

***the  
woman  
question***

***is a  
class  
question***

**A STUDY GUIDE**

This study guide was prepared by:

THE PRODUCTION COLLECTIVE

For use by The Bookstore Club of:

WORKING WOMAN AND MAN BOOKSTORE

Two basic principles of our study:

A. Practice is the criteria of truth, or in other words, the truth or falseness of our ideas and theories must be determined in social practice, in experience.

B. Social being determines consciousness, not consciousness social being: our experiences and conditions determine our ideas and modes of thought, not vice versa.

PURPOSE OF THE BOOKSTORE: To inform and educate working people about issues and events that have a direct and indirect influence on their lives.

## THE WOMAN QUESTION IS A CLASS QUESTION

### I. Historical Materialism of Women's Social Oppression and Economic Exploitation.

#### A. A Definition of the Historical Materialist Method:

"The materialist conception of history starts from the proposition that the production of the means of support of human life, and next to production, the exchange of things produced, is the basis of all social structure; that in every society that has appeared in history, the manner in which wealth is distributed and society divided into classes is dependent upon what is produced, how it is produced, and how the products are exchanged. From this point of view, the final causes of all social changes and political revolutions are to be sought, not in men's brains, not in man's better insight into eternal truth and justice, but in changes in the mode of production and exchange. They are to be sought, not in the philosophy but in the economics of each particular epoch."

Engels, Socialism Utopian and Scientific

#### B. Historical origins and development of Social Oppression and economic exploitation of women.

1. Primitive Communalism: Property is collectively owned, with the exception of small hand tools and weapons needed for defense from wild beasts. Production was very primitive--barely enough to ensure the survival of society. Society was organized into tribes, clans, or "gens". Women played the leading role in production and thus in society.

"The stores were in common; but woe to the luckless husband or lover who was too shiftless to do his share of the providing. No matter how many children or whatever goods he might have in the house, he might at any time be ordered to pick up his blanket and budge...The women were the great power among the clans." Engels, quoting a contemporary anthropologist in Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State.

Lineage and inheritance in this society was thru the mother: mother right.

2. Transition to slave society: "The increase of production in all branches--cattle-raising, agriculture, domestic handicrafts--gave human labor power the capacity to produce a larger product than was necessary for its maintenance. At the same time it increased the daily amount of work to be done by each member of the gens, household community, or single family. It was now desirable to bring in new labor forces. War provided them: prisoners of war were turned into slaves. With its increase of the productivity of labor, and therefore of wealth, and its extension of the field of production, the first great social division of labor was bound, in the general historical conditions prevailing, to bring slavery in its train. From the first great social division of labor arose the first great cleavage of society into two classes: master and slaves, exploiters and exploited." Engels.

According to the division of labor within the household at that time, it was the man's part to obtain food and the instruments of labor necessary to the purpose. He therefore also owned the instruments of labor, and in the event of husband and wife separating, he took them with him, just as she retained her household goods. Therefore, according to the social custom of the time, the man was also the owner of the new source of subsistence, the cattle, and later, the new instruments of labor, the slaves....

Thus on the one hand, in proportion as wealth increased it made the man's position in the family more important than the woman's and on the otherhand created an impulse to exploit this strengthened position in order to overthrow, in favor of his children, the traditional order of inheritance. This, however, was impossible so long as descent was reckoned according to mother right. Mother right, therefore, had to be overthrown, and overthrown it was...

The overthrow of mother right was the world historical defeat of the female sex. The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude; she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children. This degraded position of the woman,....has gradually been palliated and glossed over, and sometimes clothed in a milder form; in no sense has it been abolished."

Engels, Origin of the Family

Thus slavery and the patriarchal (male dominated) family developed together, at the same time and on the same basis. The original meaning of the word "family" refers to the total number of slaves belonging to one man. Under Roman Law, the male head of household had the power of life and death over wife, children and slaves.

"The modern family contains in germ not only slavery but also serfdom, since from the beginning it is related to agricultural services. It contains in miniature all the contradictions which later extend throughout society and its state." Marx.

3. Conditions of Women in the modern family: "With the patriarchal family and still more with the single monogamous family, a change came. Household management lost its public character. It no longer concerned society. It became a private service; the wife became the head servant, excluded from all participation in social production. Not until the coming of modern large-scale industry was the road to social production opened to her again--and then only to the proletarian wife. But it was opened in such a matter that, if she carries out her duties in the private service of her family, she remains excluded from public production and unable to earn; and if she wants to take part in public production and earn independently, she cannot carry out family duties. And the wife's position in the factory is the position of women in all branches of business, right up to medicine and the law. The modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife, and modern society is a mass composed of these individuals families as its molecules.

In the great majority of cases today, at least in the possessing classes, the husband is obliged to earn a living and support his family, and that in itself gives him a position of supremacy without any need for special legal titles and privileges. Within the family, he is the bourgeois, and the wife represents the proletariat. In the industrial world, the specific character of the economic oppression burdening the proletariat is visible

in all its sharpness only when all special legal privileges of the capitalist class have been abolished and complete legal equality of both classes established. The democratic republic does not do away with the opposition of the two classes; on the contrary, it provides the clear field on which the fight can be fought out. And in the same way, the peculiar character of the supremacy of the husband over the wife in the modern family, the necessity of creating real social equality between them and the way to do it, will only be seen in the clear light of day when both possess legally complete equality of rights. Then it will be plain that the first condition for the liberation of the wife is to bring the whole female sex back into public industry, and that this in turn demands that the characteristic of the monogamous family as the economic unit of society be abolished." Engels, Origin of the Family.

4. Women Today: Women's conditions, Women's Struggles: see the pamphlet published by the bookstore.

## II. Methods of Solution of the Woman Question:

1. Capitalism versus Socialism: The principal contradiction of capitalist society is private appropriation of socialized production. On the one hand, production is increasingly socialized--as for example now 51% of all women are wage laborers--and on the other hand, the wealth produced socially is the private property of the owners of the means of production, the capitalists.

"out of the conflict between the new productive forces--including both technical advances and incorporation of women into the labor force--and the old relations of production there arise new social ideas; the ideas organize and mobilize the masses; create a new revolutionary power, and make use of it to abolish by force the old system of relations of production and firmly establish the new system. The spontaneous process of development yields place to the conscious actions of women and men, peaceful development to violent upheaval, evolution to revolution." Stalin, DHM

2. The liberation of Women demands a change in the capitalist class form of property.

"By transforming the far greater portion, at any rate, or permanent, heritable wealth--the means of production--into social property, the coming social revolution will reduce to a minimum all this anxiety about inheriting... The single family ceases to be the economic unit of society. Private housekeeping is transformed into a social industry. The care and education of children becomes a public affair; society looks after all children alike." Engels.

#### Questions for Discussion and Study

QUESTION: What is the "Woman Question"?

ANSWER: A term used by socialists to refer to the study of the contradictions of capitalist society, that are connected to women's social and economic oppression under capitalism. Lack of adequate day care is a concrete example of the effects of this contradiction.

QUESTION: Why do we study these contradictions?

ANSWER: We study in order to change the capitalist system. All things contain contradictions, struggles of opposite forces. For example the struggle with male domination of women, sexism, is a contradiction between men and women that results from internilization of ruling class ideology by both men and women. This struggle must go on in order that both may develop. As socialists we base our study on looking at struggles in society in terms of class. Thus our purpose in studying and struggling with sexism is because it divides the women and men of the working class and prevents a united class struggle against the capitalist class.

I. Contradictions in the family: Women's social and economic oppression as unpaid domestic workers vs. the economic crisis of capitalism. (Review Engels description of this contradiction in I.B.3. in the outline at the beginning of the study guide.

1. Give examples of women's social oppression in the family. What are the effects on people's development? Give examples of economic oppression. Effects?

2. How did/does sexism come out in the family? What are effects on parents, on children ?

3. What changes do you see resulting from technological improvements, such as micro-waves on women's labor in the home? How will such improvements push forward the contradiction between women and capitalist society?

4. The capitalist system is going through an economic crisis of runaway inflation and recession. The Women's conditions, Women's Struggles article said that capitalism inherently destroys the family because of the effects of women being forced to work in production while still being oppressed at home.

What signs of the destruction of the family do you see in society? How does the economic crisis vs. women's role in the family set conditions for women to push forward the struggle with capitalism?

II. Women in Production: Women's social and economic oppression in social production.

1. Sexual harassment on the job is a daily fact of life for most women. Why is sexual harassment a feature of capitalist relations of production?

2. All workers are exploited by theft of the surplus value they produce by the capitalists. Women are super-exploited, first by not being paid for household labor, and secondly by unequal pay on the job. How does the classifying of a job as "women's work" mean more surplus value for the capitalists?



3. The "Women's Conditions, Women's Struggles" pamphlet noted that at the current stage of the contradiction between workingclass women and capitalist society many women are permanently dependent on having a job.

Capitalism must constantly develop the instruments of production, as part of the competition between capitalists for a shrinking market. An example is in clerical and secretarial work- the increasing use of computerization and wordprocessing technology - A recent article stated that such machines would replace 30% of women in clerical work.

What changes in the instruments of production do you see in the last 20 years? What are the effects?

How do such changes in the instruments of production intensify contradictions in the capitalist system?

How does this set the conditions for the overthrow of the capitalist system?

III. Development of the contradiction: How the contradiction between women and capitalist society pushes forward the overthrow of the capitalist system.

1. The effect of women's participation in socialized production is more independence in the family and social life. How do you see this independence developing in women you know? (if you're a woman, in yourself?) How is it pushing them/you forward?

2. Being in production ends the social isolation that is part of being trapped in the home. What effects of ending this isolation have you seen?

How does this develop the political consciousness of women?

3. Racism and Sexism are interconnected both as tactics of the ruling class to divide the working class and as interconnected experiences of the working-class which provide the basis of seeing common oppression. How do you see realization of this common oppression in your experience? What does breaking down such ideological divisions mean for developing a mass movement?

#### IV. Methods of Solution

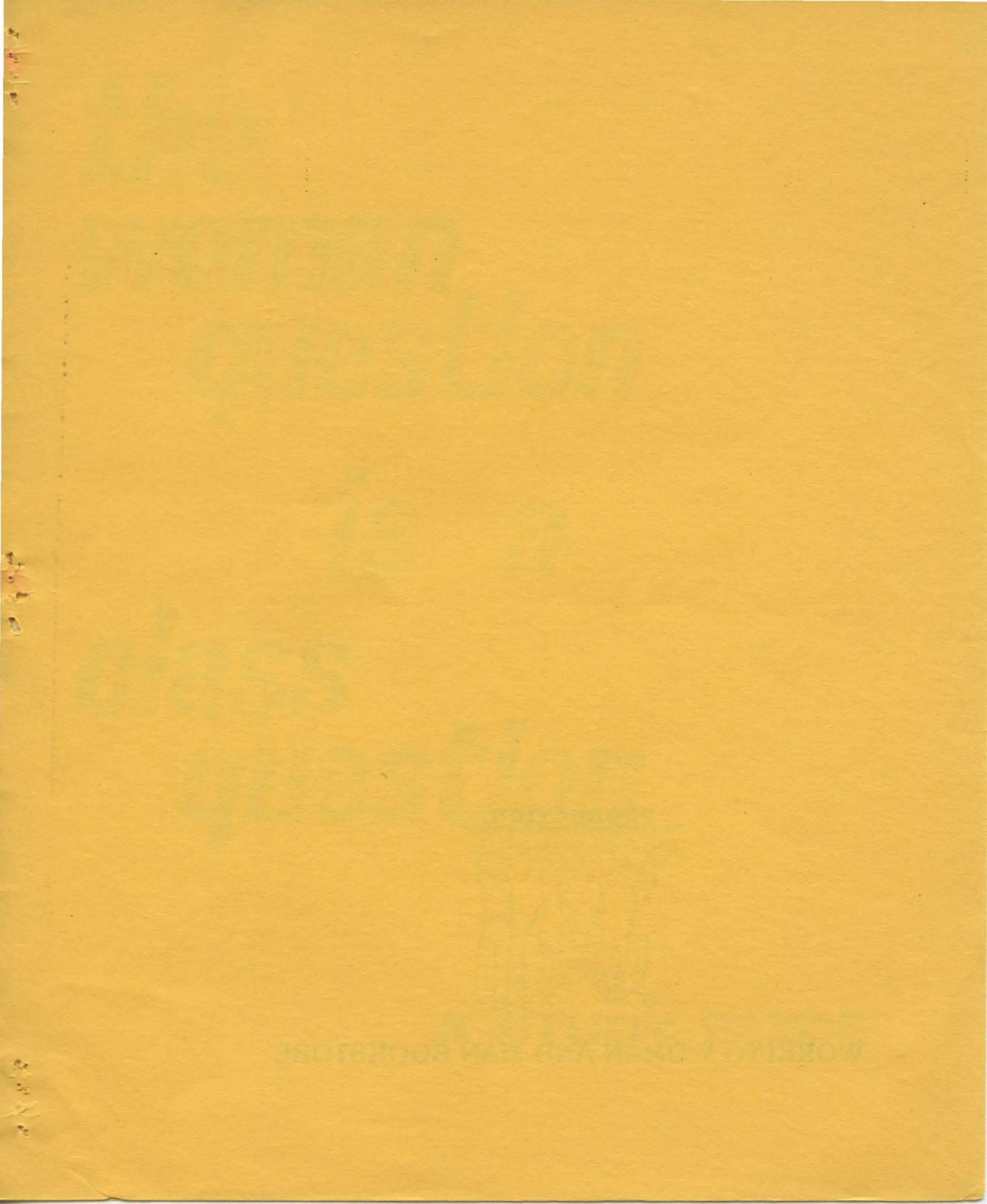
1. The need for socialist revolution is explicitly linked to seizing power by force. While many people are afraid or uncomfortable with this, it is especially common among women.

How is fear of or reaction to violence instilled in women by the way they are brought up in the capitalist system?

How is violence a natural part of the development of contradictions in capitalism?

2. The study guide outline states that the aim of the solution to women's oppression is to transform the class form of property from private property to socially owned property.

What are the obstacles to developing the socialised production of housecleaning? of providing day care?



**PRODUCTION**



**WORKING WOMAN AND MAN BOOKSTORE**