

The communist manifesto



“ All men are created equal. ” In the Communist Manifesto by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, the writings are closely linked with economic and social domination with class, with little attention to the inequalities linked with gender. Marx did not comment much on the system of gender domination prevalent in his own time and he was not publicly associated with the contemporary movement for the emancipation of women-contrast his silence with the writings of John Stuart Mill, for example (Mill).

Feminism and women played an important role in the development of communist institutions. The pattern and treatment of women is still observed today in many communist countries. Marx and Engels offer criticisms of the bourgeois family and the exploitation of women. “ The bourgeois has not even a suspicion that the real point aimed at is to do away with the status of women as mere instruments of production” (Engels sect. 1) The critiques provide little insight into the ways gender relations and the social institutions of the family affect the life situations of women.

They also failed to identify structural ways in which women were denied access to political positions, economic opportunity and basic components of health assurance. Frederick Engels devoted more extensive attention to issues surrounding sex, gender and the family in his anthropological book, (F. Engels). Engels argued that great historical variety in the sexual and reproductive practices of primates and human groups. He offers a historical hypothesis for the emergence of the paired-couple family: the emergence of private property and slavery.

Neither Marx nor Engels offered a coherent statement of socialist feminism and neither offered specific commentary of criticism of the political, social

and economic disadvantages by women in nineteenth century Europe. However, the fundamental themes of social criticism that Marx puts forward are alienation, domination, inequality, exploitation and a critique of the social relations that give rise to these conditions. This therefore implicates for a theory of gender equality and emancipation.

First his theory of alienation is premised on assumptions about the nature of the human being, involving ideas of freedom, self-expression, creativity and sociality (Marx). The situations of everyday life in which patriarchy and sexism obtain-the situations in which existing social relations of power, authority and dominance are assigned on the basis of gender and sex, including marriage, the family and the workplace all create a situation of alienation and domination for women.

Second Marx's theory of exploitation expressed primarily in (Capital (Marx 1977[1867]) extends very naturally to the social relations of patriarchy. Patriarchy and the bourgeois family system embody exploitation of women within the household and workplace. Finally Marx's strong moral commitment to the overriding importance of social equality is directly relevant to a socialist feminist critique of contemporary society. The unequal status and treatment of women is an affront to the value of human equality. Thus Marx's principles lay the ground for a foundation of a socialist feminism.

Issues of women's equality became prominent after the death of Marx and World War I. Lenin gave attention to the problem of sexual inequality in bourgeois society in his journalism and in a widely read interview with the German feminist Clara Zetkin (Zetkin 1920). These developments had

important consequences for the policy priorities of communist governments once they seized power in Russia, China and Cuba. The communisms of the Soviet Union, China and Cuba placed sexual equality at the top of the agenda for social transformation.

The equality of women became a central communist goal before and during the revolution. A particularly important figure in the Soviet efforts was Alexandra Kollontai, author of *The Social Bases of the Woman Question* (1908). This was a crucial piece of legal document with the goal of establishing gender equality through marriage, the family and guardianship. The Chinese Communists likewise placed the emancipation of women as one of its leading revolutionary goals and made specific efforts to mobilize women in the base areas.

Arranged marriage, domination by the mother-in-law and subordination of the wife to the authority of the husband were long-established features of Chinese society and Chinese communists were determined to end these practices ((Hinton1966): 157-160, 396-98). The Communist state undertook a series of fundamental legal reforms to establish the equality of women, including the areas of family and marriage, literacy and female education, electoral rights, equality of treatment during the period of land reform and guarantee of the right to labor outside the household.

The Cuban revolution also brought systematic change for the situation of Cuban women and Cuba became a model for the developing world in its success in ending the oppression of women. The percentages of female legislators, lawyers, doctors, scientists and managers are among the highest in any country. Nicola Murray provides a detailed accounting of the role and

status of women in post-revolution Cuba (Murray 1979a, 1979b) Socialist and communist ideas thus had a large effect on progress towards greater gender equality in the twentieth century.

For mixed reasons, both ideological and political women leaders and the issue of the equal treatment of women have had substantial influence on policies and outcomes in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, China and Cuba. This progress has occurred in multiple spheres: in the area of legal and constitutional declarations of equality of treatment; in the transformation of some of the basic institutions governing family, marriage and childrearing and in the successful provisioning of basic social goods such as healthcare education and access to economic opportunities. In the end the goal is to establish equality of outcomes for men and women.