationships. This understanding makes us more effective. It is useful to women so that they can act and change what they understand.

Socialist feminist consciousness is of such value because it is useful, it is true. Of course, there is a great interplay between objective conditions - the various material and social arrangements of our lives - and consciousness.

With material changes such as children, a mate, a home, one often becomes more circumspect because such a person must be able to provide for others. Or, a sister is not treated equitably or denied rights she had come to expect and suddenly the women's movement is no longer just "them". In everyday ways, objective conditions affect our minds.

Change may also come through receiving information which touches our crucial values and jolts us. It may be of women dying from illegal abortions or of My Lai massacres. Information changes our consciousness by putting our lives into a new context.

Usually, we think, this change happens in ways consistent with women's pasts rather than through absolute, abrupt breaks from it. Most often, a change in specific conditions and consciousness occur simultaneously, part of a process developing over months, if not a lifetime.

Our material lives change and our thoughts about it and ourselves change. One situation or series of situations may be a catalyst to a new perception of reality, but this is often a culmination of other events. In our movement we think it is important to emphasize the obvious about consciousness.

We all have consciousness. WE all have contradictions in our own "level" or "levels" of consciousness. Certain factors of our lives may mean that we emphasize certain things we see to be true; and ignore, or deny, or just agree to live with others.

Our movement needs to offer women feasible alternatives. These new alternatives can help close the contradictions with which they live. Here it is important that we offer a view of reality. For example, women often cannot see who their enemy is because he is not right on the scene.

So, often people vent their anger on a relatively powerless agent who is carrying out another's will e.g. the waitress, or cannot function well in the conditions but who does not have the power to change. What we have that makes us attractive, is that we see the roots. That is the meaning of the word "radical".

What Our Consciousness Has To Offer

So what does our conception of consciousness have to offer? It allows women to generalize from their specific situation or series of situations to see patterns. This provides a picture of reality that will allow them to function better because the pieces fit.

But we can provide more than a pattern: we identify causes for events. Only if we understand these causes will we know how to change those events - not repeat or be overwhelmed by them. It provides a systemic way to develop our ideas from ideology to strategy, to program and tactics, because it identifies things in relation to their importance in reaching our goals.

We must understand consciousness raising in relation to objective conditions. Women cannot have "higher consciousness" by trying harder. There are real limitations on women. Just presenting alternatives does not often make them adequate or real to women.

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We must always relate to the lives of women, in the concrete form. The most wonderful thing that a consciousness-raising group does is to help us see that problems we once felt were personal are social. WE must continue to see how we are not so different from most women.

We react to so many of the same objective conditions, from the pill, economic job scarcity, more youth in college etc. This helps to keep things in perspective. For example, it is not women's liberation that is making problems for the nuclear family. IN part, we are an outgrowth of many of its problems.

In part, we affect its future and the alternatives offered. So there is the constant interplay of objective and subjective forces. Popularized women's liberation consciousness itself is not what causes social change.

Implications of Socialist Feminist Consciousness

We began our paper with a three-point guideline to strategy:

1. win real concrete reforms that meet women's needs
2. give women a sense of their own power.
3. alter the relations of power.

Our understanding of consciousness allows us to understand the real root needs of women, and the ways in which our powerlessness affects us and gives us the desire to alter relations of power. It unites talk and action, constantly, describing a place for emphasizing each.

It helps us set priorities in terms of a concrete situation. Thus, we move away from abstractly "pure" issues, but see each issue in a specific situation as one that may or may not demand our attention, depending on how it relates to the lives of women we are able to address and other strategic considerations.

It also makes us fairly tolerant of what choices women make with their lives because we see how bound up conscious decisions are with immediate situations. We have a great belief in the almost infinite perfectability of people, given changes in social institutions and generations of change in consciousness.

But we are cautious about the extent of personal perfection. We know no one can be liberated in this society, no matter what their consciousness. WE are bound in networks of limitations, immediate, specific and affecting our whole lives.

Thus, consciousness is not abstract though it may at any point be unclear. It does not come from an individual's mind, though intellectual focus develops it. It is not necessarily reflected in all personal actions of an individual, but is in social actions.

A socialist feminist consciousness is certainly not a natural or spontaneous process that will always happen when a group of women come together. As events move quickly to clarify social forces, as declarations of war, arrests, economic hard times, increased divorce rate etc, so our consciousness is clarified.

Consciousness is a key to power, not only in our individual lives, but as a social force coming into its own and able to work on its own behalf. Many things have moved us to believe in women's liberation. Talking to other women, we came to realize our oppression by understanding the nature of our upbringing and of our lives as women.

However, the changes we think will be most permanent in us are those made by participating in a variety of activities, which, through our involvement, lead us to further understanding and change. In the

process of struggling to change our oppression, we begin to understand both the specific forms of oppression and how they are related to one another.

We find that ideology guided only by reflection and discussion loses touch with reality and is not accepted by most women. Further, if our movement is to continue to expand and to move forward to change our oppression as women, we must unite in a variety of activities which will build our power base.

This in turn further develops our ideology and our understanding of the oppression of women.

Rap Groups

The method of consciousness-raising most frequently used in the women's movement has been the rap group. The fact of group participation has been very important in changing women's feelings of isolation and individuality .

It has made it easier for us to understand the commonality of interest among all women and what is necessary for change. The rap group format is one in which everyone can contribute. Women can develop skills through understanding one another's experience and dealing with the feelings that experience has created. But because consciousness and conditions are intertwined, rap groups by themselves may be a dead end.

They can lead to a concentration on the improvement of ideas or one's self with no eye toward action. The purism of endless refining and redefining should not be mistaken for success. A good analysis is not equal to action. WE are arguing neither for an uncritical turn of mind nor the blissful ignorance of all but the narrow issues for the many.

We are arguing that ideology be integrated into the ongoing life of the movement, and that this is best done in relation to and with testing, by concrete changes resulting from actions. The rap group format may present another obstacle to the full development of the movement.

Discovering more and more examples of the effects of oppression on personal life can make the task of social and personal change seem impossible. It is not difficult to reach the stage where any work toward liberation seems irrelevant because early socialization practices cannot be changed at once.

Direct action supplements rap groups. It provides opportunities to develop and use new skills while bringing about change. In this context, both rap groups and the development of a socialist feminist analysis can proceed without the dangers of prism or hopelessness.

The full development of women's capabilities may be hampered by the very things in consciousness-raising which at first seem to stimulate so much growth. Women come together as sisters on the basis of shared weakness and common problems.

As women grow stronger, they themselves may become frightened; sometimes the strength of one may divide the others from her. Thus sisterhood may be lost as strength is gained.

Issues

To make more concrete what we mean by socialist feminism, in this section we address a few issues currently facing the women's movement. For each of these issues we sketch what we see as a socialist feminist context. The issues include independent women's organizations, separatism, class organizing, counter-culture, lesbianism and vanguards.

Independent Women's Organizations

With the isolation and unorganized state of the women's movement in a number of areas of the country, many women who might agree with ideas presented here are not presently working as part of the independent women's movement.

Many women have filtered back into mixed organizations or left the women's movement, feeling that it rejected their skills. Many women in mixed organizations who know they are for women's liberation are caught in the bind of either feeling guilty or hostile to the independent women's movement.

Our concerns, we expect, are shared by many women in mixed organizations. We hope emphasizing the need for an independent women's movement also helps develop ways for working with women and men in mixed organizations.

We argue for developing organizations and having organizational pride. This is a point many act as if we had "overcome". We argue for developing leaders and organizers responsible to such organizations and through them to us in the movement.

A few years ago it was not "in" to be for organizers. Now leaders are "out". We argue for a leadership that is responsible and useful to all of us. There are so many more points, but these should provide some for argument and discussion.

All women's fates are bound with that of the independent women's movement. The movement's advances will concretely affect the lives of all other women. So too, individual women's advances and defeats, multiplied, will help shape the movement.

Women

Other reasons for women working with women have been said often, and still are true. As with any group with common interests, once those interests are identified, much is shared and a common perspective can be developed more readily.

It is easier to follow our own agenda. Of course, there are situations in which organizational problems develop among women. We find women are just nicer to work with than men.

But the most basic argument for the independent women's movement and organizations is that the relations of power are unequal between women and men. As long as this is true, men will maintain control unless we have separate organizations to identify our needs and strengths.

Unequals, treated superficially as equals, remain unequals. This will be true unless women come together on the basis of self-respect and separate organizations or caucuses. We argue this partly in the interest of ever maintaining democratic and effective mixed organizations.

Women must be united to act on our own program. Otherwise, feeling our ineffectiveness, we will focus solely on attacking chauvinism in organizations in a more and more personalized form. Without a strong caucus through which women can be strong, they suffer - for example, being told they are not political or to submerge their desire to fight on women's concerns.

Organizations also suffer, unable to proceed, having to deal with internal problems of chauvinism at every step. Alternatively, they will not deal with chauvinism at all. As socialist feminists, we argue for using the principles of power realities to guide democracy in the organization. Women in mixed organizations would fight for and win the program they wanted and know they had won it.

This would begin to alter structurally the relations of power in the mixed organization through common struggles in action. At the same time, we must remember our greatest enemies are those in or serving the ruling class.

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Working With Men

Objectively, men as a group have vested interests opposed to those of women as a group. We will, for example, cut into their jobs, challenge their position of comfort in the family, and take personal power away from them. In the short-run, and in some ways, men are an enemy.

Why work with men at all? At many points, our interests and the interests of men are shared. We commonly are united in our class position against such things as bad health care, insufficient jobs, long hours and a powerlessness to affect priority decisions of our society.

Also, at points, sexism oppresses men. At these points, we can join in common struggle. Even then, we must be able to organize separately so that we may come together. In addition, women have historic and emotional bonds to men. When men and women come together alone, but only when that social reality changes.

In many cases, women have no real choice but marriage for survival, self-respect, warmth or love. We must look at the lives of most women with few assumptions to discover what their real alternatives are and in what is their happiness.

Our perspective for our struggle must not deny to these women the sources of support they have found in the past. There has sometimes been a weakening of the skills men have to offer to the movement, by excessive guilt-tripping when men are told to give up their chauvinism.

True, the struggle against chauvinism is a constant one. But chauvinism is all around us, constantly conditioning us, and will be most effectively overcome through attacking its institutional roots, through women united against it. We assume men, and we, will reflect chauvinism.

Too often our actions contradict our knowledge that originally brought us together - you cannot overcome social problems with personal solutions. Thus a "position" on men should be tactical: it varies with the real circumstances.

A position on men is not our program. Sexism, not men, is our political enemy.

Separatism

Separatism has two meanings now in the movement. One is an ideological position arguing for the separate development of men and women as fully as possible. Another is a tactical position, arguing for separate organizations or life alternatives. We argue for separate organizations as a tactical decision.

However, we argue against an ideological stance of separatism. It is easy to see how the argument for the independent women's movement could lead to an ideological argument for separatism. We do find strength in separatist models.

They show us concretely, how much we can gain from each other as women. But for reasons previously said we do not believe separatism will solve our problems. Also, because ideological separatism does not have the social basis for attraction to the majority of women, it has turned the struggle to one only within the movement.

It moves toward more and more purity, dividing us from our allies rather than uniting us on common ground and developing new common ground on which we can unite. Ironically, this is much the same position that women in mixed organizations, without strong caucuses, find themselves in.

More basically, under certain circumstances, working with men is feasible, desirable and necessary to achieve our vision. Separatism as personal practice is a matter of choice, as political position is illusory.

In the Name of Socialism

In the name of socialism, arguments have been made against the independent women's movement that did justice neither to feminism nor to socialism. Such arguments were often part of attempts to develop a class analysis of American society and saw women's liberation as a way to bring women into "the movement".

Many in the women's movement have responded negatively to the opportunism implied in this using of women's liberation. Although it is now generally accepted that the fight against sexism is a main goal, there are still times when the perspective of women's liberation is challenged for legitimacy from this quarter.

Sometimes the challenge comes in the form that our primary fight must be against racism. Since the women's movement is primarily white, this would mean we need to change struggles. Raising the need to fight racism abstractly only reaffirms the "purity" of those who raise it.

WE argue that struggles against racism will be meaningful on the basis of common self-interest between black and white groups. On many issues, whites and blacks may not be able to unite because our relations of power are unequal.

However, when social forces touch us commonly in some ways, we can build programs to overcome social divisions. We must not deride the support we do have because it does not include all women right now. At other times the argument is one of "giving up privilege".

To some extent this is another abstract purism. More importantly, this is not the image we want to project, nor will it be successful. Women will join us because we win rights for them. No one joins in order to lose something that they need.

Rights will be established as they are fought for and won, not because those with privileges and power give them up. A third challenge to women's liberation has postulated that only productive, paid working women are a revolutionary force.

There have been some interesting but defensive responses to this showing that housework is productive. But we feel the argument and the defense have been too narrow. There are many contradictions in society. Many different kinds of efforts, directed at many different targets, have included so many more women in our movement.

Of course, only employed workers can withhold labour necessary for corporations to continue. But the general strike has never won any victories when it wasn't combined with the general political mobilization of all exploited classes.

While working for it, organizations of unpaid female labour and community organizing efforts are building the social force we will need for that revolution and revolutionizing future social relations.

Counter-culture

The women's movement has brought forth a women's culture with the development of women's poetry, music, art, history, women's centers in the cultural realm, and more practically orientated skills such as auto repair and karate.

This culture has provided a place for our creativity to be expressed and enabled us to have more independence and self-confidence in areas where we have been denied knowledge and opportunity for expression in the past.

In addition, it has helped change many women's lives. By providing an example of our vision, women's culture has helped develop a consciousness of how things could and should be better. At the same time, feelings of frustration and isolation among other things have led many women to seek only cultural Socialist Feminism - A strategy for the women's movement, H.P. Chapter, Illinois.

alternatives - personal lifestyles of liberation. Many women have chosen to commit themselves entirely to development of a counter culture, dissociating themselves from any action or organizations and frequently moving from the city to the country.

For its personal usefulness, we do not argue against it for those who can. But because of its limitation, we challenge this as a political program. As socialist feminists, we are helping build an extended women's culture but also believe that it should be available for all women.

This will fully be possible only if we challenge institutions which have power over us so that we might make it available to all. Our culture should be built into the kind of society for which we are fighting. Currently, our culture is only available to a small minority of women.

Women must join together to struggle for power in order to bring about our vision for all women.

Lesbianism

As the women's movement developed, the gay movement, too, has grown. The gay movement has more forcefully brought the issue of sexuality into the political arena with an analysis of the oppression suffered by gay people in our society.

Hating the conditions that stunt us and loving women with whom we find new strength and new room to be weak, many of us come into lesbian relationships. The gay liberation movement has brought people together collectively to bring an end to that oppression.

Gay or straight lives are joined in that these struggles affect us as women. Lesbians, as outcasts in society because they have stepped out of the prescribed roles for women, have long been persecuted. In lesbians' fights against sexism, all feminists stand to gain.

Similarly, since all lesbians are women, lesbians stand to gain from the struggles of feminists. We must join together since our interests are intertwined. This is not to deny the need for separate lesbian groups or caucuses.

Heterosexual bias is so strong that it persists unless lesbians are organized separately to argue for a lesbian perspective. The organizational form may be caucuses or entirely separate groups, but where interests are ultimately the same, we should fight together for we can then be stronger and gain more power.

In some places, it appears that to be in the women's movement, one must be gay. Sometimes, in fact, it is argued that lesbians should be the vanguard of the women's movement. We do not believe that power for women will be won by a primary focus on gayness.

We do not believe that a primary focus on any particular contradiction will lead to revolution.

Vanguards

A vanguard has two common meanings. One is a social force in the front of political struggle. The other is a conscious leadership such a political party provides for certain movements. At different moments, strong forces in the movement have argued that certain groups should be the vanguard.

Many of these arguments have been so oppressive that some women have reacted against any idea of a vanguard. Yet both functions for vanguards are important at certain points. At times, our movement may be able to use and will need a vanguard, a leading and integrating force.

Out of respect developed through past leadership in struggles, a vanguard can synthesise a movement's energies and help to focus it. A vanguard of conscious, responsible leadership can help us develop the best use of the resources and the varying interests that we will attract.

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It does not further and further define the pure line so that we attract fewer and fewer women. It does not win its respect by merely identifying itself as a leader. Many previous attempts at vanguard leadership failed, resting on guilt, rhetoric, and self-imposition.

When we are truly strong enough, able to develop program from our independent sectors - in women's, gay, black, medical, educational, along geographic and work lines, overlapping and also leaving spaces - then we will especially need an integrating force, a political party.

It will incorporate and build on our priorities of socialist feminism because we will have shaped this vanguard of the people's liberation movement.

Organizational Needs

In order to implement the strategy outlined in this paper, women's liberation organizations are needed. Through the strength of organizations, power can be won and the women who participate in them can gain a sense of their own power, a new self-respect, and a form for ensuring the continuation of the movement.

Only organizations can be the carrier of victories and the repository of past successes.

Currently, the women's liberation movement is broken into small groups in most places and thus is hard to find, hard to join. Women's liberation has not received recognition for even the few victories we have won up to now, because there is no organized form to articulate our successes.

With organization, women's liberation can be in the arena along with other groups, struggling for our own victories. We fear that the women's liberation movement may die. How can we arrive struggling for five, ten or more years without organizations larger than ourselves to carry on?

More conservative efforts will be able to claim our victories and attract women and resources unless we offer our organizational alternative. They will set the tone and the agenda for the movement and it will no longer be ours.

As a movement, we have tried to understand why early feminists died out, or lost out in history. Concerned lest we repeat their mistakes, we have spent much time saying we should expand our class and racial base.

But perhaps a fate similar to the early feminists awaits us because 1. we have not concretely identified the interests of women and fought in common for real gains on that interest; and 2. we have not developed organizations that would fight around that interest.

If we can do these things, we should be able to overcome the limitations of the earlier women's movement and actively recruit women to our movement. We are arguing for an organizational conception which would provide a form for working on the range of problems women face - abortion, child care, health, job discrimination as well as all issues which affect our lives as women.

As those issues affect us, we need forms that belong to us, through which we can respond and reach other women, and which will ensure that the solutions won reflect our interests. The kind of organization we propose reflects our confidence in this strategy, with alliances made on the basis of mutual self-interest and equal power among groups.

Sometimes we have participated in coalitions out of a sense of guilt or because we did not have our own work. Often in the women's movement we face requests for our participation in everyone else's program. In a socialist feminist organization, such alliances would only be made as they fit into our own strategy.

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Structures Appropriate to Goals and Constituency

As women, we have had many bad experiences with organizations which impeded our personal growth and political progress. Many women, reacting to the way they have been oppressed by such structures, reject all explicit structures.

We have found this unrealistic because the structures survive implicitly and continue to affect us while we try to ignore them or live in the spaces allowed to us. The form and structures for organization will vary depending on the type of group being formed.

For large, mass organizations, more structure is necessary in order to be able to integrate new members, and provide varying levels of responsibility so that those with less time can also participate. Such organizations, which are designed to achieve specific goals, need structures also in order to facilitate the development of strategy and the implementation of decisions.

A reason for flexibility in organizational form is that women of different styles may feel comfortable in different situations. For example, those with a college background may see more need for philosophical discussion.

Some with jobs, family and other commitments may feel greatest priority on starting and ending meetings on time. At times the decision may have to be for the medium amount of comfort for everyone rather than the perfect atmosphere for any.

Within this context, there are several specific organizational ideas that we think are important in building organizations that serve us. We need specific forms clearly stated through which women can see where leadership lies and how to develop it and make it accountable to them.

Below are structural elements we think are necessary for developing a mass organization:

1. explicit structure and decision-making vehicle
2. levels of involvement to allow women to make more or less a commitment depending on interest and/or time
3. division of labour, reviewed systematically and designed to help less skilled women gain skills.
4. leadership responsible to the organization
5. work and involvement have some relationship to decision-making
6. information dissemination throughout the organization

Leadership, Elitism and Democracy

There has been much discussion in the women's movement about elitism and leadership. WE have been innovative and learned from experiments tried in different parts of the country. The principle of "if you don't know, learn, if you do know, teach" has helped many of us develop and spread our movement.

However, we have seen leadership patterns emerge in every situation. The solution is not to destroy leadership. Rather, we must make leaders responsible to organizations and to the members. In addition, leadership can be an effective catalyst, a stimulator to advance the movement.

Elitism can be perpetuated only when we do not train each other in what we know. We believe in political debate and in voting as a means of distinguishing between alternatives and deciding how to proceed. Operating on the basis of consensus means necessarily that we cannot move beyond the lowest common denominator agreement.

Our movement would never have existed if we really followed notions of consensus in American society. Moreover, consensus often hides real disagreement because there is no structured way for opposition to have a voice, as in a vote.

Further, women in the minority on a particular issue can be oppressed by a consensus approach because their views cannot be seen as a clear, different position or alternative. Such a minority position may be forced into agreement with the majority.

We believe political debate is crucial for maintaining the viability of our movement. We can have political debate without endangering our strong feeling of sisterhood for each other. Sometime we will win and at other times we will lose, but political debate and struggle provides stimulation and challenges us to develop our ideas and positions.

Conflicting viewpoints, in fact, are healthy in any organization and should not be submerged because of a fear of difference. But for debate to be worthwhile, it needs to be tied to clear function with the organization.

While engaging in that debate, we must continue to be clear in identifying the real enemy we are fighting. We can structure debate within the organization so it helps us learn, but it is not our sole function.