

The struggle from the mother's perspective and how as socialists we might develop it further

How does our struggle in raising children fit into the struggle for Socialism? The first thing it does is alter our perspective on what that struggle for socialism is.

It is a great gain made by feminism that we now ~~kk~~ know that the struggle for positive change touches every aspect of our private, personal and social existence. And for those of us engaged in raising children, it is not particularly difficult to realise that in organising around the struggles we have as parents we affect and potentially draw in either actively or passively a vast proportion of the total population.

BIG FLAME was to my knowledge amongst the first organisations to try in recent years to prioritise the community struggle; to move towards a much clearer view that the enormous weakness of women politically is their isolation as child rearers, and to help actively in the development of struggles that brought women ^{most} together to act collectively.

Because women are paying the enormous price for the prevailing isolation of child rearers in terms of their health happiness and their potential as human beings, women have much to gain by taking steps to combat it and many are ready to do so. Our South London group of women with children * met for the first time of 27th April. The quietest woman in our meeting went home wrote some of her ideas down and next day knocked on seven doors where she knew there were children, but did not know the adults. Six of these seven women she saw expressed positive response to the idea of forming a support group for each other.

Some of the problems

OPPRESSION OF CHILDREN BY PREJUDICE The decade of the Women's Movement has been a great period of burgeoning awareness of our oppression as women, the fact that the whole of our lives have been made a dreary process of self-denial and acceding to our own oppression. I will guess and leave it to further discussion by men that they are similarly affected. Where do we learn this self oppression? I would suggest it has its roots in parental enforcement of widespread prejudice ~~kyx~~ in our society against infantile behaviour which in itself is normal healthy and part of learning and growth. Masturbation and exploratory play with one's body and then with other objects increasingly coming within reach.

Women do resist to some extent this pressure to deprive themselves and their babies of instinctual satisfaction eg by breast feeding but hiding themselves away to do it. One of my friends used to take all her clothes off to feed her baby and hold him close.

* "Women with Children" group formed March 1980 by Spare Rib readers who have, or care for, or just like children and want to discuss write about and organise around the problems.

UNMET
NEEDS:

There are some crucial conditions attached to the job of child rearing which for a very sizeable part of the population are being met very inadequately. Listing them briefly - we need an adequate minimum amount of money guaranteed to raise kids. Below this the job is horrendously difficult. Single parents for obvious reasons actually need more (e.g. to get out of the isolation of their home with or without their kids) but in fact get much less. The National Children's Bureau's latest report and to me one of the most significant to date confirm that all the disadvantages suffered by children in single parent families are the same as those of two parent families forced to live on a very low income. The recent NSPCC report warned that the latest steep rate rises because of the stress it would cause would be followed by an increase in non-accidental injury (child battering).

MONEY:

CHANGING
HARMFUL
WAYS
OF
DOING
AND
BEING:

Parent's violent behaviour towards their children when under stress seems to get repeated in the child's own behaviour when they've become adult husbands and fathers. What gives this credibility is that once you become a parent, you immediately find that you are doing the same things and in the same way as your own parents. To change that, you have to first learn what and how each discreet bit of behaviour is wrong, and then to work quite hard on yourself to change it. eg. to stop yourself interfering with masturbation or other play that your mother would not have approved of but actually does no harm.

HOUSING:

Another very important factor in the lives of parents is the accommodation in which child care takes place. Half the children in London are being brought up, as mine are, four stories or more above the ground with literally no where other than dangerous pavements and roads for play space.

I met one of the dinner ladies from my daughter's school because our two girls are close friends. That family is also in a fourth floor flat and are unable to get a transfer. I asked her if she would like to come with me to something happening in the Women's Movement. She said she was not a feminist but if somebody got something going on housing she'd come out and support it at once.

FINDING
CONFIDENCE:

Its a familiar story on the left for wives and girlfriends of militants to be cast into silence by this seemingly superior knowledge and political wisdom of the men they are attached to. It has taken me a while to discover that this prevailing ideology of experts and expertise is one of the most effective silencers of the whole working class population. By its means, people are kept from demanding control over their own lives because they lack the confidence and belief in their own capacity to form a sensible and worthwhile opinion. It is felt that only academics and their ilk are worth listening to, so there's no point in the likes of me even trying. Women experience it cruelly and continuously once they have children.

There have always been some who related closely to their babies and so ignored the rules for some of the time. For crazy mums, we would need the strength and support of each other to rethink the prejudices and I will briefly mention in a section below how and why I think it will be possible to initiate changes^{which} would start that process of mutual support more readily.

LEARNING
SELF
DENIAL

It is commonly tabu for young children to touch things which are precious, breakable, expensive and meant for adults only. Some people put all such things out of the way. Many more still believe children have to learn not to touch - I've never seen the slightest usefulness in this enforced and painful frustration from a human point of view, but it is a fine building brick in the edifice of self-denial, with which most of us accepted the terrible boredom of primary school (of which also more below) the unsatisfying and often unhappy experiences of selection and secondary non-education and then the pointless and underpaid jobs which follow.

ISOLATION
OF
MOTHERS
AND
CHILDREN

And this lack of human rights which a child suffers in regard to herself and her living space is further impoverished by the anger she/he experiences at the hands of a parent incarcerated with her for those first five years. If they ever put me in prison and in solitary confinement I and all the other mothers at home with under fives will know exactly what to expect it will feel like - depressing, lonely, with a craving for a friendly adult voice and satisfying interaction with other adults. On this emotionally threadbare scenario, the mother at home bears the weight of the constant demands for love, play, and energetic input by the adult into their need for loving, learning and growth. The anger and frustration one feels with the isolated child rearing gets turned against the children in shouting, loss of patience and tolerance, and hitting them. It is clear also that the emotional resources one has with which to cope with children are whittled away and smashed by worries about shortage of money, the moodiness of the marriage partner, and the whole range of outside pressures created by the society around you. Those pressures are centrally about amongst other things, the lack of awareness and concern of people in the wider community for children or their mothers. Children quite commonly appear to the mother to be less cared about in the neighbourhood than the local dog or cat population.

PLUS
DEMANDS

PLUS
OTHER
PRESSURES

COMMUNITY
UNWARENESS

Playing out in the corridor outside our fourth floor flat, my kids were told off by a neighbour for being there. I retaliated by saying that she obviously considered her cats more important since their stinking cat food always littered the same corridor. She contested this saying she liked my kids very much only she couldn't stand the way I was bringing them up; which illustrates how totally unaware most people are of the energy, love and effort that goes into bringing up "nice kids".

UNMET
NEEDS:

There are some crucial conditions attached to the job of child rearing which for a very sizeable part of the population are being met very inadequately. Listing them briefly - we need an adequate minimum amount of money guaranteed to raise kids. Below this the job is horrendously difficult. Single parents for obvious reasons actually need more (e.g. to get out of the isolation of their home with or without their kids) but in fact get much less. The National Children's Bureau's latest report and to me one of the most significant to date confirm that all the disadvantages suffered by children in single parent families are the same as those of two parent families forced to live on a very low income. The recent NSPCC report warned that the latest steep rate rises because of the stress it would cause would be followed by an increase in non-accidental injury (child battering).

MONEY:

CHANGING
HARMFUL
WAYS
OF
DOING
AND
BEING:

Parent's violent behaviour towards their children when under stress seems to get repeated in the child's own behaviour when they've become adult husbands and fathers. What gives this credibility is that once you become a parent, you immediately find that you are doing the same things and in the same way as your own parents. To change that, you have to first learn what and how each discreet bit of behaviour is wrong, and then to work quite hard on yourself to change it. eg. to stop yourself interfering with masturbation or other play that your mother would not have approved of but actually does no harm.

HOUSING:

Another very important factor in the lives of parents is the accommodation in which child care takes place. Half the children in London are being brought up, as mine are, four stories or more above the ground with literally no where other than dangerous pavements and roads for play space.

I met one of the dinner ladies from my daughter's school because our two girls are close friends. That family is also in a fourth floor flat and are unable to get a transfer. I asked her if she would like to come with me to something happening in the Women's Movement. She said she was not a feminist but if somebody got something going on housing she'd come out and support it at once.

FINDING
CONFIDENCE:

It's a familiar story on the left for wives and girlfriends of militants to be cast into silence by this seemingly superior knowledge and political wisdom of the men they are attached to. It has taken me a while to discover that this prevailing ideology of experts and expertise is one of the most effective silencers of the whole working class population. By its means, people are kept from demanding control over their own lives because they lack the confidence and belief in their own capacity to form a sensible and worthwhile opinion. It is felt that only academics and their ilk are worth listening to, so there's no point in the likes of me even trying. Women experience it cruelly and continuously once they have children.

There have always been some who related closely to their babies and so ignored the rules for some of the time. For many more, we would need the strength and support of each other to rethink the prejudices and I will briefly mention in a section below how and why I think it will be possible to initiate changes^{with us} would start that process of actual support more readily.

LEARNING
SELF
DENIAL

It is commonly taken for young children to touch things which are precious, breakable, expensive and meant for adults only. Some people put all such things out of the way. Many more still believe children have to learn not to touch - I've never seen the slightest usefulness in this enforced and painful frustration from a human point of view, but it is a fine building block in the edifice of self-denial, with which most of us accepted the terrible boredom of primary school (of which also more below) the unsatisfying and often unhappy experiences of selection and secondary non-education and then the pointless and underpaid jobs which follow.

ISOLATION
OF
MOTHERS
AND
CHILDREN

And this lack of human rights which a child suffers in regard to herself and her living space is further impoverished by the anger she/he experiences at the hands of a parent incarcerated with her for those first five years. If they ever put me in prison and in solitary confinement I and all the other mothers at home with under fives will know exactly what to expect it will feel like - depressing, lonely, with a craving for a friendly adult voice and satisfying interaction with other adults. On this emotionally threadbare scenario, the mother at home bears the weight of the constant demands for love, play, and energetic input by the adult into their need for loving, learning and growth. The anger and frustration one feels with the isolated child rearing gets turned against the children in shouting, loss of patience and tolerance, and hitting them. It is clear also that the emotional resources one has with which to cope with children are whittled away and smashed by worries about shortage of money, the moodiness of the marriage partner, and the whole range of outside pressures created by the society around you. Those pressures are centrally about amongst other things, the lack of awareness and concern of people in the wider community for children or their mothers. Children quite commonly appear to the mother to be less cared about in the neighbourhood than the local dog or cat population.

PLUS
DEMANDS

PLUS
OTHER
PRESSURES

COMMUNITY
SAFARIENESS

Playing out in the corridor outside our fourth floor flat, my kids were told off by a neighbour for being there. I retaliated by saying that she obviously considered her cats more important since their stinking cat food always littered the same corridor. She contested this saying she liked my kids very much only she couldn't stand the way I was bringing them up; which illustrates how totally unaware most people are of the energy, love and effort that goes into bringing up "nice kids".

1. Income:

The Claimant's Union has made a target of its struggle an adequate income for everyone. This needs massive TUC support as well as much wider awareness that the main burden of the task of raising the next generation is thrown on to parents with no guarantee of the resources to do it. The tragic results are everywhere visible - on the streets, in ESN schools, in children's homes, even in the shops where the distressing pressure on the mothers of young children is clearly apparent, and in remedial classes and in "sin bins".

2. The campaign for decent housing for all

Could have potentially massive support from many different sections, including people with out adequate housing, Squatters Groups, Tenants Associations, those handicapped by repayments they can't afford, workers in housing departments, Women's Aid, National Council for One Parent Families etc. That movement should be our riposte to the selling off of Council houses.

3. Education:

Many working class mums carefully and capably respond to their childrens learning needs from their earliest days. We learn from each other in that process - e.g. a young playleader taught me to use finger paints so that I would allow my child to have that satisfying messy play. When it comes to school time, we are then shut out of any important influence over what happens. Many aware teachers know full well about the inadequacy of primary school experience for kids in which the high numbers of children per teacher plays a central and destructive part. It has the advantage for our rulers that it saves money and gets the kids disciplined to boring unsatisfying work in adult working life. It wastes many years of valuable learning time and makes sure that working class intelligence will be used and exercised on its own behalf very minimally.

Working class parents are extremely concerned and dissatisfied. The teachers, who are aware are often rendered impotent to contribute to change by being isolated in a hierarchical system. We need to talk to them and build a strong movement for change, outside the control of the PTA when that organisation does not choose to join us. There are many groups in existence offering potential support, e.g. concerned parents and teachers, women in NUT, rank and file, multi-racial education groups, groups combating racism and sexism in education.

4. Health Services

I know least about this section having had only a year's nursing experience long ago and having been to hospital myself only for confinements. But there are many NHS workers concerned about the services. NUPE and NALGO members are building up their experience of struggle and there is no women who don't know about their dismissive treatment but at the hands of GRS, their ancillaries and the Maternity Departments. Women health groups are springing up and they will mean that increasingly we can offer self help and at the same time pressure for the right kind of services from the knowledge gained and shared with NHS workers.

The state nursery I saw recently had "educational" toys around and it was clear that its under fives were not missing out on some of the nursery school experience, but in nursery schools there are many more staff and helpers. One of the things you learn as a parent, that a loving interest and delight in your child's process of enquiry is worth more than twelve dozen sets of Cuisinère rods (coloured rods for learning to count) and that it takes lots of unbegrudging adult time and attention to meet the whole of a small child's needs for that input. They don't get it in state nurseries - Working class kids don't need to be whole people for purposes of this society and the sooner it starts to chop down their human potential, the more expendible cheap labour ^{is} available at the end of the process.

So are the state nurseries still better than no day care and mothers imprisoned at home?

Discussing the state day nursery question in the Women's Movement I have come away with the impression that many well intentioned and well healed women would not use state day nurseries for their own young children whilst they had other options and very often they have other options. But working class women, they feel, need them and so should demand them. Shades of the housing estates designed by the middle class professionals and suffered by working people!

It has been taken as axiomatic amongst the working class women of the neighbourhood where my kids have been born and raised that the woman who is forced to put her child in a council nursery is an unfortunate and my experience as one of the benighted professionals bears it out.

The need for state day nurseries reflects the isolation, poverty and the inadequate housing situation of millions of mothers, a sort of unsterile plaster for a socially created wound.

Women need to be together to fight the various manifestations of the state system that oppresses and deprives their lives and those of their children.