



WOMEN'S FIGHTBACK

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TRUMP'S NEW WORLD ORDER

If you watched the re-election of Donald Trump with horror, just imagine what it must have felt like in Rafah or Kyiv. Since his (re-)inauguration, he has reinstated off-shore drilling, attempted to end birthright citizenship, sacked many thousands of federal employees, ended the US's overseas aid programmes, sided with Putin over Ukraine, backed ethnic

cleansing in Gaza, and pardoned the 6 January rioters. Senior officials of the most powerful government on Earth now give Nazi salutes from the stage of political rallies. For millions of working-class Americans, especially women, girls, LGBT+ people and people of colour, his government poses an existential threat.

Trump himself has been accused by 26 separate women of rape, sexual assault or upskirting. During the 2024 presidential election, Trump promised to "protect women whether they like it or not". His new government will now be fired up to reverse any positive changes made under Biden, pursue traditional Republican attacks, and go much further

TRANS RIGHTS

Trump's last administration weakened Title IX, the federal anti-discrimination law that applies to schools, limiting the rights of transgender students to take part in activities and enter spaces in line with their gender identity. Discrimination and the spread of a culture war targeting LGBT+ people continued under the Biden administration. At least 16 states have provisions restricting LGBT content in schools.

At his inauguration, Trump signed an Executive Order entitled 'Defending Women From Gender Ideology Extremism And Restoring Biological Truth To The Federal Government'. It declares that gender is equivalent to anatomical sex, and reverses federal anti-discrimination policy. According to the *Washington Post* the Republicans spent over \$200 million on attack adverts against transgender people during the 2024 election.

Bit-by-bit the US Congress is introducing discriminatory policies: banning transgender athletes from participating in

women's sports, banning gender-affirming care for transgender children of serving military personnel, and so on. One hope is that Executive Orders will continue to be difficult to implement, but we cannot rely on that.

Discrimination against transgender people signals the triumph of reactionary ideology. Far from protecting women, it will reinforce damaging gender stereotypes. It is at odds with US public opinion which, according to polls, increasingly supports trans rights. Undoubtedly, Trump's policy agenda is likely to increase bigotry and violence against an already marginalised group of people.

REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

Trump's appointment of three ultra-conservative Supreme Court judges during his first term tipped the political balance of the court and produced a ruling ending federal (nationwide) access to safe and legal abortions. Since then many states have heavily restricted or banned abortion – the total stands at 16. Some states have introduced so-called TRAP laws, which enforce onerous "health and safety" restrictions on abortion providers. Most states which allow time-limited abortion have mandatory counselling; many have waiting periods between counselling and procedures. On the other hand, some states have enshrined abortion rights in their constitutions, or had rights confirmed by a state supreme court – also a total of 16.

The geography of bans and restricted provision is such that many women have to travel hundreds of miles to access the nearest abortion clinic. More than 60% of all those who seek abortions in the US are people of colour and about half live below the federal poverty line. Many people of colour live in the southern states which have the most restrictive abortion laws. These statistics are in line with other disparities experienced by women of colour in terms of access to medical insurance, poorer maternal health and access to contraception. This situation will be exacerbated if, as is expected, Congress repeals or significantly reduces the healthcare protections in the Affordable Care Act.

The powerful US anti-abortion movement is wildly out of step with the majority of ordinary Americans. Polls show 80% of Americans oppose a federal abortion ban, including 65% of Republicans.

Will Trump go along with Congress





• Anti-abortion demonstrators at the annual March for Life in Washington, 24 January 2025.

passing a national ban on abortion? During the election campaign he said he preferred to leave it to federal states to determine policy. But as provision of abortion has become a political battleground between states, he could be prompted to take sides with his reactionary supporters.

AGAINST THE TIDE OF PROGRESS

It is significant that the anti-abortion measures are out of line with a successful rising wave of struggle for reproductive rights around the world, led by radical, leftist, feminist movements. Trump and his supporters don't like that. In 2020 the Trump administration led and co-signed the Geneva Consensus Declaration which, among other things, stated its support for local bans on abortion. Biden withdrew US support for the declaration. Trump is likely to reinstate it. Trump is also likely to reinstate a "global gag rule," preventing foreign NGOs from receiving US federal funding if they provide abortion counselling or referrals.

Anti-abortion activists inside and outside of government are now likely to target the

63% of abortions which are first trimester medical abortions. Some anti-abortionists are even advocating using archaic law (the 1873 Comstock Law) to restrict the mailing of the abortion pill on the grounds that it constitutes "obscene" material. The previous Trump administration also allowed employers to claim exemptions on religious freedom grounds from covering the cost of contraception under the Affordable Care Act. This has so far not had a big negative effect, but the coverage itself is hugely important: under 4% of women in the US currently have to pay for birth control pills.

CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

For Trump's supporters both gender equality and transgender rights are seen as a threat to so-called traditional families. This guiding patriarchal principle found its way into legislation and policy piece-by-piece, a dynamic that will now speed up.

Before the election a great deal of political debate was focused on 'Project 2025' a 900-page "manifesto" for a future Republican government by

the American far right think tank The Heritage Foundation. The Foundation brings together some 100 conservative, Christian nationalist and other right-wing organisations. Trump denied knowing anything about the document during his campaign. He was lying. Many of the authors of the document have been appointed to government positions. A central idea of the document was that the family should be put back into the centre of American life "in order to protect children".

'Straight White American Jesus', a podcast which tracks the rise and rise of US Christian nationalism, recently featured a discussion which argues that "family values" as used as shorthand. Most obviously, it means families based on heteronormative married monogamous couples. The Christian nationalists (which include all denominations) won't say it but they do usually mean "white" families. Their patriarchal worldview is bothered about single mothers but more than that, the absence of fathers, as the cause of "degeneracy". Their view of the history of families is static and ahistorical. They fear diverse gender expression and sexualities

but cannot speak of that fear; they can only seek to repress these things.

As Siân Norris argues in *Bodies Under Siege*, the organisations which promote these ideas are well-funded and have been well-organised for many years. They are also linked up globally. Some anti-abortion networks, such as Agenda Europe, also take an explicitly political stance, attacking Marxism, feminism (which is apparently "Marxism in new clothing"), "homosexuality" and "gender theory". The people who populate these organisations want to, on the one hand, infiltrate key "respectable" institutions (through projects like Project 2025) and on the other hand provide an organisational infrastructure to more "street fighting" anti-abortion and anti-LGBT+ campaigns.

Whatever the Trump administration does next in these areas will be the culmination of many years of campaigning. One US group, the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), has been using the courts for years to successfully label extremely rare late-term abortions, in cases of, for example, fatal abnormality of the foetus, as so-called "partial-birth abortions", i.e to redefine it as the murder of living babies. That led to George W Bush to pass the 2003 Partial-Birth Abortion Act, which led to a federal ban on late-term abortion. Since then ADF has successfully defended the law in the courts.

TRUMP AND THE FAR RIGHT

In the US, reactionary conservatism has a long history and is made up of different streams, including libertarianism and the deeply socially conservative evangelical right. But in recent years, especially since the Tea Party movement was founded after the 2008 financial crash, the conservative right has radicalised.

Trumpism is the latest iteration and draws support from an amalgam of overlapping networks and groups including Trump's own "Make America Great Again" movement. The far right also includes extreme groups such as neo-Nazis, conspiracy theory movements and various misogynistic and racist social media communities. White Christian nationalism is increasingly influential. This far right movement exists in parallel with the growing far right in Europe and Latin America but mobilises through its own streams of home-grown, often populist, far right politics.

Trump will do whatever sustains him in power. He has forged an alliance with

the US religious right, a big part of his base. In 2016, he appointed Mike Pence, a hardline evangelical Christian as his Vice President. This time he has chosen JD Vance, a Catholic convert and far right Christian nationalist. During the presidential election, Trump labeled Kamala Harris a "childless cat lady" because in the religious utopia the far right desires, women will be incubators for babies.

Siân Norris also argues that the far right attack on women's reproductive rights is an integral part of their race war. The Great Replacement is a white supremacist theory which holds that bad actors – Marxists, Jews, Black Lives Matters activists – are conspiring to reduce and marginalise the white population. For white supremacists, stemming the birth rate of people of colour is key; they must be removed, sterilised or exterminated. But in the meantime, attacking reproductive rights and abortion provision is a key part of the battle.

Trump's misogyny fuses well with a persona which boasts about wealth, power and privilege. He expresses his power through threats to punish anyone who challenges him; women, and men he can define as "unmanly" are always the object of those threats. As Kate Manne argues in *Down Girl*, misogyny in its purest form is built on a myriad of actions which involve the policing of women. Trump's "pussy grabbing" aggression, and his justification of serial sexual harassment as "locker room talk" is not only a way to express his power, but it is also a neat fit with his other expressions of power: blunt vocabulary, vulgarity and studied ignorance.

Unfortunately for us, the vulgar talk feels authentic to his supporters. Millions who voted for Trump are not just crackpots prepared to believe that every crime Trump is convicted of is "fake news". His support comes from a place of deep mistrust of the political system. The more the liberal left rails against Trump's style, the more popular it becomes.



HOW DO WE FIGHT BACK?

Just before Trump's inauguration there were over 300 "People's Marches"; thousands took part. There have been more protests since. This a good start but does not match the response the first time Trump took power, when hundreds of thousands marched in Washington.

Trump's victory will embolden the far right around the world. The opposition to Trumpism must make a clear defence of "social progress": for reproductive rights and sexual freedom, for full gender equality, for freedom of gender expression and against misogyny.

On 18 January, cities and towns across the UK saw protests, with 2-3,000 in London. They focused on reproductive rights and violence against women. But trade unions were noticeably absent from protests in the UK and the US. This is despite Republican threats to undermine trade union organisation, such as the plan to abolish the National Labour Relations Board. Trump's agenda is no accident. He knows that the unions are one of his most powerful potential adversaries, and he will seek to weaken them.

The organised working class – over six million people are trade union members in the UK and the majority are women – has the power to play a strategic role in defending women and LGBT+ rights. How? Every piece of progress that workers can win – from tackling sexual harassment at work to higher pay for disabled workers – forms a bulwark against the far right. Unions could play a role in educating people against the far right, mobilising to defend migrants and other vulnerable communities, and restoring the idea that politics is not about division and hate, nor is it about worshipping at the feet of billionaires, but building a society of equality and justice.

POETRY

GREGG WALLACE

Jean Lane

Don't say cheeky chappie
Do say stupid twit
Don't say a bit of a lad
Do say sexist shit
Don't say working class
Do say grocer and loser
Don't say funny with women
Do say sexual abuser



• Black Lives Matter protestors outside the White House, May 2020.

US POLITICS

BUILDING AN INDEPENDENT SOCIALIST LEFT

Natalia Tylim is a restaurant worker and socialist activist based in New York City. She is a leading member of the Tempest Collective, which was formed in 2020.

Natalia spoke to Kelly Rogers.

Trump is back, and his election has ushered in a period of urgent reflection for the socialist left in the US. "But," says Natalia Tylim, "his reelection is not a popular mandate for Trump's policies." There were nearly 90 million people who did not vote, and while Trump's vote share increased by 3 million, the Democrats lost close to 6 million votes compared to 2020.

Rather, there exists a deep disillusionment with the political centre. "The options on offer in this election were not speaking to people," Tylim says. "Kamala Harris was doubling-down on a rightward-moving

Democratic Party vision. It was not something that people saw any reason to support. The election was one of those really bald moments that shows how centre-right liberal politics have been a breeding ground for the right."

Tylim has been a socialist activist for 20 years. First radicalised at High School during the anti-war movement of the early 2000s, she has dedicated her time to a plethora of struggles, from abortion struggles to migrant rights organising.

In 2020, she co-founded the Tempest Collective. "We felt like there was a need and an urgency for socialist, revolutionary politics – and to be part of something that at that time felt like it was still on the ascendency, with the George Floyd uprising, DSA [Democratic Socialists of America] still being a central hub of political discussion and the Covid moment which had led to a lot of workplace organising." Tempest now has more than 200 members and continues to grow.

AGAINST LESSER-EVILISM

Tylim is a strong critic of "lesser-evilism", an approach to electoral politics that calls on people to "hold their nose" and vote for a candidate they disagree with in order to avoid something worse. In an article for Tempest published in August last year, she wrote, "Lesser-evilism is not about how individuals vote; it's an insidious strategy that disarms our side, one that wrongly claims that supporting a liberal



whose goal is to protect and serve the ruling class is how we stop the spread of far-right ideology, imperial violence, and draconian social policy."

The election result hasn't changed her view. "I stand by it even more than I did before the election," she says. "We're in this very, very deep-seated moment of crisis [...] People's lives are getting much worse, and the Democratic Party is incapable of understanding what people's lives are really like because they exist in an elite bubble. They don't live the same lives that we live. They're representative of an entirely different class, whatever coalitions they make to try and win elections.

"You're faced with this situation, that if you think there's something wrong, your only options are to abstain and say 'fuck this' or despair – and when you only have two parties, the only place for people to go is to the right."

That's not to minimise the threat posed by Trump, she says. "I want to be clear: Trump's presidency is an utter disaster. Across the board, we're facing something unprecedented. This is not just a continuation of right-wing policy. There's a break happening here. Trump is testing the constitutional basis of the US and trying to see what he can get away with." But the Democratic political project had only strengthened Trump's hand: "The harm they've done, the deaths they've

caused, the complete and utter failure of their strategy around defending abortion, the number of people they have deported – you cannot fight Trump's policies by accommodating them."

So, for Tylim, people's voting intentions were of secondary importance to building a strong and independent left. Last August, she wrote, "What's at stake here has very little to do with how someone votes. Where there is no galvanising left alternative on the ballot to rally around, we should be doing everything we can to steer conversations away from individual voting choices and toward what will actually transform the situation." Now she says, "It's not about discrete lists of which party is better or worse, but can your strategy stop the right from growing? In 2020, Biden won the election and – guess what – Trump expanded his base."

NO LONGER IN THE RACE

Tylim and Tempest were in a minority on this point, however. "The entire weight of the left and the trade union movement got subsumed into campaigning for Harris," she says, "and it has left us ill-prepared."

The result has been widespread disorientation. "In 2016 when Trump won there was an immediate mass response, which liberals supported. Now, they've disappeared. They are utterly confused, have no idea what to do – and are folding immediately into, for example, Trump's attacks on gender-affirming care."

Large swathes of the left have also found themselves in disarray due to their over-emphasis on shaping and winning elections. Tylim used to be a member of DSA. She was active in the New York chapter and sat on the leadership of the New York Labor Branch. "For me, the thing that was really exciting about DSA was that there were live, strategic questions being debated. There were people who had different positions on how we use elections or how we work or don't work with Democrats, but it was a stated debate. As time went on and there were perceived successes in the electoral work, the space for that debate became less and less present.

"When Biden became the candidate in 2020, there was an urgent need to take a step back and be like, 'Bernie Sanders is no longer in the race, how does this change what we're doing?' That conversation never happened and so the entire political situation around DSA changed, but DSA didn't."

Without the anti-establishment arguments provided by the Sanders campaign and its supporters, DSA lost its moorings and became a lot less able to respond to grassroots mobilisations. "It didn't capture the radicalisation around Palestine or the Black Lives Matter moment, or when we lost abortion rights with the Dobbs decision."

It is a commonly held view that DSA is at its strongest in New York, where they have won a number of DSA-backed candidates. "But I don't think that winning seats in Democratic Party positions is in and of itself a success," Tylim says.

She points to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Jamaal Bowman, two members of "the Squad" who have been drifting to the right. In 2023, for example, they voted to outlaw a railroad union strike and impose a contract on approximately 135,000 workers that provided zero days of paid sickness leave. In 2021, Bowman voted to fund Israel's Iron Dome defence system. "Instead of being able to hold them to account, the opposite happened. Everything became about defending post facto mistakes that are made."

"Right now, there are attacks coming from every corner, but most of what New York City DSA is doing is trying to get people to register to be Democrats so that they can vote for a mayoral candidate in the Democratic primary."

REBUILDING THE LEFT

After the overturning of *Roe v Wade* in 2022, Tylim wrote an editorial for Tempest, arguing: "The hard work of the right has come to fruition. This is not a hiccup, or a momentary break in the arc of history marching towards justice, and it puts the tasks of the left into urgent perspective. The left is in a weak position in the face of the ascendant right, and it must be rebuilt."

Tempest believes it can contribute to that rebuilding. And for Tylim, that means reestablishing some basic principles that have been lost. "An overall solidaristic approach to politics," she says, "which is: an injury to one is an injury to all. If we allow any of us to be picked off – if we allow people to be fired from their jobs for their positions on Palestine or if we allow our immigrant co-workers to be targeted – it will make it impossible for any of us to take any steps forward as a class."

"I say this because it's very much contested on the US left." She points to an article in *The New York Times*,



published in February, which quotes Bhaskar Sunkara – founding editor of socialist magazine *Jacobin*. In the article, Tylim says, Sunkara appears to welcome Trump's turn against Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, instead calling for trade union and worker-led organising as a solution to inequality. "He's explicitly arguing against the idea that we would defend specific issues of the oppressed."

Another essential part of building a fit-for-purpose left, Tylim argues, is the availability of democratic political spaces. "When I became an activist, there were organisations you could join and there were meetings where you debated things and voted on things. It would be hard to overstate how few entry points there are now for people who are brand new and searching for politics. In order for there to be a strategic debate, those spaces need to exist."

THE UNIONS

Although the trade union response to Trump's election has been slower this time around, Tylim says that there is a fightback brewing. She points to school workers in Winooski, Vermont, where Tempest has a branch. In February, school workers, parents and the community came together to pass a sanctuary school policy. Schools in the district will now refuse access to immigration agents

and school staff are prohibited from collaborating with immigration authorities. In January, Trump reversed guidance that for over a decade had restricted Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection agencies from carrying out immigration enforcement in sensitive locations, such as schools and churches.

But the strength of the union response is tempered by a lack of militancy in the biggest unions, which are focused on top-level negotiations rather than worker-led action, and a "service union" model, by which members are seen as passive recipients of union benefits rather than active leaders of their own struggles. Even nominally left-led unions, like the United Auto Workers (UAW), have issued a tepid response to Trump's election. "The UAW is a very important marker of the fervour of the union movement. They were on strike last year, they were taken over by the left in an election two years ago, and they've been very, very vocal on social issues. But after Trump got elected, the union president published an op-ed saying that he was ready and willing to work with Trump."

A LEFT DISCONNECTED

In the context of a weak, disorganised left, a lot of activism in the US now centres on localised, mutual aid-focused organisations. This is perhaps most true

when it comes to the feminist movement. "Losing Dobbs was a huge blow," says Tylim, "and it hollowed out Planned Parenthood, and the bigger organisations that at one time were willing to fight are no longer present. That doesn't mean that there aren't people organising and doing important things, but it has fed the fragmentation of the movement." This disconnection has also meant a lack of urgency in states where abortion access is relatively secure.

Demoralisation is a challenge, and there's no quick fix. "The reality – that we lost *Roe v Wade* under Biden – makes it feel to people like it's a done deal, that it can't be reversed. For people a generation removed from when abortion was won, there's something that has to be recaptured and rebuilt from the ground up."

There are examples of local feminist organising that are, as always, very impressive. Tylim points to the Undocumented Women's Fund in New York City. When an individual is at risk of deportation, the UWF will develop contingency plans and build a community network that can resist the deportation and support the individual at risk and their family. "Where people are organising, they're doing the right things," Tylim says. "But ultimately, those things need to be knitted together, and we need to build something more lasting."

It's a refrain that Tylim repeats throughout the interview: whether you're talking about the feminist movement or the Palestine movement, the left needs better organisation and lasting, democratic institutions by which it can collectively strategise.

AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE OLIGARCHS

The National Committee of Tempest said in an editorial in January: "The second Trump administration has promised shock and awe as it begins its hateful rampage. In so doing, it will seek to project an inevitability and omnipotence that it does not (yet) have. While the authoritarian right hopes to disarm any resistance and to continue rallying capital to its banner, we should not allow a sense of despair and disillusionment to do this work for them.

"We have no choice but to fight the new authoritarianism. In so doing we can and must develop a stronger Left strategy to hone the resistance into a more effective force – one that shows a way out of the impasse we have been stuck in for too long. And in so doing we can demonstrate that there is still power in our collective capacity to struggle for a world based on solidarity and an actual alternative to the rule and coercion of these odious oligarchs and capital as a whole."

Their callout is to the US left, but the dangers presented by the Trump administration are reflected in the growth of the far right across the world. At the close of our interview, Tylim says: "In terms of authoritarianism, anti-immigrant sentiment, attacks on women and trans people, the far right is very consistent across the board. It tells us something about the political moment we're in and the urgent need for international collaboration."

At our 2024 conference, Workers' Liberty members debated whether or not socialists should advocate a Biden/Harris vote against Trump. The majority voted in favour.

This issue and the wider politics surrounding the US election continue to be debated in our weekly paper *Solidarity*.

Subscribe to *Solidarity*:
www.workersliberty.org/sub

ORGANISE WITH US FOR ABORTION RIGHTS

Members of Workers' Liberty submitted a resolution, calling for the full decriminalisation of abortion and removal of all barriers to access, to the Abortion Rights Annual General Meeting in March.

Are you a member of the Labour Party? Below is an amended resolution, for members to take to their local parties. 2025 Labour Women's Conference is due to take place on Saturday 27 September.

Will you organise with us?
Write to us at:
womensfightback@workersliberty.org

DECRIMINALISE ABORTION & REMOVE ALL BARRIERS TO ACCESS

Notes:

- Abortions in England must be approved by two doctors and take place within the first 24 weeks of pregnancy. Otherwise, it is illegal to deliberately end a pregnancy and, under the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act, carries a maximum punishment of life imprisonment.
- Recent years have seen a sharp increase in women in England being prosecuted in relation to pregnancy terminations. Six women have appeared in court over the past two years under the Offences against the Person Act, and more than a hundred women have been subjected to criminal investigation since 2019.
- In addition to criminalisation, barriers to abortion access include: mandatory waiting times, the requirement for two doctors' signatures, financial charges for migrants, insufficient service provision, and limits on when during pregnancy an abortion can take place. Such barriers can lead to critical delays in accessing treatment and increase the risk of unsafe abortion, health complications, and stigmatisation.

Further Notes:

- The amendments to the previous Criminal Justice Bill, submitted by

Diana Johnson MP, which sought to protect women ending their own pregnancy from criminal prosecution in all circumstances, and by Stella Creasy MP, which proposed to make abortion access unconditional up to 24 weeks, which both fell with the calling of the general election in May 2024.

- The 2024 National Policy Forum report stated that: "Labour believes that abortion is an essential part of health care which is highly regulated and should not be subjected to custodial sanctions. Labour will provide parliamentary time for free votes on modernising abortion law to ensure women do not go to jail for getting an abortion at a vulnerable time."

Believes:

- No one should be forced to continue a pregnancy against their will.
- No one should face the threat of jail, or the distress of an investigation or prosecution for ending a pregnancy, or for experiencing unexpected or unexplained pregnancy loss.
- Abortion should be considered a healthcare procedure, and treated as such.
- Abortion should be free, safe and accessible to all, available on demand as early as possible and as late as necessary.
- The Labour government should provide parliamentary time for modernising abortion law to ensure women are not criminalised do not go to jail for getting an abortion at a vulnerable time and to remove current barriers to abortion.

Resolves:

- To produce a motion for Labour Party Women's Conference proposing the full decriminalisation of abortion and removal of all barriers to abortion access, along the lines of this motion.
- To support a fringe meeting at the Labour Party Women's Conference.
- To invite a speaker from Abortion Rights UK to a future meeting;
- To urge our MP to take up these issues in Parliament.

ISRAEL'S "FUCKED GENERATION" TAKES ON THE OCCUPATION

Ella Keidar is an 18-year old military refuser living in Israel. She is an activist with the refuser network Mesarvot and the Communist Youth.

Ella spoke to Kelly Rogers.

Every few years, high school students across Israel sign an open letter setting out why they are planning to refuse to enlist in the military. In 2023, Ella Keidar was among them. 280 signed – the second-largest number ever.

The night before the Hamas attacks on 7 October, she and a few friends were at a punk night in Tel Aviv handing out the letter. "And then," she says, "it was a giant whiplash." In the first half of 2023, with mass protests against the Netanyahu government, "the left saw this very hopeful growth and then [after the Hamas attacks] lots of people 'sobered up'. The left got much smaller."

"Suddenly, our activism wasn't about getting new people involved, but trying to understand what we can do publicly without being violently repressed and how can we prevent lynchings against Arab civilians in Jaffa. People were arrested for posts on Facebook. A friend of mine was kidnapped."

On 17 March 2025, Ella Keidar, now 18, is scheduled to report for duty in the Israeli air force. Instead, she will join the growing ranks of Israeli refuseniks and will most likely be sent to prison.

A SLAUGHTER

Since October 2023, Israel has killed around 47,000 Palestinians in Gaza (2% of the population), wounded 110,000 (5% of the population), and destroyed most of the

Gaza Strip's civilian infrastructure. Gaza is ranked as the deadliest place on Earth for children. In late 2024, around a third of the 18,000 children killed by the Israeli bombardment were under five. Acute malnutrition is widespread.

Nizam Mamode, a retired British surgeon volunteering in Gaza, told the *Guardian*: "I have never seen medical supplies being restricted in this way. I've never seen persistent targeting of civilians, and I've never seen such persistent, deliberate targeting of aid workers, including healthcare workers." He has worked in Rwanda during the genocide, as well as in war zones in Sudan, Lebanon and Nicaragua.

With the IDF having blocked aid deliveries, medical supplies have been unavailable for long periods of time. Most of Gaza's hospitals are completely destroyed. In the remainder, many amputations take place without anaesthetic or painkillers.

In February this year, a ceasefire finally took effect, and the people of Gaza began to walk back to the rubble where their houses once stood. What the future holds is unclear. "It's the left's job to push for a permanent and concrete political solution", says Keidar. "Civilians in Gaza are returning to their homes, the hostages are coming home, but the current government will use the ceasefire to escalate the conflict in different areas. Smotrich and Ben-Gvir will try to sabotage this deal and we've seen how much political power they hold in this government."

Even if the ceasefire does hold in Gaza, the situation in the West Bank could continue to deteriorate. Under the Oslo Accords, the West Bank is divided into Areas A

• Ella Keidar

& B (administered by the Palestinian Authority) and Area C (comprising 60% of the land administered by Israel). "The day-to-day reality of 'quiet' ethnic cleansing and transfer in the C-territories is something we've seen for years now," Keidar says, "and now we see both an escalation in the C-territories and violent escalations in the A & B territories as well, which we haven't seen on this level in recent times: invasions into Jenin again and other big Palestinian cities in the West Bank."

AWAKENING

Ella Keidar's political awakening came young, around the age of 14. During the pandemic, having just come out as trans, she wasn't in a good place. "I fell into quite a hard depression," she says. "But during that time, I became interested in philosophy and political theory. I found *The Communist Manifesto* in my grandma's home library," she recalls. "It was a little brown and red book. And she said, 'Take it, maybe you'll like it.' I did take it, and I did like it."

"I would spend all my time hating myself, hating the world, and reading, reading, reading all the time. And while that was very interesting for me, I was politically depressed. I was constantly occupied with how shit everything was everywhere."



Then, in 2023, came mass protests against Netanyahu's anti-judicial laws. These mobilisations gave Keidar her first taste of street politics. She also met Einat Gerlitz and was introduced to Mesarvot, the network for Israeli refusers. Keidar is now a member of the Communist Party and Communist Youth, who play a central role in Mesarvot. "The weekly protests gave me an avenue not to feel hopeless and helpless – but to feel like I do have power. That was very important for me. It took me out of bed and into the streets, and it brought me to my life. Activism is my life now."

Despite her newfound support networks, the decision to refuse is still not an easy one. "The military permeates many parts of our socialisation in society from a very, very young age," Keidar says. "But from very early on, I knew I didn't want to hold a weapon and shoot. Family members would tell me that there are other ways to serve in the military, that you don't have to be in combat positions and so on – which is a very common way to talk to children who don't want to enlist."

THE FIRST TRANS REFUSER

It is unclear exactly what will happen to Keidar when she refuses – because she is trans. Eight years ago, one refusenik came out as trans while in prison (a trans woman who subsequently detransitioned).

When they were put in a men's prison, Mesarvot's lawyers successfully had them moved to an enlistment base. So, Keidar explains, "Either I will be sent to the men's prison, and then we will go to the Supreme Court; or I'll be sent to the women's prison; or I'll be imprisoned in the enlistment base. Or there is the fourth option: maybe they will decide they don't want to deal with this refusenik and find some reason to give me an exemption."

Keidar's decision to go to prison is a determined one. Not only is her status as a trans refuser likely to make her time on the inside worse, but it also makes it optional. "Being trans can be a basis for psychiatric exemption," she says, "but I didn't pursue that because I knew I wanted to use the political power of a public refusal."

Formally speaking, international law obliges the Israeli military to exempt conscientious objectors. In practice, however, the Conscientious Objection Committee will rule you out if your reasons are classed as political rather than moral. Keidar explains: "If you say the occupation is wrong, or you disagree with the IDF's policy or tactics, then that's political, and you can't be a conscientious objector because a conscientious objector has to be a perfect, apolitical pacifist." Refuseniks, like Keidar and Einat Gerlitz,

who opt to run public campaigns, stand no chance.

EVERYTHING CHANGES

Israeli politics is volatile. Until October 2023, the country's streets were filled with protests against the government's anti-judicial laws. In Israel's unicameral political system, the Supreme Court plays an outsized role in checking the power of the government. Netanyahu's reforms, which have yet to make it to the statute book, would have allowed the government to appoint the judges and would have prevented the court from declaring legislation unconstitutional. "During the protests against the anti-judicial law, it was a very hopeful time. In Tel Aviv, there were weekly protests every Saturday at Kaplan Street for a whole year. And every Saturday there was a big anti-occupation bloc in those protests". Activist groups, including Mesarvot and Communist Youth, recruited and grew.

The bloc "drew this line between the occupation and the civil rights of Jewish-Israelis. And it got bigger every week. We started with less than a hundred. A few weeks after that we had three hundred. There was a period of a few months when quite consistently we had between a thousand and two thousand."

Hamas's attacks on 7 October changed everything. "At the beginning of the war we saw this almost complete subordination to the government's agenda", says Keidar. "After more than a year of non-stop anti-government mass movement, suddenly the streets were quiet, except for the Communist Party and the radical left."

For the first few days after 7 October, Keidar and her comrades worked with the Guard for Arab-Jewish Partnership in Jaffa – a partnership between the Communist Party and a variety of civil society organisations. "We did fly posting, we did direct actions against lynchings."

The emergency of defending Palestinian communities limited their political slogans. "It was 'let's all live together, and be friends.' We wouldn't mention the occupation but talk about how Arabs and Jews should be friends together. Because we lived in Tel Aviv, and suddenly Tel Aviv was this scary arena of racial tensions that could become violent at any moment."

To protect the identities of Mesarvot and Communist Youth activists, new anonymous organisations were started.

"It was called *Dor Zayin*," Keidar explains, "which means generation Z. *Zayin* in Hebrew means 'Z', as in Gen Z, but it also means fuck or fucked, so *dor zayin* is the 'fucked generation'. We would do graffiti, and we had a manifesto that we hung around the city." After a few months, they went back to public activity as Communist Youth and Mesarvot.

PEACE, EQUALITY & FASCISM

For many years now, the Israeli government has had a strategy of sporadic military escalation. Since 2007, Gaza's population has lived in a state of constant siege, with limited access to the outside world and to basic imports. The first Gaza war started in 2008, and Israel invaded the Strip repeatedly prior to the latest conflict, killing thousands of civilians. "One of the right's biggest ideas of the past few years was to keep everything as it is without any actual solution," says Keidar, "with escalations every few months, maybe a ground operation in Gaza, maybe an air operation, maybe an invasion in the West Bank, but never provoking all-out war."

The question is whether the current situation will mark a departure from this cycle of escalation – and, if so, into what? For Keidar, the fork in the road is a decisive one. "7 October was simply proof that we need a deeper solution, we cannot leave it as it is. 7 October was the result of years and years of a violent, horrific, deadly siege. But then it's crazy how good fascists are at their job," Keidar says. The far right pivoted – "they said, 'no, no, no – what 7 October proves is that actually Arabs are so subhuman that the problem is all of them. Now the solution is to simply flatten Gaza. We can't contain the conflict, and we must eradicate them.'"

She isn't exaggerating. Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich has called for the "total annihilation" of Gaza. Nissim Vaturi, a member of parliament for the main governing party, Likud, has called for Gaza to be "wiped off the face of the Earth." "I have no mercy for those who are still there. We need to eliminate them," he said.

Defence Minister Yoav Gallant has said, "We are fighting human animals, and we are acting accordingly." Israel's Labor Party President, Isaac Herzog, has said that "an entire nation [...] is responsible" for 7 October. Netanyahu and other government officials have regularly invoked the biblical analogy of Amalek, the only part of scripture in which God tells the Israelites to exterminate a nation. In May 2024, seven months into the

slaughter, around three-quarters of the Israeli public either thought that the military campaign in Gaza had been about right or that it had not gone far enough. But, Keidar says, "As the war continued, more and more members of the public realised that the war wasn't getting us anywhere."

Being seen to retaliate against the Palestinian population and negotiating the safe release of the hostages were counterposed aims. A ceasefire is a means of squaring the circle. "This deal is a way for the government to make themselves seem like winners: 'We got you your safety, we got you your hostages back.' They say this is even though the hostages are coming home despite their efforts and they did everything they could to sabotage the deal."

"I am hopeful that the Israeli public will see they're being fucked over and that we need to steer towards a political solution based on peace and equality and Palestinian sovereignty," Keidar says. "But I can't say I'll be surprised if we see another rise in fascism in the general population."

STANDING TOGETHER

Standing Together is a joint Israeli-Palestinian movement campaigning

against the occupation and for the return of the hostages. They are broader than Mesarvot, and Keidar has her criticisms. But her outlook is unsectarian: "I appreciate the existence of Standing Together," she says. "You've got to have a middle ground. People won't just randomly join the Communist Party and start doing radical, anti-Zionist activism. Standing Together started as a project of the Communist Party in Tel Aviv; it was a project aimed at getting more support and more audience in the Jewish population."

Standing Together has come under fire from some pro-Palestine activists for its focus on winning over the Israeli population and adapting some of its rhetoric to do so. The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) even went so far as to call for a boycott of the organisation, despite its anti-occupation politics, for (they claim) "normalising" Israel.

Keidar vehemently disagrees. "We have to work together. I'm sorry to break it to you. That's the tough luck of being a leftist. I don't agree with a lot of their rhetoric, but I'm a radical leftist, I'm an anti-Zionist. I'm not their audience."

She is cautious about the BDS movement in general. "An arms embargo is very

- Ella Keidar at the anti-occupation bloc at Gay Pride, Tel Aviv, June 2023.



much a good thing, and countries and institutions putting economic restrictions on Israel is good. But the idea of "normalisation" as this disease of guilt by proxy – it's a defeatist framework. The idea behind "normalisation" is that by trying to move Israeli society to the left, you're trying to redeem them. It's misunderstanding the goal of the struggle. My goal isn't to make people abroad hate Israelis – that's such a weird, defeatist political goal. We have a world to win. Who has the time to decide which populations are good or bad? I'm for everyone.

"If you're boycotting Standing Together, boycott any or all Israelis. We're more radical than them. We publicly say that we're anti-Zionist, but I still pay taxes to the Israeli government and to the Israeli military. And so do you."

NEITHER GROUP IS LEAVING

In the British and US left, the adoption of the terminology of "settler colonialism" has often been taken to mean disavowing Israelis' national rights. For Keidar, that is not the conclusion. "We're settlers", she says, referring to the Israeli population. But "the solution to settler colonialism isn't to decide that the settler colonial society must be eradicated. There are ten million Jews here and around ten million Palestinians. Neither group is leaving. It's not feasible – it's very hard to displace and evacuate millions of people. And it's not desirable politically – the problem is oppression, not the presence of Jews in the land."

The task of the left internationally is one of political struggle – and most crucially, it is about stopping the Israeli war machine. "If you are simply marching in London saying 'Free Palestine' and 'Stop the Occupation', then it's a protest, and it's as useful as any protest", says Keidar. "But people in Germany and in Britain and America need to try as much as they can to stop their government's support for the Israeli military."

And if you want to do something right now, you can donate to Mesarvot here: bit.ly/mesarvot-donate.

In Women's Fightback #31, we interviewed refusenik Einat Gerlitz, who served 87 days in prison in 2022. In the same issue we published Sofia Orr's letter from prison. In 2024, Orr spent 85 days in prison. Read these articles here: bit.ly/womensfightback-31.



POLAND

POLAND'S WAR ON WOMEN

Dominika Szarek

Writing about Poland's reproductive rights today means confronting the seismic shifts set in motion in 2015, when the right-wing Law and Justice Party (PiS) came to power. Over eight years, PiS enacted anti-democratic policies, igniting a constitutional crisis over its judicial reforms, and waging a war on "gender ideology".

Unlike in the US, where far-right attacks on reproductive and LGBTQ+ rights aim to roll back progress, Poland never had many significant victories. Isolated under Soviet rule, it largely missed the second-wave feminist movement. Since 1989, progressive groups have continued to be vilified. Our fight is not to reclaim lost ground but to secure basic rights.

Is Polish society hostile to progressive ideas, or has the ruling class upheld an imaginary vision of a reactionary nation? Under PiS, the answer was clear. Today, the new coalition – led by the neoliberal centre-right Civic Platform – is just as unwilling to advance reproductive rights. Civic Platform pledged to legalise abortion within 100 days, yet the promise still remains unfulfilled, in large part due to its conservative coalition partners, Third Way.

To understand Poland's position, one must examine the Catholic Church's historical role. The Church's power is rooted in Poland's self-perception as a messianic nation – a Christ of the Nations, crucified by foreign oppression yet destined for resurrection. This myth frames external pressure for liberalisation, whether from the EU or reproductive rights activists, as an attack on national sovereignty.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the *Matka Polka* (Polish Mother) myth, which casts women as reproductive vessels for the survival of the nation. This ideology, entrenched since the partition era in the late 18th Century, still shapes the abortion debate. In 1907, nationalist leader Zygmunt Balicki declared, "Women's rights are not a national cause" at a women's congress fighting for suffrage alongside the independence movement. Even then, female citizenship was bound to a nationalist vision shaped by the Catholic Church. That sentiment still defines Poland today, where restricting reproductive freedom is framed as patriotism, and feminism as blasphemous treason against the Catholic nation.

THE CHURCH AS POLITICAL LOBBY

With the emergence of a liberal-democratic and capitalist Poland, the Catholic Church cemented itself as a formidable political lobby. One of its first victories was pressuring the ruling party Solidarity to impose sweeping abortion restrictions. Abortion, which had been legal since 1956, was now only permitted in cases of rape, incest, danger to the pregnant woman's life, or severe foetal abnormalities. The 1993 Family Planning Law, framed as a "compromise," was, as feminist scholar Agnieszka Graff argued, merely the institutionalisation of a right-wing status quo – one that imposed some of Europe's strictest abortion laws.

At the time, 70% of Poles supported abortion access, a fact disregarded in favour of the Church's influence. The 1993 Act reinforced Catholic dogma, embedding language like "conceived child" in legal texts and replacing "pregnant woman" with "mother of the conceived child," enshrining the belief that life begins at conception and creating a major obstacle to reproductive freedom.

The Church's influence also successfully lobbied for compulsory Catholic education in state schools and religious symbols in public spaces. Poland entered the "new world order" already constrained by an institution prioritising historical myths over lived realities. If the 1990s were heralded as the "end of history," Poland proved otherwise – history was being rewritten to serve a powerful institution.

ANTI-GENDER: A BY-PRODUCT OF NEOLIBERALISM?

Since gaining democratic freedom, Poland has waged a relentless anti-gender war. The debate – Should abortion be legal? Is it unpatriotic to support it? –



• Women's Strike protest blocks the streets of Warsaw, October 2020.

was a constant refrain throughout my upbringing. While its tone shifted with political changes, one thing was constant: the relentless policing of reproductive rights.

Right-wing populism thrives on an "us versus them" mentality and Poland's right revived the vision of a Catholic nation under siege. In post-communist Poland, identity became profoundly gendered, exacerbated by neoliberal reforms. As Poland integrated into the EU, the right faced an existential crisis. Could the nation maintain sovereignty while embracing EU values like LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality?

The Church, long positioned as the guardian of national identity, provided the ideological framework for this shift. Its agenda, borrowed in 2008 when PiS went into coalition with the League of Polish Families (LPR), was fully weaponised in 2015 to wage a full-scale anti-gender war.

Who were the enemies? Anyone rejecting the patriarchal model of Polish identity. Between 2008 and 2015, the right made it clear: feminists and LGBTQ+ individuals were not real Poles. The rhetoric became increasingly violent, aiming not just for exclusion but subjugation – to

remind them of their place in a Catholic stronghold defying the so-called "infidel elites" of the EU.

The coalition government, including then-Education Minister Roman Giertych, compared gay people to paedophiles and framed abortion as an EU plot to erase Polish identity. This rhetoric resurfaced in 2015 – only this time, it took a lethal form. PiS secured both the presidency and a parliamentary majority, ensuring the war on gender would be waged with unprecedented force.

LIFE UNDER PiS

Once PiS secured a majority in 2015, they sought to weaken institutions designed to keep the government in check. One target was the Constitutional Tribunal, which ensures that executive policies comply with the Constitution. PiS disregarded the appointment of judges elected by the previous opposition government and instead filled the court with their own party-aligned judges. This court-packing enabled them to install Julia Przyłębska as the Tribunal's President (Chief Justice). Upon her appointment, Przyłębska altered the composition of panels in pending cases, ensuring that politically sensitive rulings were decided by PiS-aligned "quasi-judges".



PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński viewed Poland's previous abortion compromise as a "mistake," arguing that it was being exploited to promote eugenics. After failing to tighten abortion laws in 2016 –when the attempt triggered the nationwide Black Umbrella Protest – PiS ultimately succeeded in 2020. Przyłębska's appointment played a crucial role in this process, as she ruled that abortion in cases of foetal defects was unconstitutional, effectively making abortion entirely illegal. In response, the Constitutional Tribunal became widely known as the "Constitutional Tribunal of Julia Przyłębska," reflecting its transformation into a partisan tool used to enforce Catholic fundamentalism.

This decision sparked the 2020 October All-Poland Women's Strike, one of the largest anti-government mobilisations since 1989. The protests were not limited to street demonstrations; activists directly confronted the Church, often dressed as characters from *The Handmaid's Tale*, making a powerful statement against the Church's grip on politics turning Poland into Gilead.

The scale and intensity of the protests drew both domestic and international attention. The pressure forced PiS

representatives to respond, leading to one of the most chilling moments in modern Polish history: a recorded video speech by Kaczyński, broadcast on PiS channels. In it, he framed the protests as an existential threat, declaring, "We must defend the Polish Church". Portraying the movement as an attack aimed at destroying Poland, he asserted that this "war" had to be won. He insisted that PiS was the sole authority on legal matters – rejecting their rule, he claimed, was akin to rejecting Poland itself and the moral authority of the Church.

A NEW GOVERNMENT

The protests had a big impact on the outcome of the October 2023 election. According to data collected during the demonstrations in 2020, 73% of responders did not support the abortion ban, and as many as 57% of Poles supported abortion on demand in 2020 and 2023. These statistics suggest a completely different understanding of Polish nationhood to the official, right-wing script.

2023 brought a victory for the coalition government, composed of Civic Platform, Third Way and New Left. They defeated PiS, who had sought to form a coalition with another far-right party, Konfederacja (Confederation).

At 74.4% turnout was the highest since 1989. In a joint manifesto, both the Left and the centrist Civic Platform (led by Donald Tusk) promised 100 policies for their first 100 days in office; one of these policies promised "abortion up to the 12th week of pregnancy being legal, safe, and available," as well as simplifying the gender-recognition process for trans people and introducing same-sex civil partnerships.

The coalition is dominated by the centre rather than the left, however, and the presence of Third Way, in particular, which defines itself as 'Liberal Conservative', has been an obstacle. The party's rhetoric is more liberal than PiS, but politically it is a carbon copy, seeking to maintain the Church's influence in politics.

Third Way co-leader Władysław Kosniak Kamysz stated immediately after the election that matters of "worldview" should not be included in a coalition contract, by which he meant that reproductive and LGBTQ rights were off the table.

The formal coalition agreement is vague on the subject of reproductive rights,

committing to "strengthening the rights of women [...] by invalidating the 2020 Constitutional Tribunal Ruling. Women have a right to decide for themselves." However, no explicit mention is made regarding Civic Platform's promises that 12-week abortion on demand will be legal in Poland or that emergency contraception will also be free and available without a prescription.

The new left party Razem (Together) has now resigned from the government and from the Left parliamentary grouping, citing clashes over their proposed policies for the coalition agreement being ignored, including on abortion. Overall, excitement for the new government has withered.

WHAT IS HAPPENING NOW?

We are still trapped in the same debate we have been having since 1989. Tusk's promises – abortion reform, separation of Church and state –have amounted to nothing. Abortion remains illegal, and the 2020 ruling is still in place. Tusk insists that abortion is an "objectively difficult decision" and that legal changes require time.

Time for what? More women to die? Since the ruling, multiple women have died because doctors, fearing prosecution, have refused to perform life-saving abortions. At a protest in Kraków, we marched for Dorota T., who lost amniotic fluid at 22 weeks. There was no chance of delivering a healthy baby, yet doctors told her to lie down and wait for the fluid to return. This medieval "treatment" failed, and she died of septic shock.

In 2021, Izabela, a 30-year-old woman, died in almost identical circumstances. Knowing her fate, she texted her mother from the hospital: "Thanks to the abortion law, there's nothing they can do." At least six women have officially died due to the ruling, but the actual number may be higher. Ironically, Dorota and Izabela were already mothers, leaving their children orphaned.

Some minor progress has been made in contraception access – specifically, emergency contraception. While Plan B (the morning-after pill) is available over the counter in the UK, Poland required a prescription from 2017 onward, making it the worst-ranked country in Europe for contraceptive access. In 2024, the Ministry of Health allowed people aged 15 and older to obtain Plan B without a prescription, but pharmacists can refuse to provide it. Only 850 pharmacies – just 10% nationwide – have opted in.

Meanwhile, the Church maintains its grip on public discourse. Third Way co-leader Szymon Hołownia recently endorsed a proposal from the Church for compulsory religion classes in schools, claiming children need "education and values." Civic Platform's Rafał Trzaskowski, now running for president, recently stated that "according to the law, there are only two genders."

The left is divided and on the back foot. While the majority of Razem left the government and ended the party's membership of the wider Left grouping, five of its MPs split and stayed in the government. These included Daria Gosek-Popek, who I voted for in 2023, and Magdalena Biejat, the co-leader. They say that they want to continue to influence government policy from the inside, but so far nothing has changed. The departure of Razem risks creating an echo chamber for the centrist-dominated Catholic coalition.

THE BATTLE AHEAD

Nothing will change as long as the Church's grip on politics remains intact. True change can only come from the left – at this moment, that means Razem.

Poland's history within the Soviet bloc has left deep scars, fuelling a widespread mistrust of anything associated with socialism. This legacy distorts public perception, allowing neoliberalism to thrive. At the same time, the Church continues to impose its rigid, patriarchal values – eroding workers' rights and enforcing gender essentialism under the guise of tradition. It's a perfect synergy, creating fertile ground for authoritarianism.

With the global rise of the far right, worsening economic inequality, and a failure to enact real systemic change, Poland risks once again falling into the hands of PIS and Konfederacja. And if that happens, the grip of reactionary politics may become truly indestructible.

So, we fight. Because, in the end, what else do we have?

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Follow us for socialist feminist news and commentary and to stay up to date with our political activity.

 [womens.fightback](https://www.instagram.com/womens.fightback)



• Alla Gutnikova

RUSSIA

TRYING TO MAKE POWER OUT OF HATRED AND DESTRUCTION

Alla Gutnikova is a political exile from Russia and former editor of the left magazine DOXA. In 2021, the Russian government placed her under house arrest for backing protests in support of then-opposition leader Alexei Navalny. She is studying Contemporary Literature, Culture and Theory at King's College, London, with the support of a Freedom Degree scholarship.

Alla spoke to Kelly Rogers.

In January 2021, tens of thousands of Russians, most of them young, rallied in support of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who had survived an assassination attempt the previous August.

Alla Gutnikova was 23 years old and a member of the editorial team for DOXA, a left-wing student magazine. Along with three fellow editors, Armen Aramyan, Natasha Tyshkevich, and Volodya Metelki, she published a video on YouTube expressing solidarity with student protestors. It reassured young people that, under the Russian constitution, they had the right to peaceful protest.

"A couple of months later," she tells me, "I woke up to a loud knocking on the door. It was a police raid on my apartment."

RAID & ARREST

Gutnikova's first response was confusion. "I was innocent in both senses. I wasn't guilty, and also I was very naive. The first thing I asked them was: 'Are you sure

it's the right apartment? I haven't done anything wrong'." When the police asked about the video, she breathed a sigh of relief. The DOXA team had referred the video to a lawyer before publishing; all they had done was quote the Russian constitution. "When people found out we had been arrested, they thought we were encouraging youngsters to burn down the Kremlin or dismantle the government or throw Molotov cocktails. But the video was very peaceful."

In April, the four were charged with involving minors in life-threatening activity, which carried a sentence of up to three years in prison. Gutnikova was placed under house arrest and forced to wear an electronic ankle bracelet, which tracked her movements. At first, the court granted her one minute each day in which she could leave the house, later extended on appeal to two hours in the morning. "The next year was full of interrogations and court hearings," Gutnikova says, "It was a very Kafkaesque experience."

At the time of their arrest, the video had been watched by little more than a thousand people. Russia has a population of 143 million. "They wanted to broadcast the message: 'If you want to be active, if you want to speak out, you'll end up like them'." But Russian youth couldn't be so easily cowed. "People gathered in front of the court. We received hundreds of letters

from teenagers saying they were not political before, but now they had learned about our case and were excited about politics. Still, I bump into people who say, 'I became political after your case,' or, 'I made great friends in front of your court hearing'."

RECLAIMING POWER

The effect on Gutnikova was profound. "At first, we were literally numb. It was like there was glass between you and the outer world. Your nervous system is so overwhelmed it's almost like it's shutting down. In the first months after the arrest, I would randomly fall asleep in the middle of conversations; my hands were shaking; I would have panic attacks when someone was knocking on the door because it resembled the police raid.

"But then, a couple of months later, we started to make political statements out of the arrest. We would do performances, and political actions. Now, no one is put under house arrest, they send you to prison straight away. But back then it was still possible, and we used it as much as we could." On one occasion, more than 50 people assembled in front of the courtroom, wearing make-shift ankle bracelets, to highlight how anyone can, at no notice, become a political prisoner.

"At first, you try to find the best words to explain why you need your freedom back,

but after a while, you realise it doesn't matter. The judge is not listening." The four organised an "auction of words". Supporters could, for a donation, submit a word – the sillier, the better. Each defendant would pick five words from a hat and insert them into their court speeches. Gutnikova began to recite poetry in court.

"When you're oppressed, you look around and see that they took away so much from you. They took away my career, they took away my mental health – my stability, the security of my home, my future. You search around and think, 'What's left?' My body, my voice, my words. We started to make political statements with our clothes. When they arrested Masha Platonova – she's still under house arrest now – we came to the court hearing wearing t-shirts in support of her."

Gutnikova began to write her own poetry to gain some control over the situation: "When you're sitting at an interrogation, the power is on their side. They're asking questions. They have the power to put you in prison. You are afraid of them. But I had this little pink notebook under the table, and I was writing poetry. Then it's like the power is swapped – now I'm the one in charge because I am the poet, and they're just characters of my poem. I am not a victim anymore. I have my voice back."

The four sought to make their defence campaign as collaborative as possible, and they brought together a community of young, left-wing activists, students and journalists. "Audre Lorde has this quote from her poem 'Power': 'trying to make power out of hatred and destruction.' That is what we tried to do. Publicly I had to stay as strong as possible, to be this figure [...] I thought, the day that I'm free will be the happiest day of life. I will go to my favourite library, I will go see the sea, I will go see my great-grandparents, I will go dancing."

UKRAINE

But then, on 24 February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. "And it didn't really matter any more," she says, "The whole world just fell apart."

The weeks following the full-scale invasion were extremely difficult for Gutnikova. "We were sure we were going to end up in jail. There was a huge crackdown on independent media. Journalists began to flee the country. There was an exodus of activists." But Gutnikova and the other DOXA editors were stuck. Within a few weeks of the



invasion, nearly all of her friends had fled. Not long after, her husband also left the country, to avoid conscription. "I had probably the worst paranoia of my life, sitting there, waiting for another police raid."

"But also I was hating myself for being such a coward. On my two hour walk, I was looking at my neighbourhood, and I thought: 'What if we could somehow print pictures of Bucha or of the bombing of the maternity hospital in Mariupol?' In those first weeks, I kept on thinking 'if only people knew'."

Against all expectations, the four were released on 12 April. "Of course, we were happy. But it was a drop in an ocean of horror and pain. Before, when we were going out on a protest, I had this feeling that we might win. After the full-scale invasion, the worst had happened. It was irreversible. It was a point of no return."

FLIGHT

"A couple of weeks later, I left the country forever." Gutnikova knew she would be placed on the federal wanted list and would never be coming back – at least, "not until the revolution".

The police had taken away her international passport, so she first travelled to Armenia, where she visited the German embassy and claimed a refugee

passport. A couple of months later, Gutnikova travelled to Berlin.

"The trauma doesn't end in a day. You're there, you're free, but you don't have your personality. You feel like your inner world is broken into pieces. Something sticks it together, but it's so fragile." Gutnikova tried joining volunteer programmes in Berlin but quickly realised that she needed to help herself first: "The next couple of years I more or less spent entirely lying in bed, in tears, reading the news, and feeling hopeless. I did participate in some demonstrations, but I was very weak."

Then, she began telling her story. First, via a documentary play called 'Exile Promenade' at the 2023 Berlin festival 'Performing Exiles', then through writing and performing poetry, and a 2024 exhibition, in collaboration with anti-war group Solidarity Zone, at a gallery in Leipzig. "The more you talk, the easier it gets because it becomes just a story that happened to you."

In Gutnikova's view, she is one of the lucky ones. "I have an intense survivor's guilt. I was not tortured – they torture people a lot." The DOXA case also received a lot of attention internationally. Early on, one of the most prominent Russian opposition papers, *Novaya Gazeta*, put the four defendants on the cover. They received support from public figures like Slavoj

Žižek and Judith Butler. "Everyone always asks: 'Why did they let you go?' I don't know, but support both internationally and in the country was huge. But now there are so many political prisoners that we don't even know the names of." Currently, it is estimated that there are more than 700 political prisoners in Russia, although the actual figure could be much higher.

AGAINST THE ODDS

Groups are working in their defence, which Gutnikova is keen to highlight. One such organisation, Zhuk, helps to evacuate political prisoners. For obvious reasons, Zhuk cannot operate legally and has to remain clandestine. Another group, Solidarity Zone, supports militant political prisoners: those who took part in violent protests, mostly antifascist, anti-authoritarian, or anarchist activists – the kind of prisoners that many lawyers won't touch. "We need to fundraise for lawyers, for their defence, for packages to send to prisons to help them feel like they are not forgotten," Gutnikova says.

Against the odds, DOXA has gone from strength to strength. Originating as a student magazine, a space to discuss students' rights, sexual harassment on campus, and queer and feminist politics, the magazine has grown exponentially since Gutnikova's arrest, now boasting a following of more than a hundred thousand regular readers. Since 2021, the Russian government has clamped down hard on the dissident press, and DOXA has been designated an undesirable organisation. Reposting its material carries a sentence of up to six years in prison. The magazine has had to decamp out of Russia as a result, and its current editors and contributors are dispersed across Europe. It has recently launched an English-language Substack.

Gutnikova is determined to keep on fighting, although fighting, she says, can come in many forms. "It can be organising, educating, fundraising, spreading the word – not being silent and not being silenced – and just doing it, doing it, doing it, even though a lot of the time it feels hopeless."

Zhuk: <https://zhuk.world/>
Solidarity Zone: <https://solidarityzone.net/>

Read DOXA in English:
<https://doxaenglish.substack.com/>





DISPATCHES FROM UKRAINE

REPORT

In November last year, a group of education workers and members of the National Education Union (NEU) visited Lviv in Ukraine to meet their fellow workers and show solidarity.

Janine Booth reports.

WOMEN IN UKRAINE

We met three young women activists from the Social Democratic Platform. They told us that Ukraine has a Women's Lobby, and that women have more presence in some areas of life. Since the invasion, more women have become tram and bus drivers. New women's organisations have developed.

More women were elected in the last election to the Rada (Parliament) than previously. But women still have less opportunity than men. Ideas persist of what is women's role and what is men's role: "We meet European men who appreciate strong women more, whereas

in Ukraine, men think they should not do housework."

LGBT+ RIGHTS

The SD Platform told us that in Ukraine, "there is a lack of understanding that people are allowed to love who they want to."

"We need to challenge stereotypes and the view that it is an illness. Young people, particularly young women, support gay and non-binary rights. Young men, though, are less likely to because they want to appear masculine."

"When we visit European countries, we find that gay people are more out, and non-binary people are more open. Everything is more in harmony: we would like this in Ukraine."

KINDERGARTEN MUMS

We visited two kindergartens. Since the Russian invasion in 2022, Lviv's kindergartens have had an influx of

children whose families have fled from the fighting in the east of the country.

At the first kindergarten, we spoke with two mothers – one with a four-year-old son, the other with a daughter, who had come to Lviv from Mariupol, which has been under Russian control since May 2022. This woman's husband has been held captive by Russia since it defeated the Ukrainians at the steelworks in Mariupol, and she has heard no news of him since.

In eastern Ukraine, many kindergartens have been destroyed. There are children at the kindergarten whose fathers have been killed in the war. Psychologists work with them, and also help parents and staff. When air raid alarms sound, the children go to the shelter beneath the building. Toys are kept there. Kids may also be woken by air raid sirens at night, so are tired the next day.

The children do not remember before the war. A teacher explained: "Children need happiness to learn and succeed. We want children to be more safe."

Disabled kids are included at the kindergarten. Staff emphasise that "they should not stay at home behind closed doors, they should be playing with other kids".

In the second kindergarten, we met Katarina, a parent from Kherson. On the second day after the invasion, she and her family moved to a small village 70km away. But soon, the village became the front line, so they moved to Lviv: "It was a hard decision, but we feel safe. It is better for the child, who can play with friends." Katarina told us that the invasion has changed life a lot for women in Ukraine but that, "people look after each other more."

"Our big dream is for the war to finish - and we win. For thirty years, Ukraine was independent and we built a new country. We hope to rebuild after the war and make our lives better."

LYCEUM

We visited a secondary school, Lyceum no. 83. It has around 1,200 students. Children from families who have come to Lviv from frontline areas such as Kharkiv have joined the school.

Teachers (but not other school workers) are exempt from military conscription, but some of the school's volunteers have been conscripted to fight.

The lyceum has a military classroom. It contains medical equipment, a drone simulator, land mine detectors and more. Its purpose is to teach children how to keep safe, not to prepare them to fight.

MEETING TRADE UNIONS

We visited the Trade Union of Education and Science Workers of Ukraine. They told us that the situation of education workers in Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine is "very hard and complicated". Russia forces them to get Russian citizenship even though they don't want to. Some children in the occupied Ukrainian territories have been taken to Russia, with their parents told that they were going to a 'summer camp'.

The government has been attacking union rights since 2022, restricting their right to hold protests. Having had no pay rise last year, the union wants a rise for education workers in 2025. The union has a support fund for workers and for families of those injured or killed. It has established a Centre for Social and Psychological Rehabilitation.

SOCIAL MOVEMENT

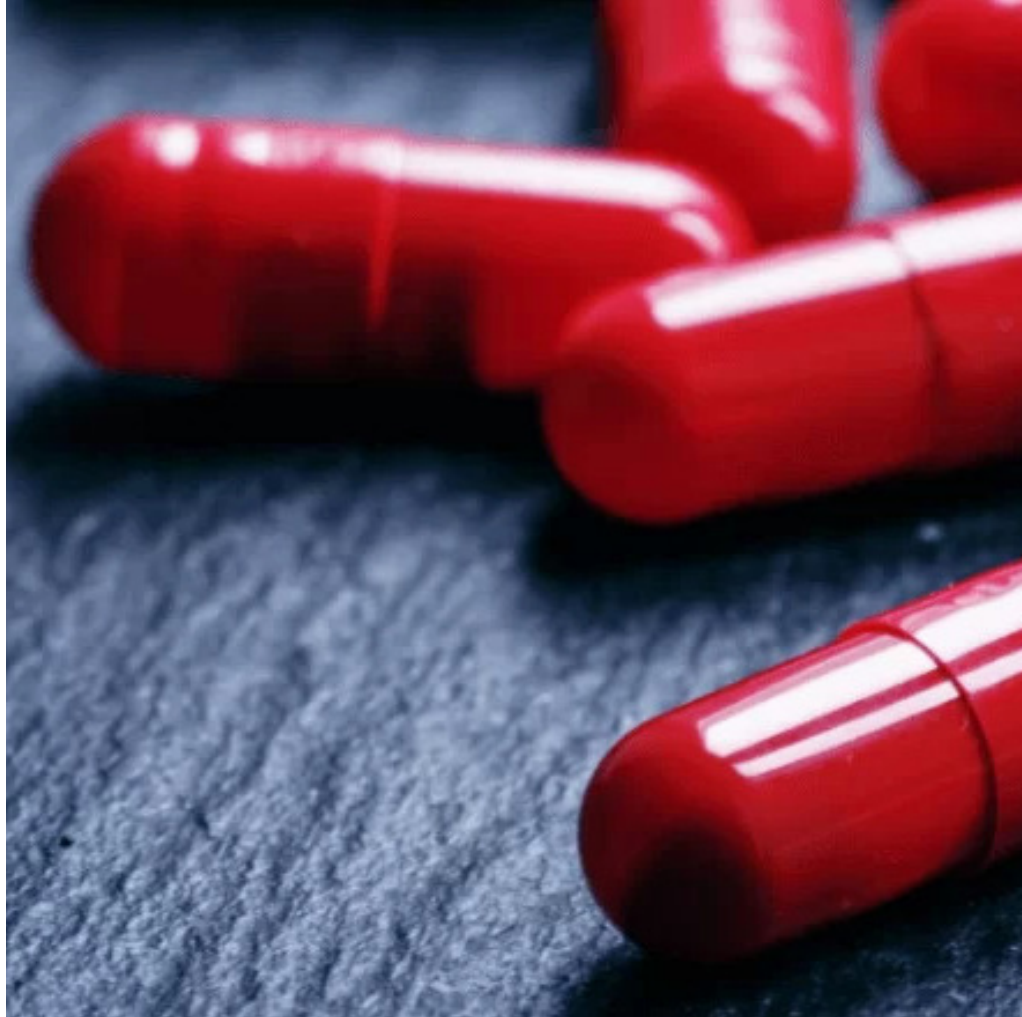
We met Sotsialnyi Rukh (SR; Social Movement), which describes itself as a new left party created by the working people of Ukraine.

There has been an SR branch in Lviv for the last two years. Before that, members helped to set up local trade unions. Mainstream unions are the successors to the state unions which existed under the USSR. SR's Valery Petrov told us that, "They are very bureaucratic and pro-government." Workers have set up new, independent unions.

SR is also heavily involved in the tenants' union, which is demanding rent controls, social housing and emergency accommodation.

Workers' Liberty activists organise in trade unions, campaigns and local Labour Parties to build solidarity with the Ukrainian workers' movement. That includes fundraising, passing motions both in local branches and at national conferences, organising delegations to Ukraine, and bringing Ukrainian socialists and activists over for speaker tours in the UK.

Check out NEU Ukraine Solidarity Network on X: [@neuukraine](#)



THE MANOSPHERE

MISOGYNY

Annie Lawson-Foley

Because of its sprawling, nebulous nature and because the lines between irony and genuine belief are often blurred on the internet, it can be hard to wholly grasp the extent of the manosphere, let alone begin to analyse it. But in recent years, more research has been conducted as mainstream awareness of the manosphere has increased, mainly due to violent crimes by its adherents and the arrest of influencer Andrew Tate for human trafficking, amongst other charges.

The manosphere refers to a diverse collection of websites, blogs and online forums promoting misogyny, masculinity and opposition to feminism. Also common in these spaces – and not unconnected

to misogyny – are racism, antisemitism, anti-intellectualism, climate change denial, homophobia and transphobia. The manosphere has been identified as part of the alt-right pipeline, where consuming provocative right-wing content gradually increases exposure to far-right politics, as social media algorithms recommend more of what you have already seen and offer fewer and fewer differing perspectives.

Andrew Tate, Jordan Peterson, and Joe Rogan are among the most widely-known manosphere figures. These influential "free thinkers" have been dubbed the "heterodoxy". In December 2024, Tate launched his BRUV (Britain Restoring Underlying Values) party, likely a gimmick but possibly a genuine attempt to enter British electoral politics.



The manosphere is home to a variety of groups, including incels (involuntary celibates), men going their own way (MGTOW), fathers' and men's rights groups, and pick-up artists. They vary somewhat in beliefs and extremities but are united by a core ideology of misogyny. According to journalist Caitlin Dewey, the two central tenets of the manosphere are the corruption of modern society by feminism, in violation of inherent sex differences between men and women, and the ability of men to save society and/or achieve sexual prowess by adopting a hypermasculine role and forcing women to submit to them.

For pick-up artists, men are sexually charged leaders who should get what they want from women. For the more socially conservative, men are Biblical guardians of peace, defenders of weak women and Western civilisation. Or, they should be – a male feminist is an aberration. Women are illogical, shallow, weak, naturally promiscuous and materialistic.

Although this gender essentialism suggests that men are in charge, the opposite is true. (Rejoice, feminists, we have won!) Members of the manosphere have taken the "red pill" and are awake to this ugly truth. Feminism is to blame for all of society's evils, which means that

the manosphere's view of feminism and its influence is inherently contradictory. On the one hand, feminism has softened men by promoting emotionality and the decline of traditional masculinity, while, on the other hand, it promotes misandry, represses men and is responsible for the harshness of their lives. For men's rights activists, this is evident in the over-representation of men in prison and the fact that men alone are conscripted in times of war. The over-representation of men of colour in prisons, for instance, or the exploitative domestic and reproductive roles of women in war, are not discussed.

Women also supposedly dominate in sexual politics. Sex is a commodity in which women hold a selection advantage – through feminism's oppression of men and through makeup, cosmetic procedures, and other forms of witchcraft. However, as the mothers of the next generation, women's sexuality must be controlled.

The manosphere targets and recruits men facing personal crises of masculinity or gender confusion and offers a solution to their supposed problems. Its adherents are predominantly young, white, and Western. Many of these men will be confronted with the expectations of hegemonic masculinity – to be the provider and economic backbone of the family – whilst experiencing a cost-of-living crisis and the first drop in the quality of living in generations. Problems that we would attribute to a racist, patriarchal capitalism, the manosphere attributes to feminism and women. Perversely, the answer is more of the same: be more of a man. Become better looking, make more money, have more sex, and restore your natural position in the social hierarchy.

Under the guise of self-improvement, agents of the manosphere promote a lack of emotionality, the physical and sexual domination of women, and eschew reliance on female friends or family. Joshua Thorburn, who studied the effect of joining the manosphere, reported that his respondents' self-esteem worsened after participating in the manosphere. They felt ugly, out of shape, unmasculine and like they were not making enough money.

Insecurity sells well and has long been a woman's commodity. Today, it keeps manosphere influencers selling their live streams, books and self-help plans. "Looksmaxxing", the practice of maximising your physical attractiveness, originated on incel message boards in

the 2010s and has now been absorbed into mainstream internet language, popularised on TikTok. It has been criticised for contributing to body dysmorphia, and its most extreme techniques are physically harmful, such as "bonesmashing" – hitting your face with a hammer to achieve a chiselled jawline.

Men hating women and industries flourishing from selling insecurity – what's new? For some, today's manosphere does feel different to the misogyny of five or ten years ago, with its medieval revulsion of women's bodies and fear of women's sexuality. Sara Brzuszkiewicz identifies this new brand of misogyny through her research on incels. Traditional misogyny is predicated on maintaining the existing domination of women by men. But according to the manosphere, men are in a position of inferiority, and the natural order needs to be restored. This inferiority might not apply to cool "alpha males" like Andrew Tate, but for incels, it is personal. In 2014, self-described incel Elliot Rodger killed six people in California. In the course of his murder spree, he posted a manifesto and YouTube video online, in which he blamed his life's problems – his loneliness and feelings of insignificance, and his virginity – on women.

Of course, there is continuity between traditional and new misogyny: both foster a nostalgia for an imagined past of "natural" family values and traditional gender roles. But the belief in male victimhood seems radically different from the misogyny of the twentieth century and far more nihilistic. The biological essentialism championed by the manosphere means, by definition, that there is no hope for some. For incels, there is no use in attempting civil relations with women, who will only ever have relationships with successful "alpha" males. This has great radicalising potential. As well as dehumanising women, it dehumanises incels, too, making them objects of their ideologies. We are social creatures, and abstaining from the world of social interaction in favour of online message boards isn't good for you.

In such circumstances, the existence of the "black pill" – the idea that fighting against the dominant, feminist system is futile and that suicide or "heroic" acts of terror are the only options – is no surprise.

To a casual observer, much of the manosphere's nihilistic ideology sounds like it could be countered by some common sense and life experience.

But their target audience, children and young people, do not have much life experience, especially after Covid, and spend increasingly more time online. In 2023, 60% of UK children aged 8 to 11 and almost all teenagers reported having a smartphone, and in 2024, 25% of teenagers reported using their phones for more than 5 hours a day. Children also report playing outside with their friends less and spending more time alone since the pandemic.

In the rise of the manosphere, we see both the indoctrinating potential of social media and our vulnerability in an increasingly individualised world, where civic life has been devastated by years of austerity. But although this is a new misogyny, the task for feminists is familiar. We must fight for bodily autonomy, reproductive rights, freedom of gender expression and comprehensive sex education. Ultimately, we must work to eradicate conditions that allow the manosphere and the far right to flourish, to build a society free from gender, sexual and all other inequalities, and liberated from the predations of capital.

- During the 'Porn Wars' of the second-wave, feminists hotly debated issues relating to sex, sexual activity and pornography.

EXPOSING THE REALITIES OF PORNOGRAPHY

Bella Beersma

"Consider also our spirits that break a little each time we see ourselves in chains or full labial display for the conquering male viewer, bruised or on our knees, screaming a real or pretended pain to delight the sadist, pretending to enjoy what we don't enjoy, to be blind to the images of our sisters that really haunt us – humiliated often enough ourselves by the truly obscene idea that sex and the domination of women must be combined."
– Gloria Steinem, *Erotica and Pornography* (1978).

Second-wave feminism called attention to sex, pleasure, and women's bodies in a way that had not been discussed

or especially considered before. The "sexual revolution" of the 1960s and 1970s demanded the sexual liberation and freedom of women and witnessed significant societal shifts: the introduction of accessible contraception for women in the form of the "pill", the partial decriminalisation of abortion and homosexuality in 1967 (in England), and the normalisation of premarital sex.

Since then, feminism has developed and adapted. The third-wave established the concept of intersectionality, which stressed the inclusion of women of all races, ages, sexualities, and abilities. Many of the struggles highlighted by these movements remain unresolved, and in some cases, have actually regressed. On top of the great suffering already created by patriarchy, women face another form of oppression: one that has soared exponentially thanks to the accessibility of technology.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers two definitions of pornography. Firstly, the "explicit description of sexual subjects or activity in literature, painting, films, etc., in a manner intended to stimulate erotic material," as well as "the explicit description or depiction of violence in a manner intended to stimulate or excite". It is the latter definition that is pertinent to what kind of pornographic material is produced today and the prime reason for my concern.

Pornography, in some form, has existed since the beginning of humanity. It is even evident in prehistoric art. The fascination with and admiration of bodies is an undeniable aspect of being human. It is unsurprising that sexual activity has been reflected in art and literature as humans have evolved. Artistic depictions of sexual activity can be an honest reflection of varying desires. But the sexual material, or pornography, that is created and



consumed in the 21st century, which is seemingly infinite in both range and availability, cannot be considered genuine, educational, or aesthetic.

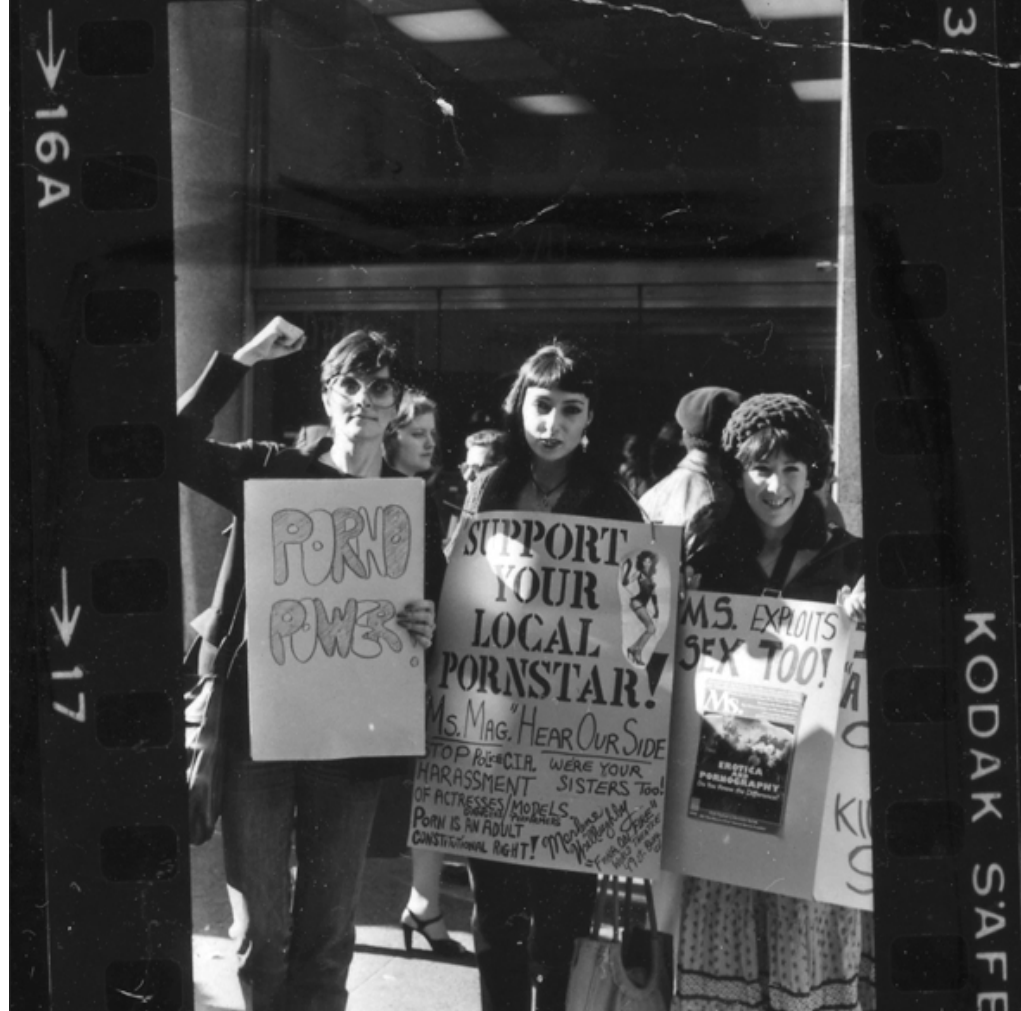
My intention here is by no means to criticise sexual expression or to tell women what they can or cannot view. Women already face countless double standards when it comes to sex and relationships, often having to repress their sexual appetites because of patriarchal definitions of "femininity". Instead, I hope to illuminate the reality of pornography today, the distorted sexual expectations that it has created, and why we should all be outraged.

It is alarmingly easy for anyone of any age with access to the internet to view pornographic material. In their 2023 study, The Children's Commissioner for England's research demonstrated that: "in the last 20 years digital technologies have become an integral part of children's lives; in 2022 91% of 11-year-olds and 96% of 16 to 17-year-olds owned a smartphone". "Unsurprisingly ubiquitous smartphone and internet access has coincided with the rise of a global online pornography industry". It comes as no shock then that the average age children first see porn is 13.

One click on Pornhub (for example), and rows of videos appear, illustrating women contorted, bent over, their bodies being taken over while being described as "sluts", "teens", and "nymphos", things to be "railed", "dominated" and "filled". Women's bodies are unrealistically smooth and clean-shaven – entirely altered for the male gaze. Over time, this way of describing women becomes normalised. During her research in primary and secondary schools, Laura Bates (founder of The Everyday Sexism Project) reported girls experiencing a variety of different forms of sexual harassment including regular use of terms such as "slut" and "slag".

Out of 4,009 scenes from two major free pornographic sites (Pornhub and XVideos), 45% included at least one act of aggression, and women were the target of said aggression in 97% of the scenes. Users of the site can type in anything they desire, unearthing a plethora of extreme sexual violence designed to appear consensual and enjoyable.

In the majority of pornography, femininity is established as submission, and submission as weakness. According to the same 2023 study, young people are



significantly more likely to see violence perpetrated against a woman (65%) than against a man (29%) in pornography. But this concept of the "feminine" as naturally submissive is also evident in gay porn, where there is often a dynamic of the "masculine" dominating the "feminine"; where the "top" dominates the "bottom". In her discussion of the detriments of pornography, feminist author Catherine MacKinnon writes: "So many distinctive features of women's status as second class – the restriction and constraint and contortion, the servility and the display, the self-mutilation and requisite presentation of self as a beautiful thing, the enforced passivity, the humiliation – are made into the content of sex for women. Being a thing for sexual use is fundamental to it."

When trying to understand the true repercussions of pornography on individuals and its effects on their sexual relationships, much of the research remains vague. While I can only speak from personal experience, and conversations with friends, I believe that I am just one of the many young women who have been a victim of the sexual expectations created by pornography. Sexual violence and the domination of women have become implicit in sexual encounters between young people. I have found that many young men are

not proactive in creating a safe sexual environment by failing to use appropriate contraception (only 2-3% of heterosexual pornography online includes condom use) and are particularly keen to engage in anal sex as a result of men seeking a "tightness" that vaginal sex supposedly does not provide, as well as engaging in choking and slapping during sex among other violent behaviours that have become normalised or expected.

According to a 2022 survey of over 2,000 people published by the Institute for Addressing Strangulation, more than one in three Britons aged between 16 and 34 have been strangled during consensual sex on at least one occasion. The correlation between sex depicted in pornography and the sex that young people are having is blatant. Young men and women in the 21st century are receiving sexual education from a source that promotes the abuse, hurt, and subjugation of women. My generation, the generation after me, and arguably the generation before me, have been brought up on misogyny fed to them through their screens and taught to view women as sexual vessels to fulfil the various desires of boys and men. Misogyny existed long before the modern pornography industry, but the porn created today is yet another patriarchal invention created by men for men.

Pornography has repercussions not only for those who watch and internalise it but also for the women within the industry itself. Vanessa Belmond, for instance, spent seven years performing in porn between the ages of 18 and 25. She has been vocal about the cruelty of the industry: the racism she experienced as a black woman, the financial exploitation, the prevalence of STDs, and the total lack of respect for the boundaries and wellbeing of porn performers, many of whom came away from scenes with injuries and became dependent on drugs and alcohol to numb the physical and emotional pain. The porn industry is entirely damaging for those involved in its making, using women as literal pawns to make profit. As technology continues to advance, the power of pornography increases. Artificial intelligence has even been used by the creators of Pornhub, allowing users to create their own personalised "AI Cum Slut" to "take control over".

It is too late to try and remove pornography and useless to try and ban it for adults. However, there are ways to combat its effects. Sexual education in schools, both primary and secondary, must improve. It should not only promote contraception and safe sex but address the realities that young people face today. We must attempt to create open discourses around sex and pornography that do not involve shame and guilt. Parents have a responsibility to help their children decipher the challenges posed by the content on their devices. As individuals, we should reflect on our own sex lives and question ourselves. Finally, women should unabashedly and unashamedly demand sex and relationships that are fulfilling, enriching, and truly satisfactory, regardless of anyone else's needs.

CALL FOR ARTICLES

In every issue of Women's Fightback, we state that we stand for sex-positive, class struggle feminism.

But what does it mean to be sex positive? Is it a useful term? Is a "fourth wave" of feminism changing the way we think about sex?

Submit your articles for WF #34:
womensfightback@workersliberty.org



• Gisèle Pelicot

SEXUAL VIOLENCE

UN VIOLADOR EN TU CAMINO (A RAPIST IN YOUR PATH)

Lizzy Dimeck

Un violador en tu camino, the feminist anthem from the Chilean feminist collective LASTESIS (The Theses), sounds in my ears as the harrowing experiences of Gisèle Pelicot reverberate all around us. How do we tackle the issue of male sexual violence against women and girls with strength and solidarity, and without losing pieces of ourselves and our hearts in the process?

In taking on this task, it feels fitting to draw upon Simone de Beauvoir, who observed society's positioning of women as "Other": both inferior in a world centred upon men, and as an object possessed by men. This social structuring

and relatedness exist, in de Beauvoir's words, within a patriarchal system where possession and ownership matter and those who possess hold power. She writes that, for women to be freed from this bind, we must, when needed, step into "transcendence" by being active, creative, public and self-centred, and step out of "immanence" which is defined by passivity, giving to the other, and cyclical repetitions. By foregoing her anonymity and making her suffering and horror the centre of her public trial, Gisèle chose to transcend the shame and silence often imposed on survivors of sexual assault and rape.

I understand sexual violence, such as that to which Gisèle was subjected, as deriving from the framework that de Beauvoir describes. A woman, a wife, is owned by her husband to be used as he pleases; the standards he sets for her become her reality. In raping his wife and inviting others to rape her, Dominique Pelicot dehumanised Gisèle and stole her rights. He related to her as Other, a mere object; in this sense, he defined her. And the other men that took part – did they too feel that Dominique Pelicot had the right to dehumanise his wife, due to the mere fact that she was his wife?

The radical, arguably revolutionary act Gisèle chose to take was to refuse this. She refused to be a passive, silent, anonymised victim; she re-named herself as human. She refused the ownership of her perpetrator, she refused to allow her husband to continue to possess her by stepping outside of the role of a victim. She took her power back and her identity back as well as her maiden name, and she shone a spotlight on the individual men who acted violently towards her, firmly placing the shame with them.

When something this appalling happens, we feel called to arms to stand up against such horrors. My question is: how do we challenge male violence towards women without making all men, and masculinity, the enemy?

It is tempting, when we really connect to the awfulness of a case like Gisèle's, and when we read about the violence against women globally, to view men as predatory and monstrous, unable to control their sexual and aggressive drives, and to view all women as potential victims, even in our own homes. But in taking this position we run the risk of falling into one of two traps. The first is assigning women the role of victim, leaving us in a state of perpetual fear and constant hypervigilance. The second is limiting women and men to

binary positions of good versus bad, victim and perpetrator. If we take this view, we're recreating the same power dynamic just with the tables turned. One sex becomes "Other", subjugated and looked down upon with hate, and it becomes a power game. We either fear or we hate, and we're locked in a war that kills our capacity for vulnerability and love.

When we turn men into "monsters" and "predators", they're no longer individual men – we turn them into something supernatural. Men become a globalised Other, which distracts us from individual accountability and responsibility. It can be reminiscent of a witch trial, as we stop asking important questions: Why are some men behaving like this? What is it within patriarchal and capitalist society that allows it to happen? And how can things change so that these horrors stop repeating? When we look for a predatory element in all men, we approach them all with hostility. This will be felt and reacted to, and we get caught in a vicious cycle.

At the same time, by relating to men as Other, we are diluting the goodness we experience in the men close to us, and our connection to them becomes spoiled. To disconnect from the value men bring into our lives would be a terrible loss.

When we dehumanise men we lose our empathy. We need to continue relating to men as individuals, and to see the nuances in men and masculinity. Without this there is no hope for equality.

So, the issue remains: how can we *quemar el miedo* (set fear on fire)? How can we mobilise to fight gendered violence, whilst not making all men the enemy and setting a good part of ourselves on fire in the process?

I don't have answers to this dilemma, but I hope to raise questions and to continue the questioning, working out, and working through of this issue, rather than arriving at a position of extremity and rigidity, of "immanence", where there is no space to reshape and transcend.

Our London socialist feminist book club read and discussed Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* late last year. Workers' Liberty hosts socialist feminist book clubs in London, Manchester, Edinburgh, Sheffield, Nottingham and online.

For more information about our book clubs, please visit:
bit.ly/socialistfeministbookclubs

• Protestors performing *Un violador en tu camino* in Chile, 2019.





TRANS RIGHTS

• Trans Strike Back protest, April 2024, and cover of Women's Fightback #32.

TRANS STRIKE BACK!

Temperance and **Cas** are co-founders and organisers with the activist group Trans Strike Back, formed in 2024.

They spoke to Kelly Rogers.

On the cover of the last issue of Women's Fightback (#32) is a photo of a London protest, from April last year, which we

purchased from Shutterstock. The protest, it turned out, had been organised by Trans Strike Back, and the individuals front and centre of the photo were Trans Strike Back members and supporters. With placards in the background that read "WAITING LISTS KILL" and "I STAND WITH THE TRANS COMMUNITY", it seemed an appropriate image for an issue that spoke extensively about the devastating impact of the new Labour government's policies on trans people. We printed the magazine and fly-posted hundreds of A3 posters around south London to promote its launch.

Cue a very polite email from Trans Strike Back: "As you can imagine, it was a bit of a surprise to see it in the street," they wrote. And so, by way of this happy accident, Women's Fightback and Trans Strike Back came to be in touch.

Trans Strike Back was formed in February last year, when the Tory government issued notice of a ban on puberty blockers for trans youth. In March 2024, NHS

England removed puberty blockers from routine treatment offered to children with gender dysphoria. In May, following the Cass Review, the Tories introduced their emergency ban. Following Labour's election, Health Secretary Wes Streeting wasted no time announcing plans to make the ban permanent.

NATIONAL CRISIS

For Temperance, the attacks on trans healthcare heralded disaster: "These kids were only just learning to trust a very, very damaged and underfunded system. This will be devastating for trans youth and their mental health." Research published in January this year, cited by the charity Mermaids, studied the experiences of nearly 4,000 trans young people who spoke to their GP about wanting to transition between 2011 and 2021. The research found that more than half of young people who spoke to their GP about being trans had a record of anxiety, depression or self-harm before the age of 19. Approximately 55% of trans youth aged 17-19 have a mental health disorder, compared to 17% of all young people of the same age.

"But it's not just about trans youth – it starts with the kids, but they'll eventually come after all people that identify under the trans umbrella." Already, trans adults face significant discrimination in employment, housing and are almost three times more likely to live in the UK's most deprived areas.

For Temperance, one of the biggest issues facing the trans community is violence, especially against trans women of colour: "Trans women of colour experience the highest rates of domestic abuse, violence, and murder. It's part of a much bigger picture of the normalisation of aggression towards women of colour in general."

Last year, the Labour government declared Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) a "national emergency", following a report by the National Police Chiefs' Council. The research found that at least one in every 12 women will be a victim of VAWG every year, equating to approximately two million victims (and the actual number is likely to be much higher).

For Temperance, there's an elephant in the room: "The rates of domestic abuse have been declared a national danger, but the fact that most of those women are women of colour – that they're not all white – isn't being spoken about." The End Violence Against Women Coalition has found that Black and ethnic minority women and girls

are not only at higher risk of domestic violence than white women, they are also more likely to be abused by multiple perpetrators, and to stay in abusive situations for longer.

There is currently little reliable data regarding violence against trans people in the UK and, according to the Office for National Statistics, "it is not possible to identify transgender victims in current homicide statistics" because "the sex of the homicide victim is determined by the police force that records the crime." But research from other countries backs up Trans Strike Back: violence against trans people, and trans women of colour in particular, is a hidden reality.

For Cas, education is key. "We need to start educating people at a young age about gender-based violence, hate crime, domestic abuse. There's a line there about what age we can start those conversations, but it needs to be something that people are aware of. I went to a progressive school and I didn't have any talks on the LGBTQ community or solely focused on diversity and feminism and racism or homophobia until I was 13, 14, 15. But the earlier that people are made aware of these things – that would be a good start in combating and breaking down prejudices, which are ultimately the source of discrimination and violence."

But the tide is turning against trans-inclusive education, too. Only two months on from Labour's election victory, the Department for Education re-affirmed guidance introduced under the Tories, which calls on schools to out trans or gender-questioning students to their parents, and to seek parental consent before allowing a student to socially transition or switch pronouns.

That Labour has turned so categorically against the rights of trans youth, has left Trans Strike Back feeling understandably bitter. "We are outcasts, essentially, and very ostracised," Cas says. "We're continuing to exist, continuing to make our existence known, and fighting for recognition because, although the government has changed, we're still here fighting the same fight."

WE'RE NOT ALONE

Although Trans Strike Back was set up at a particular moment, to fight a particular policy, its overarching purpose is much bigger. Cas was "roped into" Trans Strike Back by their friends, Temperance and Lee (the final Trans Strike Back co-founder). "I realised it was a space in which I felt

comfortable and safe, seen and heard," they say. "That was something I wanted to continue to create."

"We think it's really important to show trans people that we're not alone, that we have a public voice," Temperance says. In order to amplify that voice, the Trans Strike Back organisers seek to be as transparent and inclusive as possible: "We do everything legally," Temperance explains. "Safety was a really big factor behind that. We never want to put anyone at risk and we want people to really feel like they can have a say over how we work as a group."

"Ultimately, we aim to come across as real people," Cas says. "We're not some omnipotent organisation. It's just us, and we're trying to create a community."

Trans Strike Back is a small group, but a lot of their efforts are devoted to lending support to other initiatives. One example is Trans Kids Deserve Better (TKDB), a coalition of trans children that has been making headlines in recent months. TKDB's website sets out their mission: "We're young people just like any others, we want to be treated with dignity, age alongside our peers, and move through the world as we are, not as others tell us we

should be." In July last year, they occupied NHS England's headquarters in protest of the puberty blocker ban. A few weeks later, they occupied the Department for Education, calling for their right to safe and inclusive education. In October, they released 6,000 crickets into the national conference of the transphobic LGB Alliance. "At the moment," Temperance says, "we're mostly working behind the scenes. We're supporting them as much as we can; a quiet voice behind some of what they do. We're offering a place to talk, and a community, and trying to give out little bits of education when we can."

Temperance and Cas, both on the cusp of adulthood, see Trans Strike Back as offering an important space for trans youth at a difficult moment in their lives. "If you look at TKDB, they're kids," Cas says, "and there are other organisations that are for adults. But we're teens – we're not quite children, and we're not quite adults. We're young, but we want to be an older-sibling figure to TKDB and other trans children. We're heading into adulthood – which is terrifying – but we're going into it as a community."

Follow Trans Strike Back on Instagram:
📷 [strikeback2024](#)





• Miranda July, author of *All Fours*.

ALL FOURS

REVIEW

Haylee Lunt

Miranda July's hotly debated book, *All Fours*, offers us a scrumptious, self-indulgent romp through a messy and uncomfortable journey of self-discovery and aging femininity. We follow a nameless woman as she awakens to her raw, unfiltered desire for pleasure and self-actualisation, fighting society's assumptions about women who are "over the hill". The narrative confronts our own beliefs about female worth and in so doing helps us rewrite them. July serves this decadent dish on the sundrenched landscape of a solo road trip, complete

with lurid personalities and womb-like sanctuaries. At its heart, *All Fours* is a celebratory journey of later-in-life blossoming.

Our protagonist is unlikeable, narcissistic, and selfish. Her self-absorption ruffles the reader's feathers as her drive to New York veers off course into personal calamity. But beneath the cringe-inducing crisis lies a rich, provocative exploration of female aging, identity, sexuality, and motherhood. The book interrogates her true value, and we discover that it lies not in her likeability, but in her emancipation from her repression.

Outwardly, our protagonist appears to have it all. She lives a life of luxury, clad in tasteful, expensive clothing. She whiles away weekday afternoons on the phone to vapid friends discussing her various and indeterminate "creative projects" and meetings with celebrities. Her life resembles the curated highlights of an Instagram feed. Beneath this shiny façade, however, is a hollow internal world that yearns for carnal rebirth. A horrible reality is made clear: that the value of women's youthful productivity (sexual availability, childrearing potential, "girlbossing" and so on) far outweighs the invisible domestic

labour of love, sweat, and tears that women bear the brunt of.

As she sets off on the road, our protagonist leaves behind all definitions of self and heads toward new horizons in New York, the journey temporarily suspending her from these arbitrary associations. En route, she is left to confront her rawest self – one of trauma, unresolved grief, and long-buried desires. As she undergoes her metamorphosis from youth to middle age in the time capsule of a motel room, we witness an unflinching portrayal of the shame and longing of a woman racing toward the cliff edge of anonymity. But *All Fours* bluntly refuses to accept the desexualisation of older women. In our protagonist's fumbling, carnal reawakening, she discovers gleefully that yes, she is still "fuckable". Later, she learns that her value lies outside others' perceptions of her desirability. Revelations about women living embodied lives beyond their child-rearing years are unearthed, and she returns home renewed.

In *All Fours*, professional success and womanhood are bound together only to be deftly pried apart like an oyster shell, with July grasping inside for the pearls. The protagonist's identity is shaped by her career; her professional successes are the source of her self-worth. But it is in her tender and intimate interactions with her child, Sam, that we get to peer inside her complex and vulnerable internal world. Her gentle mothering of her genderfluid child is a reflection of the womb-like sanctuary she builds in the motel room: her own personal chrysalis in which she tends, perhaps for the first time, to herself.

It is revolutionary to acknowledge the full spectrum of a woman's existence – not draped in pink satin, but awkward and embarrassing. *All Fours* contributes to the canon of chick-lit that challenges traditional notions of femininity, and although it isn't the first to do so, it eloquently grapples with the ugly side of womanhood. I'd love to see a less palatable version of this, perhaps – God forbid – an old, working-class disabled woman having similar revelations about sexuality and identity. July's novel skilfully tugs at the trouser leg of patriarchy with a snotty, tear-stained, blood-encrusted hand, and begs us to examine our own internal assumptions around femininity. It's a messy, audacious book – but through the protagonist's struggles, July forces us to confront our own hidden desires, fears, and longings.

THE LABOUR OF CARE

Mara

The labour of care is an essential part of human survival. This labour falls very disproportionately on some people more than others and it is often ignored and undervalued, with consequences for meaningful working-class organising.

INVISIBLE

Care is commonly understood to mean doing paid care work, or being an unpaid carer within the family. The term "labour of care" is used here more widely; it could be defined as taking care of people. The unequal expectations of who should take care of others, and the different resources available to enable us to do that, have an effect on our life expectancy, our ability to earn money, our independence, ability to keep ourselves safe, and our overall potential for human flourishing.

A lot of the labour of care is invisible, and only comes to general awareness when it isn't done. People notice crying babies and dirty floors. But this not-noticing is also a choice: babies and floors don't clean themselves, and there are very gendered expectations around who can expect someone else to deal with it and who should attend to them. In a lot of left organising, issues around care are ignored or treated very perfunctorily. Employers demand that your care responsibilities are left at home and don't intrude on the work day.

FAMILY

Children, born helpless and needing years of looking after, are the most obvious people needing care. Women's so-called "entry" into the paid workforce is a bit of a misnomer as we have never been fully outside it, but the increase of women's participation in the labour market has involved constant interaction with care responsibilities: child care, elder care, husband and home maintenance, etc. More mothers now do not have the option to stay at home until all children are school age due to increased costs, especially housing, but they are still responsible for the majority of childcare. This is not only the physical feeding,



• *Self-Portrait/Nursing*, Catherine Opie, 2004.

Exhibited in *Acts of Creation: On Art and Motherhood* (reviewed on page 29).

and dressing and bathing of children, but also the constant mundane tasks of finding lost school kit, remembering dentist appointments, and one hundred and one other things that all take up mental space.

Unequal distribution of this work between men and women contributes not only to women earning less but also to less independence, more stress and unhappiness, more vulnerability to abuse and less selfhood in general. Unequal childcare responsibilities are not only unequal between parents, with girls more likely to have domestic duties than boys; but also both boys and girls in poor families are more likely to have to take on responsibilities than in wealthy ones. Whether translating, caring for relatives, working or having responsibility for household chores, they are much less likely to have "carefree" childhoods.

IN SICKNESS & IN HEALTH

Anybody can get ill, and most of us will need care if we live long enough, but ill health is very unevenly distributed, with factors like poverty, racism and environmental toxins meaning that some people are much more likely to suffer long-term ill health. The 46% funding cut from central government to councils since 2010 has resulted in services disappearing or becoming insufficient. This has pushed much of the responsibility for caring outside of direct clinical care back onto either unpaid family and friends. Disabled people are statistically more likely to be victims of domestic violence, and people dependent on those close to them for care can be trapped. A lot of demanding work is done by healthcare assistants in hospitals and care homes, low paid roles occupied disproportionately by people from ethnic minority groups. The role is demanding

both physically and emotionally, and these workers are often overlooked and ignored. In the NHS, outcomes are significantly worse for ethnic minorities and people on low incomes. Medical misogyny is a long-recognised issue where women are dismissed and diminished, resulting in dangerously late diagnoses. Being ignored and dismissed by healthcare workers similarly affects survival rates for other disadvantaged people.

RACISM

People dealing with poverty and racism are more likely to have care responsibilities within their family or close circle, and at the same time are more likely to have physically exhausting work, work unsociable shifts and so on. They also have less resources to be able to make life easier by spending money on things like takeaways or service washes. Family and friends are also more likely to be dealing with their own difficulties, and migration and frequent moves in private renting and temporary accommodation can mean people are isolated and without support networks. The expectation that families will help is an assumption that somebody has spare time, energy or money that they don't need for their own immediate survival. Grandparents often like occasionally taking care of grandchildren, but this isn't a reasonable strategy to resolve childcare needs for full-time workers.

WORK

Caring in the workplace can be unevenly distributed by race, class and gender as there are unspoken assumptions about who it is appropriate to expect things from and who it isn't. Employers, workmates and service users expect support from some people and not others. People will sometimes seek help from others of their ethnicity who speak the same native language as they hope this person will be more understanding of them.

In union branches, this doesn't only play out in terms of doing the childcare or making the sandwiches. Dealing with people's emotions and wellbeing is often seen by male reps as either awkward or beneath them and is left to women. There is also the issue in both unions and the workplace that, for example, women victims of abuse or harassment often go for support to other women who may have also suffered abuse and harassment, and workers experiencing racism often go to racialised workmates or reps who may have also experienced racism. This not only adds more work for those people but also increases the emotional load of

dealing with their own experiences while supporting somebody else. This unequal division of labour shouldn't just be called "structural" and then written off with a shrug. The people who are not routinely expected to do it could do it, but they choose not to.

Unequal responsibility for care is not just about the effort needed to do the work, but also the effort of thinking about it. Being able to walk around fully absorbed in your own thoughts and interests without constantly paying attention to the needs of others, and feeling guilty about not meeting them, is part of the gender role divide. As people see care work as women's responsibility and not men's, anger and judgement about things not being done gets directed at women over men.

CLASS STRUGGLE

Involvement in active class struggle – attending union meetings, pickets and actions, as well as more intangible aspects like just keeping up with things – is often structured in a way that excludes people with care responsibilities. Despite this, they may be the people who would benefit most given the connections between ill health, disability and poverty, and the recent rise in child poverty.

This exclusion isn't just a fact of life; we choose what we take seriously and what we put time and energy into. Issues around care are not peripheral to serious workplace or properly political matters. Care issues are workplace issues: many people's paid job is to do care, while other people's work options are shaped by what they can fit around care responsibilities.

Inequalities in healthcare mean that people are dying years earlier than they need to. We can and should make demands on the state for free childcare, for respite care, for dignified elderly care that doesn't impoverish families, for home helps and day centres. But we should also address the issue that care consumes the existence of some people because other people don't do any of it. Ignoring issues of care means leaving essential work to be done unpaid by women, racialised people and poorer people who already struggle with health inequalities, while protecting the free time of privileged men who are already more able to set the agenda for what matters and what doesn't in the movement. If people take a commitment to equality seriously, then issues around care need to be central to communist politics.



REVIEW

ACTS OF CREATION

Acts of Creation: On Art and Motherhood is a touring exhibition curated by art critic Hettie Judah. It includes over 100 modern works by more than 60 artists and centres on the experience of motherhood, including pregnancy, birth, loss, abortion, infertility, and childcare.

In January, members of our socialist feminist book club in Sheffield visited the exhibition when it was showing at the Millenium Gallery. Here we print reflections by two of the attendees.



• *Sleeping Madonna*, Leni Dotham, 2011.

Alice Hazel

Historically, motherhood has either been omitted or idealised in art. This exhibition displays the complex, messy reality – the vastness of life-changing experiences, alongside the gruelling but joyful daily detail.

Chatting after our group visit, we realised the wide-ranging exhibition had captured elements of each of our different relationships to motherhood, from decisions and restrictions on having children or not, to queer families, gender identity, and (in)fertility.

At the heart of the exhibition sat a group of portraits subverting the traditional imagery of mother and child. Leni Dotham's self-portrait 'Sleeping Madonna' depicts her breastfeeding, with classical pose, lighting and colours, but a slight



• *Untitled*, Hannah Starkey, 2013.

cyclical movement, showing this is not a renaissance painting but an image of a mother exhausted by the reality of early parenting. Billie Zangewa's 'Every Woman' is an embroidered self-portrait of a strong woman surrounded by the detritus of life with small children. An untitled photograph by Hannah Starkey pictures a heroic mother trudging through snow, hauling shopping bags with her child trailing behind her.

The images of early parenting are only one part of a much more complex story. Susan Hiller records her growing belly through a sketched series, 'Ten Months, 1977-1979'. In the images, her body protrudes like a lunar landscape, capturing the weirdness of the time of pregnancy. In 'Annonciation', Elina Brotherus documents her experiences of IVF in a series of simple photographs, with the technical and emotional calendar of hormone plotting, injections, hope, disappointment and loss that will be familiar to so many.

Many of the works reflect feminist struggle. A series of etchings by Paula Rego show women experiencing backstreet abortions; the images were used in the campaign to legalise abortion in Portugal in 2007. The exhibition also showcases photographs of women and children in virtually derelict buildings converted into hostels – giving us a glimpse of the early refuge movement – and banners and posters from campaigns to defend nurseries and women's services.

Many of the pieces reflect the reality of

working as an artist amid the challenges of domestic labour. An installation of eight portraits, 'Underground', by Marlene Dumas, is overlaid by scrawlings by her young daughter. Has this messed it up or added a new joyful dimension? Many parents will have asked this question about the impact of children on their lives. We are told the story of Mother Art, an artist who staged a series of performances in laundrettes, each lasting the length of a cycle. And a selection of pieces by Mierle Laderman Ukeles – images of ironing and tiny models in fridges, all art created in the home – challenge traditional, prescriptive ideas of what makes art, where it can be made, and where it should be shown.

The impact of motherhood lands in some form with all women. This diverse exhibition, does a brilliant job of examining the issues.

Nelsey

*Before T,
I had no connection to my body
I didn't want to lose the relationship I've
built with it over the last six years
But this pregnancy journey
is not a regression
rather than losing what I've built,
I'm connecting to my body in ways I never
imagined
I would as a trans person
I'm only at the beginning, but already this
is a deeper level of connection
And it's just going to get deeper*

Going into an exhibition on pregnancy and motherhood as a nonbinary person, I didn't expect to find a piece that resonated with me as deeply as Liss LaFleur's 'But they can't steal my joy' (2022). Consisting of a soundscape and a wall-mounted libretto, it shares the stories of research participants in The Queer Birth Project and depicts queer experiences on the body and identity during and after childbirth. It is inspired by feminist artist Judy Chicago's 'Birth Project' (1980s).

*during my pregnancy,
I enjoyed being visibly pregnant-
but I hated
the way people looked at me*

Pregnancy and childbirth are possibly two of the most gendered experiences that humans can live through. While I'm not sure that parenthood is something I will ever know, I've often thought about the impact that an experience as profound as pregnancy would have on my relationship with my body. How would feelings change? And not only my feelings towards my own physical being, but the feelings of others towards me and my body, and my feelings towards the world as a result of the way I am seen?

*I cried when I found out,
We cried when we found out,
cried so much
when I understood
what it meant*

LaFleur's work with sociologist Katherine Sobering beautifully captures the answers of people who have lived it to such questions, creating ample space for the vast contradictions and complexities. The soundscape, created using a vocoder and digital synthesiser, captures a sense of simultaneous disconnection and quietude. Stories of awe and disgust, curiosity and intrusion, change and persistence interweave in a way that queers conventional ideas of art and of research.

*I
I feel
feel like
I feel like
a science experiment
It is strange to take up so much space*

• *Ten Months*,
Susan Hiller, 1977-79



• *Annonciation*, Elina Brotherus, 2009-13

ORGANISING BARMAIDS & ACROBATS

Jill Mountford

This is the second article devoted to the lives of Esther Roper and Eva Gore-Booth to be printed in *Women's Fightback*.

The first tells the story of their magazine *Urania*, launched in 1916 and devoted to confronting the constraints of the gender binary, heterosexuality, and marriage. You can read the article here:

bit.ly/urania-wf25

The existence of barmaids had been designated a "social problem" since the mid-nineteenth century, and was opposed by moralisers, do-gooders and barmen. In 1907, in the thick of the battle for votes for women, proposals prohibiting women from particular kinds of work were again being discussed, and some became law. Barmaids, high-wire walkers, pit brow women, flower sellers and married working women all came under attack.

Esther Roper and Eva Gore-Booth, two energetic suffragists and organisers of working-class women in Manchester, made it their business to organise opposition to such "protective" legislation. They argued that rather than protecting women, much of this legislation restricted working-class women's right to earn a living. They saw the proposals as patronising, anti-woman, and usually in the interests of working-class men.

When circus riders and acrobats came under attack in 1906 with an amendment to the Dangerous Performances Act, they instinctively knew it was bad news for working-class women. Ostensibly, the amendment sought to protect women performers in circuses, theatres, and such like, but Roper and Gore-Booth thought otherwise. They said it "would reduce the livelihoods of ten thousand female

performers in Britain". The Bill established that any person causing a woman to take part in a public performance dangerous to life and limb would be fined £10 (just over £1,000 in today's money), even where there was no accident. As such, women's employment in this work suddenly became very risky for the employer.

Roper and Gore-Booth took it upon themselves to research the matter and interviewed Dr Albrecht, who worked in the Manchester music hall and theatre district. Dr Albrecht was said to be bewildered by the amendment, pointing out that in the past decade, there had only been one serious accident in Manchester music halls and theatres that he was aware of, and in that instance, it was a man who was injured. They backed this up with an interview with Mr Broadbent, a manager of nine theatres in the Greater Manchester area, who said that he had only seen one serious accident in the past two decades and, in that case, too, a man was hurt. For Roper and Gore-Booth, this meant "case closed".

Neither were against labour laws that kept workers safe, but they were vehemently opposed to any legislation which discriminated against working-class women and threatened their right to earn a living. They argued against restrictive legislation in articles and letters to magazines and newspapers, via deputations to the Home Secretary and other MPs, through demonstrations, and from the platforms of public meetings.

They worked closely with Sarah Dickenson, Sarah Reddish and Selina Cooper in many of their campaigns. These women were mill workers from an early age, strong and determined women trade unionists concerned with organising working-class women to win better work conditions and the right to vote.

SIX/ She speaks (as a woman) about everything, although they wish her to speak only about women's things. They like her to speak about everything only if she does not speak "as a woman", only if she will agree in advance to play the artist's role as neutral (neutral) observer.

She does not speak (as a woman) about anything, although they want her to. There is nothing she can speak of "as a woman", as a woman, she can not speak.



DEFYING EXPECTATIONS

Gore-Booth was co-secretary of the Manchester and Salford Women's Trade and Labour Council alongside Sarah Dickenson. Roper had been organising with women workers and trade unionists since she left Owen's College in 1891, where she had been one of the first women allowed to study for a degree. She was part of a five-year experiment to see if women studying at a degree level could cope mentally and physically. She did better than coping, graduating with a first-class Latin, English Literature, and Political Economy degree.

Roper's affinity with working-class women and her belief that only they could fight for and win their rights meant she saw Manchester as the "natural home of a

women's movement". She became the secretary of the Manchester branch of the National Society for Women's Suffrage in 1893. By then, there had been a women's suffrage organisation in Manchester for over a quarter of a century, with names such as Elizabeth Wolstenholme, Lydia Becker and Richard Pankhurst among that early crop. The secretary post was a paid position, a vital lifeline for Roper, who was responsible for her 13-year-old brother. Roper's own experiences of poverty and self-reliance, coupled with her feminism, meant she was vehemently in favour of all women having the opportunity to earn a living.

When Roper and Gore-Booth first met in 1896, Roper was recovering from illness at a friend of a friend's house in

Italy following five years of relentless campaigning and organising. Gore-Booth, a poet and daughter of an Anglo-Irish aristocrat, was enjoying a holiday with her mother and friends. They fell in love, and within a year, Gore-Booth left her privileged life and 32,000 green acres of the family estate in Lissadell, County Sligo, for the grime and smog of industrial Manchester.

The pair lived and worked together for the next 29 years until Gore-Booth died in 1926. For a few years, much of their focus was on votes for working-class women, but unlike the prominent figures in the Women's Social and Political Union (Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst's group), they were never single-issue activists.

According to Roper, the next ten years "were full to overflowing with organisation, writing, speaking at large gatherings in all parts of England, deputations to Cabinet Ministers and to Members of Parliament. To this was added a new activity, when well-meant and ill-meant efforts were made to restrict women's labour in various fields. On different occasions, women pit-brow workers, barmaids, women acrobats and gymnasts, and women florists were successfully organised in their own defence."

During her first year in England, Gore-Booth published her first book of poetry. It received mixed reviews. She was accused of "pulpiterring" by the Poems and Verses Academy and advised by her close friend W.B. Yeats to "avoid every tendency to teach." Undeterred, she continued to write and publish poetry for the rest of her life.

AGAINST MORAL PANICS

In 1906, the pair were concerned about the moral panic around infant mortality. MPs from all political parties, along with many middle-class women philanthropists, argued the solution to this was to effectively ban married women from working. John Burns, MP for Battersea and self-described socialist, was president of the Local Government Board and argued that "married women's labour was an individual injury, a social mistake, and a commercial blunder." He lobbied for legislation that would prohibit women from working three months before they gave birth and for five months after.

As Roper and Gore-Booth pointed out, the gains made for the infant child having its mother freed from paid labour are soon significantly outweighed by the dangers of malnutrition and poverty. Without financial

• Esther Roper as a student at Owen's College.



maternity benefits, they argued, imposed maternity leave was not progressive at all. They pointed out that no employer would be willing to employ married women who are likely to be frequently out of the workplace for eight months out of twelve. And, of course, it is not only married women who get pregnant. They argued that upwards of 74,000 women mill workers' jobs would be under threat by such legislation.

In 1907, barmaids were the subject of another moral panic. The news spread that barmaids were suffering from high rates of depression and suicide. Roper and Gore-Booth considered this absurd and researched and published 'Facts about Barmaids'. They estimated that 100,000 women's jobs were under threat and organised a mass meeting of barmaids in Holborn, London, on 14 March. A series of smaller meetings took place nationwide, recruiting barmaids to the Barmaids' Political Defence League, "an organisation to defend all women working on licensed premises from legislative attempts to restrict or abolish their employment."

The Washington Post reported on the Holborn meeting, lamenting the difficulty of organising the "barmaid type", declaring that barmaids "have not learned the fine art of expressing approval or disapproval at a public meeting and that it was somewhat disconcerting to hear laughter and cries of 'hear, hear' when Miss Esther Roper B.A., was explaining that only four barmaids in ten years have committed suicide."

Roper and Gore-Booth took a deputation of barmaids to meet with William Gladstone, then Home Secretary. He made sympathetic noises, but Gore-Booth warned the women he was insincere and not to be trusted. After months of letter writing, big public meetings, and lobbying MPs, their hard work paid off when a majority of MPs rejected the clause barring women from such employment. Roper and Gore-Booth wrote to *The Times* thanking "those friends in and out of the House of Commons who so effectively aided the Barmaids' Political defence League in their successful campaign."

Forthcoming in a future issue of *Women's Fightback*: Esther Roper, Eva Gore-Booth, and the dispute about protective legislation between JJ Mallon and Mary MacArthur of the Anti-Sweating League.



• Joyce, Nellie, Rose & Alyosha Cohen

REVIEW

HOTEL LUX

Micheál MacEoin

Last year saw a rather unique, and very valuable, addition to Comintern historiography with the publication of Maurice Casey's *Hotel Lux*.

As its blurb rather accurately describes it, the book is a "series of romances wrapped in a detective story, disguised as a narrative history of international communism", rather than a straight factual history of the building in Moscow which housed Russian and foreign employees of the Communist International in the early 1920s.

Hotel Lux is structured around a personal network based on a number of central characters. Chief amongst them is Wexford-born May O'Callaghan, who went from working in the East of London with Sylvia Pankhurst before the First World

War to becoming the head of the English translation department of the Comintern in 1924.

O'Callaghan is, it is revealed in the book, closely connected with three inter-locking families. This connection provides the book with its narrative engine, and helps organise the sprawling tale of dramatic events and fascinating characters.

Among those discussed are the family of Emmy Leonhard, young veteran of the 1918 German Revolution, who married the Dutch trade union leader and anti-fascist Edo Fimmen, General Secretary of the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITWF), and who later became a Trotskyist. Leonhard and O'Callaghan were neighbours in the Hotel Lux, and it was O'Callaghan who paid Leonhard's taxi and medical expenses when she fell pregnant. This started a life-long friendship, despite the tumultuous events and ideological tensions of subsequent decades.

Also linked to O'Callaghan through the *Hotel Lux* were the sisters Nellie and Rose Cohen, from London's Jewish East End, where they worked together first on Sylvia Pankhurst's *Workers' Dreadnought* and, later, for the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).

Continued from page 34...

Later on, we meet Irish writer and one-time communist Liam O'Flaherty, who once led a workers' and unemployed occupation of Dublin's Rotunda (today's Gate Theatre) in January 1922. O'Flaherty, a friend of O'Callaghan's, had a one-night stand with Nellie, and Nellie (unbeknownst to O'Flaherty) had a daughter, Joyce. Unable to return to Moscow with her friend due to rumours spread by rivals in the bureaucracy that O'Callaghan was a Trotskyist, the latter helped Nellie raise Joyce in New York, before later returning to Britain.

A coda to the tale is provided by a queer love story, which saw the daughters of the Cohens and Leonhards meet and form a loving partnership decades after the main events in the book.

The events which connect these three groups are of intrinsic interests but form only part of the purpose and appeal of the book. Much of the charm of *Hotel Lux* is that Casey breaks the historian's "fourth wall", giving a sense of his own research process into these intertwined personal histories as the book unfolds.

After spotting a reference to an Irish woman referred to as 'OC' in the memoirs of the American communist Joseph Freeman, Casey embarks on a research journey taking him to the Kremlin archives to a Cotswold attic, via a garden shed in Galicia.

Along the way he uncovers a priceless tranche of personal papers, photographs, love letters and other clues to the story. Perhaps the most touching is an anti-fascist newspaper put together by Emmy Leonhard and Edo Fimmen's daughters, sent to Fimmen as he travelled abroad on behalf of the ITWF.

Through such researches, Casey recreates the world of the *Hotel Lux*, in the earliest years after the Russian Revolution, where the commitment and idealism of the comrades made up for the relative material deprivation of the living conditions.

Two additional elements give the work its power. First, though years later Leonhard recounts many of the major Bolsheviks she met at the Lux – Bukharin, Radek and Trotsky among them – this is very much a work focused on more obscure rank-and-file communists.

Like Brigitte Studer's work on transnational Comintern networks, this has the effect of providing a fascinating social history of early communist functionaries by means of a sort of collective biography. It also has the effect of telling a familiar story – the events of the early Comintern – in an unfamiliar, and therefore interesting, way.

This makes what happens later all the more poignant. As Leonhard recounts her encounters with the Bolshevik leadership: "Stalin was also among them, but he was so uninteresting and unimportant that

nobody ever thought that he was going to destroy all the others."

Casey, who professes a clear attachment to the aspirations of the 1917 revolution, does not shy away from the politics of the period. He is clear-eyed about the growing Stalinisation of the Communist International, which culminated in the Terror of the mid-to-late 1930s.

This Terror impacted all the book's protagonists, though in different ways. O'Callaghan was prevented from returning to the Soviet Union out of intra-bureaucratic office politics. This, probably, was all to the good. Much more tragically, Nellie's sister Rose, who became an undercover Comintern operative, was arrested and executed by the Stalinists on trumped-up charges in 1937. This was despite private pressure from her friend, CPGB General Secretary Harry Pollitt.

All in all, *Hotel Lux* is a moving and impressive work, which adds much human colour to the international aspects of the early Soviet Union. It shows us why such remarkable people were drawn to the Bolsheviks and their revolution. In doing so, it reminds us, too, of the disastrous effect of Stalinism on a whole generation of principled, selfless and idealistic communists, and of the damage done to the cause of humanity's future by this brutal counter-revolution.



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