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V. I. Lenin on the "Woman Question"

ABSTRACT: In his writings and speeches Lenin showed considerable interest in the "Woman Question." He argued, first, that the exploitation of female labor performs a central function in the development of capitalism. He claimed that women are "doubly oppressed," since they lack equality in both the legal-political and domestic spheres. Second, Lenin endorsed the women's rights movement. He called for universal suffrage, criticized prostitution, and supported the struggle for freedom of divorce and abortion. At the same time, he sought to highlight the limits of female liberation under capitalism. Third, Lenin connected the emancipation of women with the construction of socialism and communism. In Soviet Russia he pushed for the equalization of male and female rights. He called for the mass participation of women in politics and economic administration. He planned the socialization of domestic labor and the abolition of household slavery. Under socialism, Lenin argued, women would emancipate themselves.

KEYWORDS: Lenin, women, feminism, Marxism, oppression, emancipation

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Introduction

The literature on women's history and Marxist feminism has seldom focused upon V. I. Lenin, the founder of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the leader of the world's first socialist state. The authoritative analysis of his contribution is still contained in Lise Vogel's seminal work, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women,* first published in 1983 and re-released in 2013 (See Vogel 2013, 121-29). In her commentary on Lenin Vogel explains why his remarks on female issues have received limited attention: they comprise a "tiny portion of his work, and it is not clear to what extent they were taken up within the Bolshevik Party or implemented in practice" (Vogel 2013, 121). As Vogel recognizes, however, this hardly proves that Lenin's ideas do not deserve a focused examination.

In the preface to a soviet compendium of his speeches and writings *On the Emancipation of Women*, the Bolshevik revolutionary N. K. Krupskaya (1933, 5) asserts that her husband showed considerable "interest and concern" for women's matters "from the very start of his revolutionary career." This claim is corroborated by the German Marxist Clara Zetkin (1924, 97), who found, through personal discussions with Lenin, that he "obviously attache[d] great importance to the

women's movement." And there are also the glowing remarks of Bolshevik Alexandra Kollontai (1918, 223), who wrote in her reminisces that "nowhere in the world, nowhere in history is there such a thinker and statesman who has done so much for the emancipation of women as Vladimir Ilyich".

Lenin's comments on the "Woman Question" are worth examining for three reasons. First, they illuminate the man himself, by undermining the myth that he was concerned solely with class politics. Chatterjee (2002, 75) and Bryson (2016, 113) are mistaken in claiming that Lenin's interest in women's issues was marginal at best. He actually paid a lot of attention to them. This is significant because many men within the early twentieth century Russian socialist movement were uninterested in or even opposed to women's emancipation. Lenin showed a degree of attentiveness on this question that few of his male compatriots could match.

Second, Lenin's analysis addresses a longstanding criticism of Marxism: that it reduces gender issues to class issues and thereby fails to appreciate the unique problems of the female experience. Efforts to understand the history of women's oppression and resistance through the lens of a Marxist theoretical framework have often been rejected as inaccurate and incomplete. Marxist approaches have been accused of adopting a class reductionist analysis that devalues the significance of women as forces of resistance and change.[1] Lenin did not do this. He highlighted the *unique* character of women's oppression and identified specially tailored strategies for overcoming it. This won him a significant degree of prestige amongst Russian proletarian and peasant women.

Third, Lenin's ideas are not only of historical interest. As Vogel (2013, 121) rightly argues, they remain "important for their insight into the theoretical heart of the

[1] For the classical statement of this criticism, see Hartmann, 1979, 1–33.

problem of women's oppression". Indeed, they are relevant for the women's liberation struggle today, over 150 years after his birth. In the Western countries identity politics and intersectionality are dividing the working class and undermining its emancipatory struggle. Lenin's analysis can encourage working men and women to transcend their differences and unite against their common oppressor, capitalism. It is for these reasons that his speeches and writings on the topic merit special attention. In the words of Krupskaya, "every working woman, every peasant woman must know . . . what Lenin said about the position of women and their emancipation" (Krupskaya 1933, 3).

This article complements and builds upon Vogel's insightful analysis of Lenin. The first part explores his thesis that the exploitation of female labor performs a central function in the maintenance and development of capitalism. He argued that women are "doubly oppressed", since they lack equality in both the legal-political and domestic spheres.

The second part elucidates Lenin's support for the women's rights movement. He called for universal suffrage, opposed prostitution, and championed the struggle for freedom of divorce and abortion. At the same time, he highlighted the limits of female liberation under capitalism.

The final section examines how Lenin connected the emancipation of women with the construction of socialism and communism. In Soviet Russia he advocated the equalization of male and female rights. He called for the mass participation of women in politics and economic administration. He planned the socialization of production and the abolition of domestic slavery. Under socialism, Lenin argued, women would emancipate themselves.

1. The Double Oppression of Women

According to Vogel, Lenin first examined the nature of women's subordination in 1894, whilst defending Marxism against the defamations of Nikolay Mikhailovsky. This critic ridiculed Marx and Engels' claim that procreation is a major determinant of society, "in addition to the production of material values". According to Mikhailovsky, this claim contradicted their doctrine of "economic materialism", which supposedly viewed material production as the sole "determining factor". Lenin responded by arguing that Marx and Engels never employed the term "economic materialism." The founders spoke simply of materialism. They divided social relations into material and ideological ones, and procreation relations are material (Vogel 2013, 122; Lenin 1894, 148–152). Lenin's point was that the production of goods and the production of life are part of one integrated process. Economic activity can continue only if the labor force itself is reproduced, so women perform an important function as the child bearers. But different economic systems favor different procreation relations, and these will usually be imposed through struggle. This means that the way women live, the roles they perform, and their relations to men, will differ in accordance with the mode of production. "This perspective . . . became the foundation of Lenin's approach to the problem of women's subordination" (Vogel 2013, 122).

This approach was not original. It stood on the shoulders of Marx and Engels. Lenin himself credited the founders of Marxism with identifying the material character and importance of biological reproduction. He credited them with highlighting the unified nature of the productive and reproductive process. Indeed, it was their writings, and not Lenin's, that inspired the Marxist feminist scholarship that

flourished from the late 1960s to the early 80s. But whereas Marx and Engels explored women's issues in the era of pre-monopoly capitalism, Lenin did so during the rise of imperialism. In doing this, he applied their framework to new conditions, and with his trademark lucidity and forcefulness. Lenin's contribution during this period should be acknowledged alongside those of Marxists like Krupskaya, Zetkin, and Kollontai.

In applying his Marxist analysis to European capitalist society in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Lenin refused to treat "women" as a homogeneous abstract group. He recognized that women, like men, are divided into classes, and that they are therefore oppressed differently under capitalism, depending upon their class (Vogel 2013, 139). Lenin recognized that proletarian and peasant women face a more intense regime of exploitation than middle and upper class women. He therefore devoted more attention to the former two groups.

In the 1890s Lenin read a host of statistical reports in order to understand the position of the Russian peasantry. He analyzed the handicraft industry's influence, the peasants' migration to the factories, and the ways in which the factories shaped their culture and lifestyles. "At the same time", Krupskaya writes, Lenin "studied all these questions from the viewpoint of women's labor". He argued that the "peasant's proprietorial psychology" imposed "a burden of unnecessary and senseless drudgery" upon women, particularly those who lived together and who were bound by ties of common kinship and residence. Lenin observed that these women typically washed only the part of the table they ate upon, or they milked their cows in turn, each getting only enough milk for their own children, and prepared meals for their own children separately (Krupskaya 1933, 6-7). He concluded that peasant women were divided,

atomized and alienated from each other, and that this facilitated their exploitation (Lenin 1898, 508).

In 1899, while living in exile, Lenin corresponded with the newly formed Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSLDP). In the illegal press he outlined the plan for a pamphlet entitled *Women and the Workers' Cause*. In this text, Lenin wanted to highlight the capitalist exploitation of female factory workers and peasants, and show that they could liberate themselves only by joining the socialist movement. He planned to show that the seizure of state power by the working class was an essential condition for female emancipation (Krupskaya 1933, 6).

During the same period Lenin documented "how cattle farmers exploit[ed] peasant women, how the merchant–buyers exploit[ed] women lace-weavers", and how female labor played an increasingly large role in the growing manufacturing industry (Krupskaya 1933, 7). In one of his studies Lenin observed how, in 1879, brush making capitalists moved into the Moscow region, while at the same time, the introduction of drilling machines for making holes in brush blocks accelerated the production process. As a result, the demand for "setters"- people who put the bristle into the block- increased, "and this operation, which became increasingly specialized, fell to the lot of women, their labor being cheaper." This case, in his view, showed "very clearly" that the intense female exploitation maintained by the sexual "division of labor" facilitated the development of industrial capitalism (Lenin 1899a, 443–444).

In his 1913 article on "Capitalism and Female Labor" Lenin highlighted how the bourgeoisie subjugate working-class women in other ways. "It is these women that the capitalists most willingly employ as home-workers, who are prepared for a monstrously low wage to 'earn a little extra' for themselves and their family, for the sake of a crust of bread." Furthermore, "it is from among these women, too, that the

capitalists of all countries recruit for themselves (like the ancient slave-owners and the medieval feudal lords) any number of concubines at a most ‘reasonable’ price.” Pointing a finger at the bourgeois reformers and philanthropists who voiced their opposition to this sexual exploitation, he argued that “no amount of ‘moral indignation’ (hypocritical in 99 cases out of 100) about prostitution can do anything against this trade in female flesh; so long as wage-slavery exists, inevitably prostitution too will exist” (Lenin 1913a, 26).

Lenin also denounced the hypocrisy of liberal democracy, which claimed to provide universal freedom and equality, while denying divorce, property and other rights to women. He saw this as all the more disgraceful since “more than 125 years [had] passed since the Great French (bourgeois-democratic) Revolution” (Lenin 1919a, 73–74). Because Lenin viewed “the legal status of women” as “the best criterion of the cultural level” (Lenin 1920a, 80), the western capitalist republics were not as civilized as they claimed to be. He also emphasized that these draconian laws did not affect women equally. The “working-class woman” bore ‘the full brunt of antiquated codes” (Lenin 1918a, 59). At the same time, Lenin chastised “the ‘petty’ — supposedly petty — details of the suffrage” that excluded women from politics and democracy (Lenin 1917a, 466). In an observation that could have been made today, he remarked that “the woman’s position is marked by such inequality that the extent of her participation in politics is only an insignificant fraction of that of the man” (Lenin 1919b, 70).

Lenin did not only highlight the economic and political subjugation of women. In pointing out that “capitalist society conceals within itself numerous cases of . . . oppression which do not immediately strike the eye” (Lenin 1913a, 26), he exposed their subjugation in the *household* as well, where “they perform, under oppressive

conditions, the unpaid labor…required to maintain and renew the producing classes" (Vogel 2013, 126). And here again Lenin recognized that working-class women have it the worst. As the result of living in poverty, "barely managing to make both ends meet," "millions upon millions" of them "live (or, rather, exist) as 'domestic slaves,' striving to feed and clothe their family on pennies, at the cost of desperate daily effort and 'saving' on everything — except their own labor" (Lenin 1913a, 26). Lenin's main point — and it is one that he reiterates on multiple occasions — is that working women suffer a *unique* oppression under bourgeois social relations, one that cannot be subsumed under the general category of class exploitation:

> Under capitalism the female half of the human race is doubly oppressed. The working woman and the peasant woman are oppressed by capital, but over and above that, even in the most democratic of the bourgeois republics, they remain, firstly, deprived of some rights because the law does not give them equality with men; and secondly — and this is the main thing — they remain in "household bondage," they continue to be "household slaves," for they are overburdened with the drudgery of the most squalid, backbreaking and stultifying toil in the kitchen and the family household. (Lenin 1921a, 83–84.)

In contrast to working class men, Lenin recognizes that proletarian and peasant women are oppressed in the legal-political *and* domestic spheres. Private property "throughout the world . . . even in the most democratic republics, keeps . . . women in a state of double slavery." And he "considers the second factor — domestic slavery — to be 'the main thing'" (Vogel 2013, 126; Lenin 1919b, 67). Vogel argues that "this emphasis was unique in the Marxist literature" at the time. "Lenin's concern

with the problem of domestic labor enabled him to formulate the questions of women's oppression . . . with a clarity not previously achieved." (Vogel 2013, 126). What he did was frame female domestic enslavement as a vital part of capitalism. The accumulation of capital requires the continual reproduction of labor power, which is achieved by i) reproducing new workers, i.e. procreation; ii) maintaining past and future workers outside of the production process, including children, the retired, and the unemployed; and iii) maintaining current workers outside the production process, so that they can return to it. These activities, which are essential to the maintenance of capitalism since they reproduce the labor force, are costly for capitalists, who do not want to pay for them. They are thereby imposed upon women, the child bearers, who carry them out at home at little cost for capital, and who are *also* exploited in the workplace. Men, on the other hand, provide subsistence to women during the childbearing period; and this, in Vogel's view, "forms the material basis for women's subordination in class society" (Vogel 2013, 153). Marxist feminists routinely deploy this framework in their analyses of capitalist social reproduction. Although they typically refer to Marx's writings as a theoretical source, some, like Angela Davis (1983, 139), have deployed the term "domestic slavery" as a key concept, just as Lenin did.

Lenin recognized that bourgeois production relations do not only subjugate the female sex. In *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* he shows how the growth of large scale manufacturing, which draws women into production, improves the conditions for their liberation struggle. It is "indisputable that the capitalist factory places these categories of the working population in particularly hard conditions, and that for them it is particularly necessary to regulate and shorten the working day, to guarantee hygienic conditions of labor, etc." But at the same time:

> Endeavors completely to ban the work of women . . . in industry, or to maintain the patriarchal manner of life that ruled out such work, would be reactionary and utopian. By destroying the patriarchal isolation of these categories of the population who formerly never emerged from the narrow circle of domestic, family relationships, by drawing them into direct participation in social production, large-scale machine industry stimulates their development and increases their independence, in other words, creates conditions of life that are incomparably superior to the patriarchal immobility of pre-capitalist relations. (Lenin 1899a, 547; Vogel 2013, 122-23.)

Lenin cites statistical evidence from Russia to prove his case. The women factory weavers were freer from their husbands and fathers than their agricultural counterparts, since they had an independent source of income. Literacy spread among the factory workers more rapidly, and wife beating was rarer than in agricultural areas. In the Moscow region, for instance, the peasant women who hand-produced stockings in their homes earned a fraction of the factory women making them by machine. The latter had a reliable income, whereas the former could be fired at any moment. The machine workers were relatively independent, and emancipated from the family constraints that limited the peasant women. They earned enough to live away from their families and do without their families' income from the land. By contrast, the peasant women earned a meager wage, which was sufficient for their sustenance only if they were also members of an allotment-holding farming family. More generally, the female urban migration engendered by capitalist development

loosened the "old patriarchal family ties" and placed "women in a more independent position, on an equal footing with men" (Lenin 1899a, 546–48; 578).

Lenin did not present this development as a purely positive phenomenon. He recognized that working women were still being oppressed under new conditions. But Lenin argued that industrial capitalism was more "progressive" than agrarian quasi-feudal capitalism, and that capitalist growth brings women closer to their emancipation. Such was the case during Western Europe's transition to monopoly capitalism in 1914. Lenin presented this development as the final stage before the socialist revolution and greater freedom for women:

> The bourgeoisie makes it its business to promote trusts, drive women . . . into the factories, subject them to corruption and suffering, condemn them to extreme poverty. We do not "demand" such development, we do not "support" it. We fight it. But how do we fight? We explain that trusts and the employment of women in industry are progressive. We do not want a return to the handicraft system, pre-monopoly capitalism, domestic drudgery for women. Forward through the trusts, etc., and beyond them to socialism! (Lenin 1917b, 81.)

By situating material and human reproduction relations within a unitary system of capitalist social reproduction, Lenin was able to connect changes in the economic structure with changes in the nature of women's subordination. Whilst viewing patriarchy and capitalism as interconnected, rather than independent entities, his analysis still recognizes the uniqueness of the female experience. It refuses, in other words, to reduce women's oppression to class oppression. Lenin places the position and role of women at the heart of capitalism and its development.

2. The Struggle for Emancipation

Lenin did not only recognize the special character of female oppression under capitalism. He emphasized the importance of combatting it as well, by fighting for women's rights. By connecting this objective with the aims and aspirations of the working-class struggle, Lenin's battle cry called upon all workers to support the women's cause: "Down with the liars who speak about freedom and equality *for all*, while there is an oppressed sex . . . *let the opportunity* to oppress and exploit be *abolished*. That is our slogan! Freedom and equality for the oppressed sex!" (Lenin 1919a, 74). Lenin joined the likes of Krupskaya, Zetkin and Kollontai in highlighting the common interests of working men and women.

In Tsarist Russia, which denied even the most basic female freedoms, one of Lenin's major concerns was winning better working and living conditions for proletarian and peasant women. In a bid to draw these elements into this struggle, he called for the establishment of the women's journal *Rabotnitsa*- "Working Woman"- which he thought would raise their consciousness on these issues (Lenin 1913b, 132). In terms of more concrete proposals, Lenin's draft of the Bolshevik Party program demanded the establishment of a democratic republic with the following measures:

> 6) Prohibition of female labor in all branches of industry injurious to women's health; prohibition of night work for women; women to be released from work eight weeks before and eight weeks after child-birth without loss of pay and with free medical and medicinal aid.

> 7) Establishment of nurseries for infants and young children and rooms for nursing mothers at all factories and other enterprises where women are employed; nursing mothers to be allowed recesses of at least half-hour duration at intervals of not more than three hours; such mothers to receive nursing benefit and their working day to be reduced to six hours.
>
> …9) The establishment of a labor inspectorate elected by the workers' organizations and covering all enterprises employing hired labor, as well as domestic servants; women inspectors to be appointed in enterprises where female labor is employed. (Lenin 1917c, 51–52.)

Lenin also called for "*state* insurance" that should provide "extra provisions for working women during pregnancy and childbirth; benefits for widows . . . upon the death of the bread-winner . . . or in case of loss of earnings due to unemployment" (Lenin 1912, 476). These emancipatory demands were decades ahead of their time. Even today few mainstream political parties endorse measures this expansive.

As a part of his fight against female exploitation Lenin endorsed the struggle to end prostitution, while simultaneously exposing the hypocrisy of the upper classes (Vogel 2013, 123). In 1913, while examining the Western democracies, he showed how the bourgeoisie, while campaigning against prostitution, raped girls in the colonies and encouraged the sex trafficking of white women (Lenin 1913c, 22–23; Krupskaya 1933, 8). "The crudeness of the Americans' rapacious imperialism" could be seen from the fact that "American agents" were "buying white slaves, women and girls, and shipping them to America for the development of prostitution. Just think," Lenin wrote, "free, cultured America supplying white slaves for brothels!" (Lenin 1919c, 156).

For similar reasons Lenin criticized the 5th International Congress against Prostitution, held in London during the same year. The congress, he observed, appeared to take a serious stand against "white slave traffic." It was, after all, attended by "duchesses, countesses, bishops, priests, rabbis, police officials and all sorts of bourgeois philanthropists." But in their proposals Lenin argued that the attendees did little for the abolitionist cause. Instead of addressing the economic conditions that maintained prostitution, they simply called to repress the trade itself, by declaring that religion and policing were the solution. When a delegate attempted to "raise the question of the social causes of prostitution, of the need and poverty experienced by working-class families, of the exploitation of child labor, of unbearable housing conditions, etc., he was forced to silence by hostile shouts!". Lenin's evaluation of the spectacle was damning:

> We may judge from this the disgusting bourgeois hypocrisy that reigns at these aristocratic–bourgeois congresses. Acrobats in the field of philanthropy and police defenders of this system which makes mockery of poverty and need gather "to struggle against prostitution," which is supported precisely by the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. . . . (Lenin 1913d, 31–32.)

And today too, many of the bourgeois political parties and governments that oppose prostitution continue to ignore the economic conditions underlying it. They continue to advocate religion, education and police as the best remedy, while simultaneously proposing cutbacks to the welfare state and public services. The class that is the most vocal in its criticism of prostitution is also the class doing to the most to maintain it.

The “disgusting bourgeois hypocrisy” denounced by Lenin continues to pervade mainstream politics in the capitalist countries.

Lenin also had little time for the bourgeois exhibition of workingwomen’s domestic exploitation held in Paris, “the center of civilization”. He suggested that it was little more than poverty-tourist art gallery that bought little practical benefit. Lenin proposed that

> our workers’ associations and trade unions, too, ought to organize an “exhibition” of this kind. It will not yield the colossal profits brought in by the exhibitions of the bourgeoisie. A display of proletarian women’s poverty and indigence will bring a different benefit: it will help wage-slaves, both men and women, to understand their condition, look back over their “life,” ponder the conditions for emancipation from this perpetual yoke of want, poverty, prostitution and every kind of outrage against the have-nots. (Lenin 1913a, 27.)

Lenin prioritized the task of winning political equality and civil freedoms for women, and he presented these as a necessary condition for the broadening of democracy. He regarded Finland as “the most democratic country in Europe” precisely because it was “the first country to give women the vote” (Lenin 1918b, 82). As such, in his comments on the Party’s draft program Lenin (1899b, 239) wrote that the formulation “full equality of all citizens” was too vague, and that “it would be well to add: ‘complete equality of rights for men and women.’” In 1903 the Party adopted this clause (Krupskaya 1933, 7).

In 1907 Lenin attended the Seventh Congress of the Second International in Stuttgart, where the question of women’s suffrage was a major discussion topic. The

congress adopted a resolution in support of this measure, with only one woman from the Fabian society opposing it. In a comment that revealed the class prejudices of many liberal feminists at the time, Lenin wrote that “her motives were simple enough: British bourgeois ladies hope to obtain the franchise for themselves, without its extension to women workers in Britain.” Lenin noted with pride that “the Congress . . . declared in favor of women workers campaigning for the franchise, not in conjunction with the bourgeois supporters of women's rights, but in conjunction with the class parties of the proletariat” (Lenin 1907, 77; 90).

But opportunism managed to infect even the socialist delegates to the congress. The Austrian male delegation requested to postpone the struggle for women’s suffrage on the pretext that it undermined the struggle for working men’s suffrage. The German social democrats — and Zetkin in particular, protested against this tactic. Zetkin declared in the press that socialists should never neglect the demand for women’s suffrage, and that instead of opportunistically abandoning this struggle to expediency, they should broaden it and thereby strengthen the popular movement. The Austrian proposal was rejected by twelve votes to nine. In Lenin’s view, the controversy between the Austrian male and German female social democrats illustrated “how severely the best Marxists treat the slightest deviation from the principles of consistent revolutionary tactics.” “The Congress recognized that in the campaign for women's suffrage it was necessary to uphold fully the principles of socialism and equal rights for men and women without distorting those principles for the sake of expediency.” “The Stuttgart Congress . . . laid this line down in the spirit of revolutionary Social-Democracy as opposed to opportunism” (Lenin 1907, 90; 85).

Lenin was an uncompromising advocate of freedom of abortion (Vogel 2013, 123). In 1913 the Pirogov Doctors’ Congress in Russia passed a resolution stating that

mothers should never be criminally prosecuted for undertaking an abortion, and that doctors should be prosecuted only if they carried out the abortion for personal gain. Lenin welcomed this measure, adding that socialists should support "the unconditional annulment of all laws against abortions" and "the distribution of medical literature on contraceptive measures, etc." He pointed out that "such laws are nothing but the hypocrisy of the ruling classes. These laws do not heal the ulcers of capitalism, they merely turn them into malignant ulcers that are especially painful for the oppressed masses" (Lenin 1913e, 30).

In relation to this Lenin analyzed the debates concerning childbearing, and criticized the liberals who urged women workers to use contraceptives in order to reduce child poverty. He described this "social Malthusianism" as a "petty bourgeois" ideology, the "psychology of the philistine". Nothing could be further "from the point of view of the working class". Although the workers faced "unbearable oppression and suffering", they were more class conscious than their parents, and were "*rapidly learning* to fight" for their emancipation. Likewise, the sons and daughters of the present generation would be even stronger fighters. They would succeed in abolishing capitalism and establishing a better life for all future children (Lenin 1913e, 28–30; Krupskaya 1933, 8).[2]

Lenin also supported female divorce rights and linked them directly to the struggle for democracy. He dismissed the objection that this freedom would destroy the traditional family unit. As he wrote in 1914:

[2] According to Attwood, Lenin saw pro-abortion laws as a "temporary necessity until the state had the resources to cope with unrestricted childbirth" (Attwood 1999, 117). She provides no evidence or argumentation in support of this claim.

> The reactionaries are opposed to freedom of divorce; they say that it must be "handled carefully," and loudly declare that it means the "disintegration of the family." The democrats, however, believe that the reactionaries are hypocrites, and that they are actually defending the omnipotence of the police and the bureaucracy, the privileges of one of the sexes, and the worst kind of oppression of women. They believe that in actual fact freedom of divorce will not cause the "disintegration" of family ties, but, on the contrary, will strengthen them on a democratic basis, which is the only possible and durable basis in civilized society. (Lenin 1914, 422.)

While Lenin thought that women could obtain legal-political equality under liberal democracy, he argued that even the most advanced bourgeois republic could never facilitate their complete emancipation, since "the oppressed sex is subjugated economically. No matter how much democracy there is under capitalism, the woman remains a 'domestic slave,' a slave locked up in the bedroom, nursery, kitchen" (Lenin 1916, 43). But this conviction did not deter Lenin (*ibid*., 42–44) from supporting the struggle for women's rights — first, because the lack of them meant "additional oppression of the oppressed sex"; and second, because the more rights women win, "the clearer will women see that the source of their 'domestic slavery' is capitalism, not lack of rights." That is, when women obtain legal-political equality and realize that they are still oppressed in the economy and household, they will look for more radical solutions to their subjugation. They will identify their emancipation with the building of socialism.

Vogel argues that Lenin's support for women's rights "went well beyond earlier socialist analyses". Some had dismissed the importance of female oppression and

refused to tackle it. Others supported women's rights in theory, whilst in practice adopting "reformist positions that scarcely differed…from…liberal feminism". By identifying the women's liberation struggle as a part of the socialist struggle, Lenin gave socialists "a better chance to confront…women's oppression without slipping into either error" (Vogel 2013, 124-25).

The core thrust of Lenin's approach to the female workers' emancipatory struggle is that all workers have an interest in supporting it. For although working men are privileged within the household, they are exploited alongside women outside it. Lenin does not deny that workingmen and women have unequal economic and political opportunities. His point is that they both have a common oppressor - the bourgeoisie- and that in order for either sex to be free, they must unite to overthrow capitalism. This message is particularly timely in the West today, where identity politics and intersectionality dominate. The former persuades people to prioritize the concerns most relevant to their particular identity, and to form exclusive alliances on this basis. The latter teaches that there are multiple overlapping sources of oppression, none of which have causal primacy. Identity politics is useful in mobilizing working women and highlighting their marginalized concerns. But it can also weaken the proletariat, by obscuring the common class interests between working men and women, and even turn them against each other. Likewise, intersectionality is useful in showing how women are oppressed not only for their sex, but for their other attributes as well, such as race and religion. In its current form, however, intersectionality weakens the emancipatory struggle. By placing class in the same category as sex, it obscures the fact that the class system (*i.e.,* capitalism) is a structural factor maintaining, though not creating sexual and other forms of oppression (Eisenstein 2018, 259–260). It should therefore be unsurprising that both intersectionality and identity politics have

the financial backing of big corporations, who see them as useful devices for dividing and ruling the working class, and for diverting their anger away from capitalism (McGarvey 2017, 159–160). In the current climate, where gender issues have swamped out those of class, Lenin's analysis can remind working men and women that they are stronger together, rather than divided, and that their chief enemy is capitalism.

Unfortunately, Lenin himself occasionally undermines this unity when he refers to "men" and the "male sex" in abstract, non-class terms. He once wrote, for instance, that wherever capitalism exists "the men retain their privileges" (Lenin 1919b, 67). Claims like these overlook the oppressive conditions shared by both proletarian men and women. They reinforce divisionist beliefs that will only hinder the liberation struggle. Fortunately, these statements are rare in Lenin's writings.

3. Women Under Socialism

Lenin intertwines the emancipation of women with the construction of socialism and communism. On the one hand, he argues that socialism alone provides the objective conditions for overcoming male domination and attaining complete equality between the sexes. On the other hand, "there can be no socialist revolution unless very many working women take a big part in it" (Lenin 1918a, 59). Lenin was confident that they would take part. As he prophesized in 1916:

> Women . . . fought in the Paris Commune side by side with the men. It will be no different in the coming battles for the overthrow of the bourgeoisie. Proletarian women will not look on passively as poorly armed or unarmed

> workers are shot down by the well-armed forces of the bourgeoisie. They will take to arms, as they did in 1871. (Lenin 1917b, 82.)

Since, under socialism, the working class wields state power and owns the means of production, the exploitation of female wage labor can be abolished fairly swiftly. Lower pay, dangerous working conditions, prostitution — these forms of female exploitation become a thing of the past.

But because women are "doubly oppressed" under capitalism, Lenin recognizes that their emancipation is "a double task. The first part of that task is relatively simple and easy." It requires the abolition of "those old laws that kept women in a position of inequality as compared to men", such as those pertaining to marriage, property, and abortion (Lenin 1919b, 66-67). It also involves the removal of the petty measures restricting female participation in economic and political governance: "working women must take an increasing part in the administration of socialized enterprises and in the administration of the state. By taking part in administration, women will learn quickly and will catch up with the men" (Lenin, 1920b 78-79). It is essential that they do so. For "unless women are brought to take an independent part not only in political life generally, but also in daily and universal public service, it is no use talking about full and stable democracy, let alone socialism" (Lenin 1917d, 46; Vogel 2013, 126).

The "second and most important step" in the struggle to overcome male domination is the attainment of social and economic equality. "This and this alone opens up the way towards a complete and actual emancipation of woman" (Lenin 1921a, 84). After all, Lenin writes, "democracy, even democracy for those who were oppressed by capitalism, including the oppressed sex, is *not enough*," and "equality before the law is not necessarily equality in fact. We want the working woman to be

the equal of the working man not only before the law but in actual fact" (Lenin 1920a, 81; 1920b, 78). This requires that women are freed from the shackles of domestic reproductive labor:

> Owing to her work in the house, the woman is still in a difficult position. To effect her complete emancipation and make her the equal of the man it is necessary for the national economy to be socialized and for women to participate in common productive labor. Then women will occupy the same position as men. (Lenin 1919b, 69.)

Lenin (1920a, 81) admits that the struggle to free women from domestic servitude "will be a long one"; since "it demands a radical reconstruction both of social technique and of morals. But it will end in the complete triumph of communism." This passage is important since he acknowledges that the battle will be *ideological* as well as material. An organizational transformation is not enough. Misogynist beliefs, attitudes and mindsets must also be eradicated (Vogel 2013, 126-27).

What then, are the material means by which "complete equality" between the sexes can be attained? How can women escape the drudgery of forced domestic labor? Lenin outlines the following institutions:

> Public catering establishments, nurseries, kindergartens . . . here we have the simple, everyday means, involving nothing pompous, grandiloquent or ceremonial, which can *really emancipate women*, really lessen and abolish their inequality with men as regards their role in social production and public life. These means are not new, they (like all the material prerequisites for socialism) were created by large–

> scale capitalism. But under capitalism they remained, first, a rarity, and secondly — which is particularly important — either *profitmaking* enterprises, with all the worst features of speculation, profiteering, cheating and fraud, or "acrobatics of bourgeois charity," which the best workers rightly hated and despised. (Lenin 1919d, 64; Vogel 2013, 126)

For Lenin, then, the material means of emancipating women from their domestic slavery *already exist* in the developed capitalist countries, in the form of "public catering establishments, nurseries, [and] kindergartens". The main task is to expand and repurpose them to serve women's needs, rather than profit. What he is advocating here is a process of *dialectical* development. The capitalist aspects of the old social reproductive institutions should be discarded, while the socialist parts should be retained, albeit on a broader, more developed scale.

Not everyone has been convinced by this solution. According to Heitlinger (1979, 18), Lenin thought that "the savings in labor time resulting from socializing housework would substantially cheapen the process. This impression was mistaken", she argues, since the transition from unpaid to paid socialized domestic labor creates new costs. Labor-time savings will have to be substantial in order for the process to become "economically viable", i.e. profitable. This objection is misplaced. In the above-quoted passage Lenin rejects the "*profitmaking* enterprises" characteristic of capitalism. For him, socialism is characterized not by production for profit, but production for human needs. Lenin would advocate the transition to socialized domestic labor regardless of whether it were profitable, since it is a necessary means to female, and by extension, workers' emancipation. What he emphasizes above all is that this transformation can be successful only if women themselves assume a *leading*

role in the process: “We say that the emancipation of the workers must be effected by the workers themselves, and in exactly the same way the emancipation of working women is a matter for the working women themselves.” In other words, “the working women must themselves see to it that [socialized domestic services] are developed” (Lenin 1919b, 70). There is little documented evidence of Lenin encouraging men to work in these services as well. He “seemed to have assumed that socialized housework would remain the responsibility of women” (Bryson 2016, 113; Atwood 1999, 9). “At the same time”, Vogel argues, he did expect the socialist state “to provide guidance and devote resources to their work” (Vogel 2013, 127). Lenin’s recommendations for the establishment of socialized domestic labor and child-care are therefore double edged. In one respect, they showcase his refusal to view females as passive objects of male paternalism. He trusts in their capacity to solve their own issues. In another respect, they indicate his partial attachment to the traditional patriarchal sexual division of labor. This division needs to be overcome in order to obtain equality.

Lenin’s proposals for abolishing female subjugation were not new. They can be found in August Bebel’s 1879 work *Women and Communism* (Bebel 1904, 343; 338; 339). The main difference is that Lenin not only envisioned the emancipation of women in theory. After the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia, he called upon the Soviet regime to achieve this lofty goal in reality.

For many socialists at the time, the October Revolution signified a turning point in the struggle for women’s emancipation, since it created the material requisites for the transition to a classless society and the end of all subordination. Lenin focused much of his attention after the revolution upon efforts to improve the status of women. In November 1918 the Communist Party organized the first All-Russia Congress of

Working Women. Over a thousand female delegates attended it, mainly workers and poor peasants. According to Kollontai (1918, 221–223), one of the organizers, not everyone appreciated the importance of the Congress. Several prominent Bolsheviks opposed it. “However, Vladimir Ilyich declared that the Congress was necessary. He always inquired how we were progressing and whether women were responding to our call.” The Bolshevik leader showcased this support by attending the event himself as a keynote speaker. “Lenin’s appearance created a sensation: smiling, he held up his watch when the storm of applause showed no signs of abating” (Stites 1976, 177). His speech highlighted the importance of female emancipation in building the new society. “One of the primary tasks of the Soviet Republic,” Lenin argued, was the abolition of “all restrictions on women’s rights.” He proudly remarked that the state had already introduced freedom of divorce, thereby abolishing “that source of bourgeois degradation, repression and humiliation.” It had already “passed a decree annulling all distinction between legitimate and illegitimate children and removing political restrictions.” For these reasons Lenin proclaimed that “nowhere else in the world have equality and freedom for working women been so fully established” (Lenin 1918a, 59).

But “the important thing” was “not the law,” Lenin continued, but the capacity of women to effectively utilize the rights granted to them. He pointed out, for instance, that the formal proclamation of divorce rights did not automatically emancipate women from their marital bondage. In the towns and cities freedom of marriage was in effect. But in the countryside, where the Orthodox Church still had an influence, it remained a “dead letter,” and many women remained trapped in their relationships. Lenin described the Orthodox priesthood as “an evil” that was “harder to combat than the old legislation.” He added, however that it was essential to be “extremely careful”

in “fighting religious prejudices,” since these were still widespread. By giving “too sharp an edge to the struggle” against the church they would “only arouse popular resentment” amongst some religious women (Lenin 1918a, 59–60). Lenin therefore suggested, in the conclusion to his speech, that propaganda and education, rather than force, were the best means of removing this hindrance to female marital freedom (Vogel 2013, 127). “The significance of this speech,” writes Richard Stites (1976, 177), was that “no head of state had ever said anything like it in the history of the woman question.”

According to Kollontai (1918, 221), “Vladimir Ilyich was the one who initiated the involvement of broad masses of women from the cities and villages in the building of a socialist state.” Indeed, in several speeches and articles Lenin called upon the Soviet government to maximize female involvement in politics (Vogel 2013, 127). He argued that “the participation of working women” was “essential,” not only among “party members and politically-conscious women, but also” among “the non-party” and “least politically conscious” women. Lenin did not care what practical experience they had. All had the capacity to contribute:

> There is nothing Soviet power can appreciate as much as the help given by masses of non-party working women. They may know that in the old, bourgeois society, perhaps, a comprehensive training was necessary for participation in politics and that this was not available to women. The political activity of the Soviet Republic is mainly the struggle against the landowners and capitalists, the struggle for the elimination of exploitation; political activity, therefore, is made available to the working woman in the Soviet Republic and it will consist in the working woman using her organizational ability to help the working man. (Lenin 1919b, 71.)

Lenin urged “working women” to take “a bigger part in the elections” to the soviet government and also participate in it. The textual evidence shows that this was a particularly important issue for him. Lenin often worked himself up into a fit of passionate rage when discussing its importance. The following passage- from his 1920 article “To the Working Women”- exemplifies this tendency:

> Elect more working women to the Soviet, both Communist women and non-party women. As long as they are honest working women capable of performing their work sensibly and conscientiously, even if they are not members of the Party — elect them to the Moscow Soviet! Send more working women to the Moscow Soviet! Let the Moscow proletariat show that it is prepared to do everything, and is doing everything, to fight for victory, to fight the old inequality, the old bourgeois humiliation of women! The proletariat cannot achieve complete liberty until it has won complete liberty for women. (Lenin 1920b, 79.)

Lenin not only wanted women to be electable to the legislative and executive branches. In March 1919 he proposed to replace the old judiciary, which was dominated by the bourgeoisie, with one composed of and elected by the masses. He specified that the Party would make “no distinction with regard to women,” and that it would allow “the two sexes completely equal rights both in electing judges and in exercising judicial functions” (Lenin 1919e, 62).

In the same period Lenin called for more women to take part in the “people’s militia,” which replaced the standing army and police, as well as the Peoples’ Control

bodies, which were created to monitor the work of the Party and state organs. In a note to comrade J. V. Stalin on the reorganization of state control, he called for the "introduction by law of the systematic participation of witnesses from among the workers, with compulsory participation of up to two-thirds women" (Lenin 1919f, 486). It was also necessary, in his view, that "*all* working people, both men and *particularly women*, should serve in the Workers' and Peasants' Inspection," which monitored economic production. "*Women*, literally *every woman*, must be drawn into this work" (Lenin 1920e, 300–301).

Lenin emphasized that the October Socialist Revolution not only passed political power to working women. It granted them economic power as well, since it replaced private ownership with state and collective ownership. He called upon the Soviet power to ensure that all working people, "women as well as men," got involved this economic development. He argued that the economy could only grow when "instead of a few hundreds, millions and millions of women throughout Russia" took part in it. The "participation of a large number of women" was especially "essential in the organization and running of big experimental farms," as well as the industrial enterprises (Lenin 1919b, 72).

In Lenin's view, the Soviet power found it "relatively simple and easy" to achieve formal legal and political equality for the sexes. He recognized, however, that this was "only the first step in the liberation of women." "The second and most important step" — that of achieving social equality — had made slower progress in both the material and ideological spheres. With regards to the former, he wrote, in July of 1919, "that notwithstanding all the laws" liberating women, they continued to be domestic slaves. "Dining-rooms and nurseries" were "springing up" wherever possible and "*beginning* to change in character," but there were not enough of them.

This was partially due to the shortage of labor power and materials caused by the Civil War and famine. But Lenin also accused the state of paying "insufficient attention" to nurturing these "shoots of communism." He chastised the Soviet press for failing to extol the "best catering establishments or nurseries" as "model enterprises." "Millions" of newspapers should have made these institutions an "object of national pride." The work done to advance "the emancipation of women from domestic slavery" deserved "ten times more attention and care" from "the press, as well as from *every* workers' and peasants' organization" (Lenin 1919d, 63–64).

With regards to the ideological struggle, "Lenin criticized the general passivity and backwardness of [his] male comrades", many of whom did not take women's issues seriously (Vogel 2013, 128). That many Party men continued to make their wives do all the household work was for Lenin a sign that contempt for women was still widespread (Zetkin 1924, 115). Bryson claims that Lenin himself "never really questioned whether or how men could be persuaded to change their attitudes" (Bryson 2016, 113). On the contrary, Zetkin recalls that he called for more educational work among them within the Party and society. He wanted men to perform a fairer share of household chores (Zetkin 1924, 115). The Soviet state never formally implemented Lenin's recommendations, and the struggle against misogyny remained a secondary issue for the Bolsheviks. "Nevertheless, his observations on the problem represented an extremely rare acknowledgement of its seriousness", for "virtually no socialist in this period seriously challenged the sex-division of domestic labor" (Vogel 2013, 128).

Lenin desired "no separate women's organizations of communist women." He wanted all Party members, regardless of sex, to view themselves as communists with the same duties and rights. However, he did encourage the Party to establish internal

working groups "with the specific purpose of rousing the broad masses of women, bringing them into contact with the Party and keeping them under its influence" (Lenin, quoted in Zetkin 1924, 110–111). Lenin gave "his unqualified support to the Zhenotdel," a communist women's committee established in 1919, and "whose meetings he addressed on a number of occasions" (Stites 1976, 189; Hayden 1976, 161).

"On the issues of love and sexuality" under socialism "Lenin… said very little, and nothing was meant for official publication" (Vogel 2013, 128). In 1915 the Bolshevik Inessa Armand sent him a plan of a pamphlet on working-class women in which she advocated "freedom of love." Lenin advised her to "throw out" this demand. Bourgeois ideologists would interpret it as a license for women to commit adultery, ignore the duty of childbirth, and avoid "the serious element in love." He argued that proletarian women should seek freedom not from *moral* constraints, but from the *material* ones characteristic of bourgeois society, such as economic calculations and worries, religious prejudices, familial prohibition, societal prejudices, environmental circumstances, and the law (Lenin 1915, 36–41). Lenin expressed the same views in a series of private conversations with Zetkin, in which he rejected sexual promiscuity among socialists. At the same time, he denounced the patriarchal character of bourgeois morality, which demanded faithful wives, but which hypocritically condoned adulterous husbands (Zetkin 1924, 95–124; Vogel 2013, 128-29). Lenin advocated monogamy and the sanctity of marriage during the early years of soviet rule.

Lenin's pedagogic exchanges with Zetkin and Armand have produced conflicting evaluations among commentators. According to Jerry Pankhurst (1982, 84), they reveal that "(1) [he] was paternalistic towards his female lieutenants, (2) cavalier

about their failures, and (3) sexually conservative." By contrast, Teresa Ebert (2015, 364) defends the Marxist feminist credentials of Lenin's views on sexuality and love. In highlighting what he called the "objective logic of class relations in love" in opposition to the "subjective" understanding of sexuality and love that Armand and most feminists propose, Lenin raised the fundamental "question of class that feminists and sexual theorists, in nearly all their forms, have largely suppressed" (*ibid*.). He highlighted the objective conditions required by working-class women for a sexuality free from material constraints.

Gail Lapidus is also sympathetic. While, in her view, Lenin's comments "contain a strong note of personal revulsion, they were motivated by a larger anxiety". He recognized, with some justification, that unbridled sexual promiscuity would slow the revolution by wasting the "energies" of the "youthful generation" with "unproductive" distractions. Lenin argued that this energy should be harnessed and redirected into more productive enterprises. His "remarks reveal a man seeking a middle ground between two equally unacceptable extremes, the excesses of sexual libertinism on the one hand and the hypocritical asceticism of bourgeois morality on the other" (Lapidus 1978, 88).

Nevertheless, Lenin's critique of free love "functioned mainly as a rationale for sexual conservatism amongst socialists" during the time (Vogel 2013, 129). And among "bourgeois feminists" (a term used by Ebert), his pronouncements on the subject are "proof" of his "oppressive patriarchal and puritanical indifference to women's concerns and sexuality" (Ebert 2015, 364).

From the standpoint of the "free love" movement Lenin's views may be unsatisfactory and perhaps even reactionary. But as Heitlinger (1979, 206) rightly argues, it is important to remember that they were private, and not programmatic

statements. As such, “one cannot be dogmatic about what Lenin would have said in public, had he decided to speak about sexuality” (ibid.). Moreover, “Lenin’s downgrading of the importance of sexuality was time-specific. It referred to the revolutionary period in Russia and that of the expected revolution in Germany. One could be reasonably confident that he would evaluate sexuality differently today.” Indeed, Heitlinger suggests that Lenin was “open as regards the future” (Heitlinger 1979, 206-207).

It is also worth remembering that Lenin always placed sexual relations outside state jurisdiction. The Soviet government abolished centuries-old tsarist regulations on personal life, which had prohibited homosexuality and made it difficult for women to live singly or obtain divorce permits. Although Lenin may have criticized free love in private, he never called upon the state to interfere in sexuality. It is significant, in this regard, that Lenin continued to defend the legal right of soviet women to divorce their husbands, even when some suggested that this produced fewer stable marriages and an increase in casual relationships. In 1922, for instance, the sociologist Sorokin cited the “high” divorce rate in Petrograd as proof that citizens were using them to legally satisfy their sexual desires and abandon marriage. Lenin was unperturbed. Sorokin, in his view, had either been raised “in a monastery…entirely walled-off from life”, or he was “distorting the truth in the interest of reaction and the bourgeoisie”. Anyone with the “slightest acquaintance” with the bourgeois countries knew that “the real number of actual divorces (of course, not sanctioned by church or law) is everywhere immeasurably greater”. In fact,

> The only difference between Russia and other countries in this respect is that our laws do not sanctify hypocrisy and the debasement of the woman and her child, but

> openly and in the name of the government declare systematic war on all hypocrisy and all debasement (Lenin 1922a, 90-92).

In summary, Lenin's remarks on sexuality and love provide little evidence for the view, promoted by "bourgeois feminists," that he "is the symbol of patriarchal oppression" (Ebert 2015, 364). Such a view, as Ebert rightly argues, ignores the emancipatory thrust of Lenin's writings and speeches on the subject.

During the construction of socialism in Soviet Russia Lenin recognized that the emancipation of women would never occur spontaneously. It would not happen automatically after the revolutionary seizure of power. It instead required a consistent struggle led by the women themselves, and there would be several setbacks and obstacles to deal with, both ideological and material. But Lenin remained confident that this task could be achieved. And by the time he passed away in 1924 the Soviet Union had accomplished much in furthering the emancipation of women. Working and peasant women in particular were in several respects freer under socialism, and under socialist democracy, than in the capitalist republics of Western Europe. Lenin (1920a 80–81) was right to argue that "the new, mighty and unparalleled stimulus given to the working women's movement" was "inevitably associated with the foundation (and consolidation) of the first Soviet Republic — and, in addition to and in connection with this, with the Communist International."

But a lot of work remained to be done. In his report to the Thirteenth Party Congress, four months after Lenin's death, Stalin acknowledged that the percentage of women within the Party, state, and mass organizations was still low. Although the women's organization meetings were growing in number and scope, the forces active in this field had "not achieved even a hundredth part of the necessary minimum"

(Stalin 1924, 222).[3] Besides this, many women were still oppressed in the home. They were still subjected to the same old chauvinist prejudices that had been ingrained in the male consciousness for centuries. These and other obstacles needed to be overcome if women were to become equals with men. The extent to which the Soviet Union accomplished this goal is open to debate.

These shortcomings should not detract from the fact that Lenin himself relentlessly supported the women's struggle for as long as he was able. The leading women within the Russian Marxist feminist movement recognize his huge personal influence in furthering this objective. Lenin tried to ensure that the Party, state and mass organizations took the question of women's emancipation seriously. He outlined the general course of direction for striving towards genuine equality between the sexes. He did not do so alone. Women such as Krupskaya and Kollontai played a leading role. But the significance of Lenin's effort cannot be understated, and it should not be forgotten.

Stites argues that Lenin took a purely "instrumentalist" approach to women's emancipation (Stites 1976, 189). He supposedly supported this struggle only in so far as it served communist objectives. According to Lapidus (1978, 74), who takes a more balanced view, "Lenin's unique appreciation of the pivotal importance of women's roles" in the development of socialism was "joined to a real concern over the desirable effects of such progress on women themselves." While recognizing "the instrumental utility of female mobilization," he retained a "humanitarian and libertarian concern with the fate of women themselves" (*ibid*.).

It was precisely because of this "humanitarian and libertarian concern" that working women all over Russia wanted to meet and listen to Lenin. As proof for this

[3] For a contrast of Lenin and Stalin's views on women under socialism, see Lapidus 1978, 77-79.

fact one need only look at the string of women's congresses he was invited to from October 1918 to 1922, when his health began to fail him.[4] According to Kollontai (Kollontai 1918, 223), who was never afraid to criticize Lenin, "not only the women of the Soviet Union, but women throughout the world should know that Vladimir Ilyich laid the foundations of female emancipation."

Conclusion

Lenin's analysis of the "Woman Question" is significant for three reasons. First, it sheds light on the man himself. Contrary to popular belief Lenin did care about the plight of women. He was not concerned only with class problems. This could not be said about the majority of male socialists in Russia during the period, many of whom were chauvinists.

Second, Lenin's analysis avoids the class reductionism of some other Marxist approaches. By highlighting the fact that women suffer a "double oppression," he refuses to collapse gender issues into class issues. He recognizes that working women suffer a special form of exploitation that men never have. This enabled him to formulate strategies specifically tailored for overcoming female oppression. It is for this reason that Lenin became popular among Russian women.

Third, in his analysis of Russia and Europe during the rise of imperialism Lenin contributed to the Marxist understanding of women's oppression. His ideas also remain relevant for their contemporary struggle. Lenin shows that the emancipation of the working class requires men and women working together as equals in a united struggle against capitalism. In the West today, where identity politics and

[4] He was invited to at least six such congresses. See Lenin 1918a; 1919b; 1920c; 1920d, 1921b; 1922b.

intersectionality are undermining the fighting working class, this message is timelier than ever.

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