

Anarchist Political School

# Fighting oppressions of gender and sexuality



# **Anarchist Political School**

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## The Origins of Sexism and Queerphobia

Capitalism needs workers, both today, tomorrow, and into the future. That is, workers need to procreate, babies need to be gestated, children need to be raised, workers need to be fed, and the entire working class needs to stay convinced to sell their labour to capitalists.

Capitalism needs compliant workers to be reproduced at the minimum possible cost. The solution for capitalism has been to enforce a gender binary with a rigid division of labour. In particular, the work of **social reproduction** is cast as 'women's work'. It is devalued, taken for granted, and unpaid. Nonetheless, this unpaid labour is necessary to keep capitalism running and allows capitalism to exploit the wage labour of husbands more profitably.

In the early 20th century, Western capitalism popularised a dystopian ideal that reinforced its strict division of labour: the nuclear family. This imagined family is an independent unit consisting of a heterosexual married couple and their children. Within it, the ideal husband is the primary breadwinner and the ideal wife is the primary caregiver.

The nuclear family sets in place many of the social relations necessary for capitalism. Wives are subordinate to their husbands and ideally dependent on their wage. Children submit to their parents, just as they will one day submit to their bosses. Children born a particular sex (or, in the case of intersex people, simply assigned male or female) are forced by their parents to follow a predetermined path of identity, expression, and behaviour.

Discuss

*Why do large sections of the ruling class oppose abortion rights and the decriminalisation of sex work?*

## **Sexism**

When anarchists talk about sexism, we don't simply mean prejudice or discrimination based on gender. Sexism isn't just interpersonal unkindness, it is structural oppression—a hierarchy built around a strict gender binary in which all people must fit neatly into the categories of male and female.

Sexism keeps women in a weakened social, economic, and political position where they are silenced and have diminished autonomy. Sexist

ideology insists that women be nurturing and passive, and that men be aggressive and dominant. Sexism constricts both men and women by placing expectations on individuals that may conflict with how they actually wish to act or express themselves. Women have been, and in many significant ways continue to be, excluded from participating in economic, political, and social life. Women's work and women's health are systematically undervalued. On the other hand, many men, including those who claim to oppose sexism, automatically interact with women in ways that would never be considered acceptable if directed at men.

The ideological and material subjugation of women fuels sexual and domestic violence in our society. No aspect of our lives is immune from the effects of pervasive sexism, and this includes our political organising. Self-proclaimed anti-sexists in anarchist and socialist organisations have repeatedly proven themselves capable of abhorrent sexist behaviour, including inflicting sexual and domestic violence upon their comrades and their partners.

Sexism undermines the confidence of women and gender diverse people, so the participation of non-male comrades in our discussions and organising must

be actively encouraged and supported. Anti-sexist action requires continuous work and commitment.

Discuss

*How can we support greater participation by women in political organising and discussion?*

## **Queerphobia and Transphobia**

Like sexism, when anarchists talk about queerphobia and transphobia, we don't simply mean prejudice or discrimination based on someone being queer or trans. We understand queerphobia and transphobia as structural oppression.

Queer existence and flourishing fundamentally undermine capitalism's gendered division of reproductive labour. In a relationship between two women or two men, it is not possible for the man to earn a wage and the woman to perform the reproductive labour. Homosexuality is therefore a threat to the nuclear family. Trans and non-binary people, by simply existing, disrupt the gendered social relations that stabilise capitalism.

In response to this, capitalists and the state promote queerphobia and transphobia in order to keep their

gendered systems in place. Laws are periodically introduced across countries that directly target trans people. The reliance on the state by anti-queer forces is, in large part, a response to their slipping hold on public opinion. Their ultimate protection is the organised violence of the state.

Transgender identities are also discriminated against in more pernicious ways. Australia's public health system routinely fails to serve the needs of trans people. Trans people who wish to physically transition are forced to endure an increasingly expensive bureaucratic hellscape. Throughout this process, trans people are often subject to ignorant doctors, and an apathetic healthcare system that harms trans people by pathologising them.

People should be free to express their gender identity and sexuality without fear of exclusion and abuse. It is the work of the revolutionary to deconstruct gender roles and eliminate the imaginary gender binary.

Discuss

*Why is the liberation of women inseparable from the liberation of queer and trans people?*

## **Working Class Unity**

The Left is not immune from transphobia. Elements of the left have incorrectly argued that the fight for trans rights, as well as broader identity-based oppressions, is simply 'identity politics'. Some view trans activism as a self-absorbed political 'ideology' of an entitled cultural elite, even though the majority of trans people suffer from severe economic disadvantage. These transphobes, including those in leftist spaces, act as if we can separate the struggle for the rights of trans people from the working class struggle.

Even worse are the 'TERFs'. These Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists appropriate the language of feminism whilst attempting to enforce debunked pseudoscience about 'inherent' sex characteristics. These so-called radical feminists now readily line up with their fellow reactionaries, conservative religious pundits, and neo-Nazis.

Anti-trans politics within the Left harm our efforts to build solidarity, and create convenient scapegoats for the ruling class.

Confronting the sexist structures that oppress women, queer, and gender diverse people is a constant and pressing concern for any anarchist, both in broader

society, and within our organisations and campaign groups.

Sexism, queerphobia, and transphobia are obstacles to working-class unity, which, as we have said, is necessary for effectively challenging capitalism and ultimately overthrowing it.

If sexism allows us to make half of the working class second rate within our movement (if not excluded entirely), we are willingly throwing away and demeaning billions of fellow humans. The fight against sexism is not just a matter for women.

Similarly, the institutional, social, and physical violence that trans people face is not a matter for trans people only. The fight against transphobia is not something separate to the class struggle. Trans rights are vital to the working class. All workers must back the struggle for trans rights on the basis of “touch one, touch all”.

Discuss

*Are cis (i.e. non-trans) people ‘privileged’ to not experience the hardships faced by trans people?*

## **Do Men Benefit From Sexism?**

In general, men in heterosexual relationships still have fewer domestic responsibilities, particularly if they have children. At the same time, they also earn more than their female counterparts.

Women are subject to sexual harassment at work, continue to be under-represented in historically male-dominated fields, and are over-represented in casual and insecure work. Jobs traditionally considered 'women's work', such as early childhood education, nursing, and aged care, are consistently undervalued and underpaid. Men also often hold positions of authority in these female-dominated fields.

Sexist assumptions around what men are like and what roles men should play are also harmful to men. For example, many men are discouraged from caring for their newborn children because sexist parental leave policies often apply only to women.

Men are harmed by sexism because of what sexist ideology does to them and because the relative privileges granted to men buttress and maintain capitalist exploitation. If men truly benefited from sexism, then there could be no real prospect of a whole working-class movement to end sexism.

Anarchists assert that men have a material interest in ending the oppression of women.

Discuss

*The 4B movement in South Korea is dedicated to saying no (or 'bi' in Korean) to the following: sex with men, giving birth, dating men or marriage with men. Is this a good tool for fighting sexism? Why/why not?*

### **The Personal is Political**

The old women's liberation slogan "the personal is political" is sometimes taken to mean that we can undermine the subjugation of women through our personal choice (e.g. by refusing to make our bodies look a certain way). However, "the personal is political" is better understood to describe the ways in which our personal lives, domestic duties, and sexual relationships are shaped and conditioned by the political and economic structures that govern our lives. The personal is not separate from the public sphere of politics and economics. This understanding of sexism as both a personal *and* a political experience means that we neither neglect to confront sexism in our interpersonal relationships, nor reduce our anti-sexism to individual choices.

Yet this conception of feminism is incomplete in important ways compared with anarchist anti-sexism. Feminists have provided us with invaluable insights into the ways in which women and gender diverse people experience sexism—on our bodies, in our homes, and at our workplaces.

However, given that sexism is inextricable from the capitalist system, we argue that feminism on its own has lacked the class analysis and strategy necessary to effectively confront sexism on a structural level. Our intention is not simply to describe and criticise the sexism that pervades our society; we wish to abolish it!

Discuss

*Many companies have diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programs to address sexism, queerphobia, and other forms of oppression in the workplace. Are these programs helpful? What are the limitations of this approach?*

## **Girl Bosses?**

Since the 1960s, we have seen more ‘girl bosses’, more female police commissioners, and more women in politics, yet this has not created a society in which

the vast majority of women stand on an equal footing with men.

Women in heterosexual relationships continue to shoulder the bulk of domestic responsibilities, particularly if they have children. The gains made by female CEOs and board members have not trickled down to the majority of working-class women. We can thank Australia's first female prime minister, Julia Gillard, for an illustrative example—on the day of her much-lauded anti-misogyny speech (“I will not be lectured about sexism and misogyny by this man”), her government slashed benefit payments for single mothers.

Ruling-class women may share some limited experiences of sexism with working-class women, but their material class interests are directly counterposed. The equal rights of ruling-class women and ruling-class men to exploit the rest of us hardly constitutes liberation. Anarchists argue that confronting sexism at its root necessitates the overthrow of this entire oppressive, exploitative system, and that any future revolution is predicated on fighting sexism in the here and now.

While some feminists argue that a class analysis subsumes gender, we argue that the struggle for

women's liberation is integral to such an analysis, and that class analysis informs *how* we fight sexism, not *whether* we do.

Similarly, working-class queer people suffer more from the effects of queerphobia than queer bosses or queer politicians. Those few members of the ruling class who come out as queer do not experience oppression and marginalisation in the same way as members of the working class. Wealth will always shield ruling-class queer people from the worst effects of marginalisation and discrimination.

Discuss

*In what ways does wealth and power shield ruling-class women and queer people from sexism?*

## **A Woman's Place is in the Class Struggle**

Rather than appealing to women and gender diverse people in the halls of power, we look to the workers who join in struggles on picket lines, in the streets, and in our unions.

Take the example of the Victorian nurses' union, whose members walked out for 50 days in 1986. They triumphed over an intransigent government to secure a

pay rise and better working conditions, while also overcoming sexist ideas that had pigeon-holed nurses as subservient angels and not militant trade unionists.

Or consider the Builders Labourers Federation (BLF), who fought to allow women to work on building sites. They also imposed the first 'pink ban' industrial action in solidarity with a gay student activist who had been expelled from his residential college.

Our strategy for fighting sexism must be one that can *actually* win, and that means intervening in the class struggle. Anti-sexism in our unions and in our organisations is certainly not automatic, but our conscious interventions into these spaces can draw out the threads of solidarity that connect all oppressed and exploited people in the struggle for a better world. As women on the frontlines of struggle have demonstrated time and time again—from the women workers of Saint Petersburg who sparked the Russian Revolution to the women workers of Myanmar who were at the forefront of uprisings in their countries—the rising of women is the rising of us all. We argue that a woman's place is neither in the home nor at a boardroom table, but in the class struggle. Working-class women are not purely victims of exploitation, but also agents of change.

The fights against sexism and queerphobia are not something to wait for until 'after the revolution'. Sexism and queerphobia undermine the current position of the working class. So fighting sexism and queerphobia *now* is essential to building the unity necessary to overcome capitalism. We must refuse to wait.

Discuss

*Can forms of oppression like sexism be ended under capitalism?*

*Can capitalism be overthrown without abolishing sexism?*