



WOMEN'S FIGHTBACK

Women's Fightback is a socialist feminist magazine produced by Workers' Liberty.

We stand for trans-inclusive, sex-positive, class struggle feminism. We organise in our workplaces and trade unions, and in the student movement and Labour Party for socialist feminist politics.

If you would like to organise with us, or contribute to 'Women's Fightback', please write to us at:

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IN THIS ISSUE

Power concedes nothing without a demand. Women's Fightback regularly makes demands for the changes we want to see in the world - but how do we go beyond reacting to the issues of today, and towards bringing about the sort of radical change we need to usher in socialism and bring about an end to misogyny? This issue of Women's Fightback focuses on those demands, but it is not the end point of those demands, it is an invitation to build them with us. If you agree with our demands, organise with us! If you disagree with any of them, join the conversation and let us know why.

In this issue, we set forth a starting point for our transitional demands, the demands that can bridge the gap between the struggles we face today, and the world we build tomorrow. We look at how gender inequalities continue to leave women disadvantaged in the workplace. We also explore how this inequality exists in our home lives, particularly for parents, with mothers routinely expected to carry the double burden of working for employment, while also doing the bulk of domestic labour and caregiving. We report on new waves of demonstrations against the right to abortion, attacks on trans healthcare, and underfunding of public services; and report on how we are fighting back. Read on for this and more, and get in touch with us to let us know what you think about the topics we cover in this issue.

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NO FORCED
PREGNANCIES

MISOGYNY IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Natalia Cassidy

In the past decade or so, the level of sexism and misogyny in UK secondary schools has been on the rise. I have been working in education for the past eight years as a teaching assistant and then as a teacher. I have had female colleagues leave the profession because of sexism from male pupils and have had a teacher who had been teaching for decades tell me a few years ago that she had never seen it as bad as it is now (and she started her career at the tail end of the women's liberation movement).

What is behind this uptick in misogyny will give you a slew of answers dependent on who you ask. Some will tell you it is the unfettered access to online spaces that boys have from an early age leading them down a rabbit hole of the so-called manosphere, others that it never went away but boys have been emboldened by the current cultural moment in the context of the rise of the far right. No doubt there are also those who would seek to explain this rise as a part of a natural backlash to correct a perceived overstep by feminism of becoming about hating men. The exact reasoning is beyond the scope of an article like this and would be the topic of some quite extensive social research.

All of these; to lesser and greater extents, are worth our attention and are worth examining.

The government has taken some action in reducing access to adult content for under 18s in the UK with restrictions on who can access pornographic and other graphic content. There is however very little discussion on the consumption of algorithmic content. Who is it that controls these algorithms and what content do they push? These

algorithms do not care about the health or wellbeing of the person consuming the content. What they are designed to do is to generate profits by keeping people watching. There is no oversight of how these algorithms work to ensure the common good is maintained. It is of course true that we are living in a moment where increasingly extreme right wing views are shifting towards the mainstream. The rise of Reform and the adoption of their rhetoric by the Labour Party on migration is just one such example. These views and the romanticisation of a lost past by the right so often go hand in hand with a view that masculinity has fallen from its once rightful place at the top of the social order and that this must be reclaimed.

Lastly, the idea of feminism as 'man-hating'. This is easy to dismiss out of hand as it is so often used as a caricature to dismiss feminist causes by reducing it to a means through which to belittle men. I think the legitimacy of most people's criticisms of feminism are however secondary in this case to people's

perceptions. I have had boys ask me if I hate men and even ask if I 'support "kill all men"'.

So how do schools deal with this? Schools I have worked in have tried to deal with this through their PSHE programmes, though this does have obvious limitations insofar as in a lesson environment, young people will know what you are wanting them to say and will have no problem nodding along without internalising any of the content. This is particularly true of all-boys settings I have worked in.

I do not have a programme for how this will be solved, nor do I think it could come around by being imposed by any one person. It does seem to me that the approach we take should be one of dialogue where all young people are able to feel that they have an opportunity to have their voice heard. Overcoming misogyny cannot be, nor should it be, the sole job of women. Rather, all people must play a part and feel they have a stake in the process.



SOCIALIST FEMINIST TRANSITIONAL DEMANDS

At our most recent conference of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty, we committed ourselves to the work of developing, and then, by working alongside others, expanding and refining, a set of feminist 'transitional demands'.

Compared to a 'minimum programme', those political demands for immediate reforms that will improve our lives until the collapse of capitalism and patriarchy; and a 'maximum programme', a set of political demands that will achieve socialism and socialist feminism to replace patriarchy; 'transitional demands' are those demands that can bridge the gap – addressing the immediate vital needs that will mobilise the masses, while connecting to and furthering the ultimate goal of achieving socialism and socialist feminism, so as to win immediate improvements to our lives, without getting stuck in a reformist rut that fails to progress the struggle.

DEVELOPING DEMANDS

Women's Fightback regularly makes demands of our movement. Here are some of the demands taken from this issue...

'A cut in the working week for all workers. For parents the working day should align with the school day.'

'Free, good-quality, flexible childcare with a highly paid workforce. That need not mean, as it does now, that children are in childcare for long hours, but that childcare fits around the needs of parents and children alike.'

'Free-to-use, well-funded, publicly-owned community spaces. Not just children's centres and libraries (although absolutely these), but neighbourhood canteens, sports facilities, arts venues, and more.'

'An overhaul of policing, including the abolition of ASBOs, stop and search, and other police powers that target minorities and make public spaces unsafe, in particular for young people.'

'Work that is flexible for all workers – the right to change hours and shift patterns, to take special paid leave for all caring responsibilities, and to take sabbaticals.'

'Abortion for anyone who wants one, as early as possible and as late as necessary.'

'Ensure trans people can access the full range of gender-affirming healthcare they require through the NHS, without enduring years-long waitlists.'

'Open borders, free movement and the decriminalisation of sex work.'

These demands are not all innately 'transitional'. For example, a reduction in working hours could be realised without fundamentally undermining capitalism or patriarchy. But many of these demands can be expanded into a wider struggle to dismantle these systems. As we make demands, we should look beyond the immediate benefits they offer, and towards the systems of oppression that they can be used to undermine.

A FRAMEWORK FOR TRANSITIONAL DEMANDS

We are still in the process of developing immediate demands. Further development of these will be crucial for formulating our transitional demands – and we should continue to make clear demands that address our immediate issues and improve our current conditions.

But beyond simply formulating demands, we should begin to identify the structures of oppression that our demands are designed to undermine. The following list is an attempt to start that thinking, although it will likely require significant expansion and refinement...

Socialist transitional demands - Demands that expand into the wider struggle to replace capitalism with socialism. Capitalism is a core component of women's oppression, although socialism will not automatically dismantle patriarchy without a simultaneous movement for socialist feminism, and so replacing



capitalism with socialism is essential.

Socialisation of domestic labour and social reproduction - Demands to bring domestic labour, which falls disproportionately on women, from the realm of personal responsibility to the responsibility of society. The socialisation of this work transforms 'personal' issues into workers' struggles, putting the equitable distribution of this labour onto the table.

Bodily autonomy - Demands for the freedom and means to have control over our own bodies. The more control we have over our bodies, the more we undermine the biological constraints used to justify women's oppression under patriarchy.

Freedom from gendered roles and expectations - Demands to end discrimination on the basis of subverting gendered expectations, including: ending the misogynistic standards applied to women (e.g. policing 'femininity', or expecting women to take on the majority of domestic or emotional labour) and men (e.g. the ideals of 'hypermasculinity' pushed by 'manosphere' influencers); an end to homophobia and transphobia; freedom to redefine the forms of family accepted and supported by society; and the removal of legal institutions and cultural pressures that reinforce these gendered roles and expectations.

TRANSITIONAL DEMANDS

The following is an attempt to demonstrate how we might begin to formulate the demands that we have already made into a more transitional form – it is not a fully debated and agreed manifesto. As above, it will almost certainly require significant expansion and refinement, but it may provide a useful



base from which we can begin to build these demands.

WE DEMAND WORKERS' LIBERTY

- We call for a shortening of the working week for all, with no loss of pay – so that workers do not have to sacrifice their domestic and caring responsibilities for their employer.
- Parental and caring responsibilities are essential to the functioning of our society, and so we call for at least 12 months parental leave for all parents or nominated carers, and paid leave for parents and carers when they need it.
- Work should pay all workers enough to support themselves and their families, and those who cannot work should be similarly supported, and so we call for adequate benefits and wages, including child benefit which covers the cost of bringing up children, with equal pay regardless of gender.
- Borders, and restrictions on where people can live and work, cause unnecessary division between workers, and create a class of precarious workers (those dependent on work visas, or those without a 'right to work' and so seeking off-the-books employment) that can be more easily exploited, and so we call for free movement and freedom to work for all.
- The criminalisation of sex work serves only to make this work precarious, and worsen the exploitation of sex workers. Sex workers are exploited, as all workers are exploited, and we fight to end the exploitation of workers, not to construct barriers to those workers organising against their exploitation, and so we call for the decriminalisation of sex work.
- Work cannot be truly equitable until it is

controlled by workers, and so we call for the end to all anti-trade union legislation, and the unionisation of all workplaces.

WE DEMAND CARE AND SUPPORT FOR ALL

- Parents deserve a right to full lives, as children deserve a right to proper care, and so we demand free, high quality childcare, available 24-hours a day, and based in communities and workplaces.
- We call for free, expanded, socialised care for all who need it.
- To eliminate the inefficiency of domestic work being left entirely to individual households, as well as to reduce nutritional and health inequality, we demand a radical expansion in socialised services for domestic labour, such as: community and workplace canteens serving nutritious cheap food, and collective laundry services.
- We call for the rebuilding and expansion of public services that provide vital community and care: libraries, youth clubs, children's centres, 1 o'clock clubs and parks, early years support and play facilities, community centres, services for victims of abuse, etc.
- So that everyone has easy access to community spaces and services, and to workplaces, we call for free, expanded, and integrated public transport with adequate space and facilities for disabled passengers and young families.
- Care for all requires care for our planet, and we are currently headed to increasingly frequent and severe climate crises, and so we call for: immediate action to minimise carbon emissions and other environmental damage; rapid adaptations to the climate changes that we can no longer prevent; and a movement towards a truly sustainable economy.

WE DEMAND BODILY AUTONOMY

- Bodily autonomy should never be sacrificed for the sake of reproduction, and so we call for: expansion of reproductive health services, including maternal health; improved access to contraception; improved access to fertility treatments and an end to all explicit or implicit forced sterilisation; the full decriminalisation of abortion, and adequate provision to ensure abortion is available as early as possible and as late as necessary.
- Trans people should not be made to suffer for the sake of their biology, and should be trusted with their own bodily autonomy, and so we call to ensure that

trans people can access the full range of quality gender-affirming healthcare they require for free, and without harmful wait times or legal restrictions.

- All healthcare needs should be taken seriously and treated to the best of society's ability, and so we call for the expansion of all under-resourced healthcare, including mental health services.
- Substance abuse is not a criminal issue, but a healthcare issue, and it should be treated as such, and so we call for the decriminalisation of the possession and use of controlled substances.
- Disabled people deserve to be fully included in society, and so we call for the elimination of all barriers that prevent disabled people from accessing work, homes, and public spaces.
- All women and non-binary people deserve to not be excluded from full participation in society due to fear of harm, and so we call for an end to violence against women and girls, not through treating this violence as a purely individual problem, or through performative incarceration, but by countering the attitudes and structures that permit, encourage, and reinforce this violence.

WE DEMAND LIBERATION FROM RESTRICTIVE GENDER, SEXUAL, AND FAMILIAL NORMS

- Restrictive gender norms are used to intimidate and coerce women and men into behaviours that harm them, and so we call to end the social ostracisation of people who subvert gender norms.
- The restrictive gender norms are reinforced by our society, and so we also call for an end to gender stereotyping in advertising, in job adverts and hiring practices, and in consumer goods.
- Access to quality housing should be available to all, and not dependent on familial support, and so we call for decent homes for all, including adequate supported living arrangements and the availability of communal households.
- We recognise that harmful stereotypes about gender, sexuality, and family relationships are learnt from an early age, and so we call for mandatory, fact-based, progressive sex and relationship education in schools to counter sexist, homophobic, and transphobic attitudes that children face at home or outside of school; and we also call for an end to the gender stereotyping reinforced within schools and the curriculum.



WOMEN, WORK AND OUR FUTURE CLASS STRUGGLES

Cathy Nugent

Before the emergence of the 'second-wave' women's movement, many feminists, socialists and liberals knew that there was something deeply unfair, disturbing even, about women being restricted to a life of domestic drudgery at home and excluded from economic and public life. Although working-class women had always worked outside the home, they were often restricted to domestic service, localised industries and/or highly precarious and marginal jobs. One of the Second Wave's achievements was to draw attention to the restrictive role of the family in women's lives, while also showing how the daily reproduction of

human life in private households was important to capitalist accumulation. The labour of social reproduction, in particular the numerous household tasks carried out by women and girls, was embedded in wider economic and social processes. Workers' Liberty has built our politics on these insights.

Our analysis also has some things in common with social reproduction theory, which sees 'the relation between labor dispensed to produce commodities and labor dispensed to produce people [is] part of the systemic totality of capitalism' (Tithi Bhattacharya). However, whatever the theoretical perspective, we should review the up-to-date data on the paid and

unpaid work that women do. To that end, this article surveys some of the current UK data on women's waged work – rates of employment, pay, gender segregation in the labour market. It also looks at whether the gender division of labour in households has changed in the last few decades.

The most dramatic change has been in the rising percentage of women in waged employment in the UK. It is now very close to that of men. In February–April 2025, 16.7 million women in the UK aged 16–64 were in employment, and 17.5 million were economically active – equivalent to a 72% employment rate and a 75.5% economic activity rate. (Source: Office for

National Statistics (ONS) Labour Force Survey, April 2026. All figures unless otherwise stated are taken from here.) That is only moderately less than that of men, at 78.2% and 82.6% respectively. The employment rate for women is now very close to its pre-pandemic high of 72.7%. Women were disproportionately affected by lockdowns, due to their concentration in employment sectors that were most badly affected. However, women's employment rates rapidly recovered. Other recent increases in women's participation are partly due to changes in the state pension age – equalisation began in 2020.

Near-equality of employment rates has, however, not erased other inequalities. These are: persistent unequal levels of pay between men and women; a continuing unequal division of labour between co-habiting heterosexual couples over caring responsibilities and other household labour; and persistent labour market segregation on gender lines. (Studies of LGBT+ couples show a higher degree of co-operation, negotiation and equality in household arrangements.) I argue that these inequalities – pay, unequal burden of household labour, segregation – interact with and reinforce each other.

One important note: it is not possible, and it is debatable whether it is desirable, to disaggregate data on trans people in, for example, employment statistics. This article, where it talks about 'men' and 'women', therefore uses the aggregated figures of official statistics necessarily covering both cis and trans people although not necessarily correctly categorised. It is important to note that transgender people often experience, on average, even lower pay and/or higher unemployment.

WOMEN IN WORK AND THE DUAL ROLE

Although women's participation in the capitalist labour market, including that of married women, has never been marginal, today's employment figures represent a radical economic and social transformation. At the time of the 1901 census, around four million, or less than a third, of all girls and women aged 10 or over in England and Wales were in work. According to the 1911 census, 1.35 million women in England and Wales worked in domestic service. Women's employment in war industries brought many more women temporarily into waged work and broadened their social

expectations. By 1918, 36% of all working-age women were employed; and at the peak of World War Two up to 90% of single women aged 18 to 40 were in war work.

After the wars, a combination of explicit rules and informal practices excluded women from many jobs and consequently reduced women's participation in work. However, after World War Two industrial change, incremental improvements in legislation and shifting social attitudes led to an increase in women's participation in waged work. After 1971 women's economic activity and employment in the UK gradually rose; the rate of increase flattened out in the late 1980s and early 90s, then speeded up in the 2010s. In 1971, the rate of economic activity for women aged 16-64 was 55.5% and thus has risen by 20 percentage points. In contrast, the rate of economic activity for men has dropped. In 1971 this stood at 95.1% and thus has dropped by roughly 13 percentage points. Men's economic activity rate decreased very gradually; the peak of the rate of decrease came in the early 1980s and mid-1990s. Since 2020 it has stabilised.

After 1970 there were increasing opportunities, especially for married women, to break out of the default status of 'housewife' and/or 'mother', the isolation of the home, and to gain some financial independence. However, women also took on a dual role – combining work and taking primary responsibility for parenting – and that has been a big cog in a system of gender inequalities. Because around 84% of women will have at least one child in their life course, and just less than half of all working-age women are currently involved in looking after children, the effects of the dual role impact most, if not all, women. For women, having a child will lead to a short period of maternity leave followed by either a return to the exact same job, or the switching of jobs and roles. For many, this means a reduction in hours or even dropping out of work. One study found nearly 33% of women in a poll opted for a less stressful or 'family-friendly' job after having children. Jobs in the health and social care sector, and teaching assistant jobs, were perceived to be more family-friendly. Many women also take demotions. In this way, lower-pay and career-limited kinds of work become entrenched as 'women's work'. Everyone in part-time or gender-typical work, whatever their gender, is affected by the worse pay and conditions.

Overall, the periods where primary carer

parents are out of the labour market are shorter than they were in the past, not least because pre-school nursery and childcare provision has expanded and in the last few years through government subsidy. There is a strong desire from women with children to stay in work. It is estimated that five million women would be willing to work longer hours if they had access to more flexible working.

It is worth noting that, through the entire period, the rate of economic inactivity (people of working age who are not looking for work) for all people has maintained at a steady level of 20-25% for a variety of reasons including full-time education. However, the gender ratios have changed radically. In 1971 a full 90% of economically inactive people were women, whereas today the figure is 54%. At the start of 2026, 5.4 million women (24.5%), compared to 3.7 million men (17.6%), were economically inactive. In some minority ethnic groups, very high numbers of women are economically inactive – 48% of women from Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities, for example.

11 million people in the UK live with long-term health conditions, but the majority are either working (seven million) or retired. However, 1.5 million women are out of the workforce due to long term sickness, including mental ill-health. This is 200,000 more women than men. In the UK, about 27% of women are disabled compared to 22% of men. According to TUC 2020 research, the employment gap between disabled women and non-disabled men was 32.6 percentage points, and the gap between disabled BAME workers and non-disabled white people was 34.7 percentage points. The overall disability employment gap was 28.4 percentage points.

According to last year's ONS Annual Population Survey, some 1.4 million women who are economically inactive said they were 'looking after family or home'. The same is true for 0.3 million men. The number of economically inactive women looking after family has fallen in younger age groups, but remains high/ the same in older age groups (as high as 52.1% for women aged 25-49). Overall, the

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• 1941, Housewife clears ash from hearth as part of her domestic labour

figures reflect a complex mix of women having children later in life, having fewer children on average, and looking after dependent adults later in life.

Figures on the proportions of men and women looking after dependent children tell a slightly different story. Here, just 100,000 men (1.5% of men with children) were economically inactive and looking after their children. In comparison, one million women, or 12.3% of women with children, were doing the same. For working parents, 6.3% of men compared to 32.8% of women were working part-time. The employment rate for lone mothers, who head up 84% of lone-parent families, is 67.1% – versus 80.1% for lone fathers.

PERSISTENT INEQUALITY: PAY

The full-time gender pay gap has decreased by nearly a quarter over the past decade and now stands at 6.9%. However, the median hourly pay for men in both full- and part-time work is still £19.17, compared to £16.71 for women; and weekly median pay is £740.60 compared to £556. The overall pay gap is now 12.8%. Low pay is defined as below two-thirds of hourly full-time median wages. That is close to the current national minimum wage for over 21 year olds (£12.71 per hour) but under the Real Living Wage (£13.45 per hour). In 2025, 4.4 million jobs were paid below the Real Living Wage, and 2.5 million women – compared to 1.8 million men – held those jobs. According to the Living Wage Foundation this gap has closed somewhat. There are no figures

comparing the mean hourly pay of white women and women of colour; however, there are official 'ethnicity pay gap' figures which are shocking. They stood at 21.1% for Asian people, 29.7% for Black people, and 5% for other groups.

Recent years have seen the rise in part-time work for all genders. In the three months to February 2026, 6.22 million women (37%) were working part-time, compared to 2.5 million men (14%). Part-time work tends to be less well-paid than full-time work. The median hourly pay of all full-time work is £19.74, but for part-time work it is £14.11. Men's median part-time hourly wage rate is actually lower than women's (£13.85 for men compared to £14.25 for women). This may reflect a higher number of women working in higher paid work, but on a part-time basis.

A GENDERED LABOUR MARKET

Segmentation of occupations by gender remains pronounced, with women more likely to be employed in certain sectors and jobs that have lower median pay. For example, 77% of all jobs in the health and care sector, and 71% of jobs in the education sector, are held by women. There is further segregation along racial lines as well. For example, 20% of all working-age Black African women are employed in health and social care roles. Some jobs in these sectors are higher paid, but vertical segregation is a factor in the pay gap everywhere. 13% of men work in senior or managerial posts, compared to 8% of women. In school teaching, where men are 24% of the workforce, there is an 18.8% pay gap. This is because

more men work in secondary schools and hold senior posts.

The ONS Labour Force Survey puts occupations into nine broad categories. The ratios of men to women in these categories are sometimes equal, but more often unbalanced. In order of levels of pay, with the highest first: more men than women are managers; equal numbers are in professional occupations (scientists, engineers, doctors) and associate professional occupations (technicians); many more men are in skilled trades; many more women are in administrative and secretarial jobs; many more men are process and machine operators; many more women are in caring and similar service roles; slightly more women are in sales; and equal numbers are in elementary occupations (cleaners, warehouse workers, postal workers).

Men are much less frequently, rarely or never employed in stereotypical 'jobs for women' whereas women sometimes have stereotypical 'jobs for men'. Although there are equal numbers of men and women in so-called 'professional occupations' and 'associate professional occupations', reflecting women's higher and even superior educational attainment, there is still a great deal of gender differentiation. There are roughly equal numbers of men and women scientists, but many less women than men in engineering or IT. On the other hand, more women than men are doctors, dentists and vets.

There are strong historical factors behind occupational segregation. Some of this is accidental: the expansion of service sector jobs occurred at the same time as the rise in women's employment. Women went where the jobs were. Certain occupations were or still are perceived to be a 'better fit' for gender stereotypes about women: secretarial, caring, teaching, social work, retail work, and otherwise 'people-oriented' work. It is even said that capitalism's emphasis on self-actualisation encourages girls and women to aspire to be doctors and nurses and not plumbers and train drivers. More importantly, the sexist culture associated with certain work organisations informally discriminates against women or puts them off. Then there is the fact that 'jobs for women' were associated with women's role as secondary breadwinners. This will not shift without fights for higher wages. Equally, the perception that trade work such as plumbing is more 'skilled' than secretarial work will not shift unless we reconceptualise what is skillful.

PERSISTENT INEQUALITY: AN UNEQUAL DIVISION OF LABOUR IN THE HOUSEHOLD

Has the sharing of household labour in the UK's 11.3 million heterosexual couple households changed in the last few decades? Attitudes have certainly changed. According to the National Centre for Social Research (NCSR):

- Among people in two-person heterosexual households, agreement with the idea that men should earn money and women should look after the home dropped from 48% in 1987 to 9% in 2022.
- In 2012, 31% felt mothers should stay at home with pre-schoolers. 18% now think this.
- 33% of people think that, while children are young, women should work part-time and fathers full time.

Men want to spend more time with their children – a good thing. According to the NCSR's survey, 18% of people would like both adults in their family to work-part time. A 2022 survey commissioned by the Centre for Progressive Policies estimated that men look after children for 22 hours a week, and women for 45 hours (i.e. men do just under 50% of the childcare that women do). Other studies show fathers' time tends to be spent on developmental tasks such as chatting, helping with homework, reading stories and kicking footballs.

When it comes to housework, although there has been some progress, women are still doing more than men. A 2015 ONS survey of a different range of household activities showed men were spending over 50% less time on laundry, housework,

childcare and cooking. Only in one task – transport – do men do more than women.

It is true that the automation of household activities has reduced the time these things take. These substantial gains are offset by new sources of labour. For example, before an online shop is done, there must be meal planning. These 'hidden' labours are associated with the tasks which are still mostly done by women.

The figures vary, but clearly some progress in the sharing of tasks has been made. Yet we should not overlook the fact that this has slowed down or been limited. No doubt the cultural ideas and practices which are really oppressive to many women – expectations of endless domestic drudgery – will continue in many households.

CONCLUSION

When women were more confined to the home, the role of the family appeared very important to socialist feminists as they were not accepted as full-time workers or the main breadwinner, even when they needed to be. That is no longer the case. On the other hand, although women are much more likely to work while having dependent children, and most fathers share the load of parenting, women's 'dual role' is still a 'dual burden'. For women, the stress of combining primary care responsibilities with the necessity of and desire to work is a structural circumstance, imposed on them by how capitalism is organised. Women make more compromises than men in terms of their hours of work and the type of work they do, and accept a cut in their lifelong income. Many working-class parents

IMMEDIATE DEMANDS

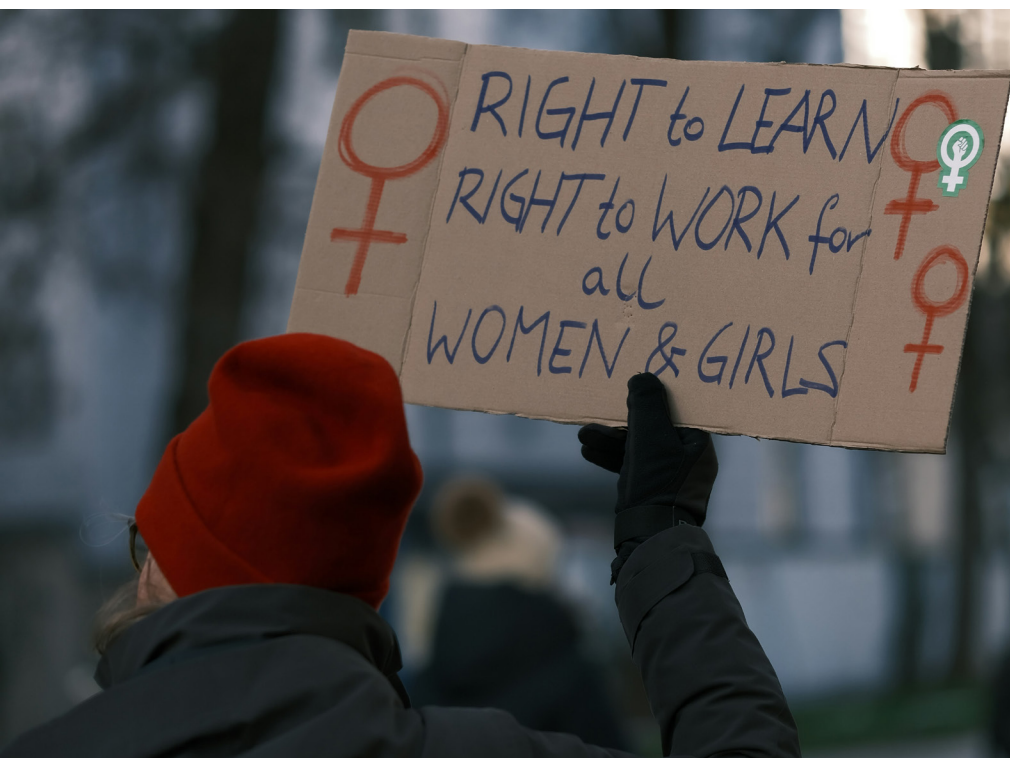
- A cut in the working week for all workers. For parents the working day should align with the school day.
- Free, good-quality, flexible childcare with a highly paid workforce. That need not mean, as it does now, that children are in childcare for long hours, but that childcare fits around the needs of parents and children alike.
- Longer and more flexible parental leave at full rates of pay, making it affordable for all parents to take leave.
- Work that is flexible for all workers – the right to change hours and shift patterns, to take special paid leave for all caring responsibilities, and to take sabbaticals.
- Defend and extend benefits for disabled people and the long-term sick. Increase sick pay.
- Rethink the meaning of 'equal pay'. Reconsider the distinctions between 'skilled' and 'unskilled' work. Prioritise campaigns against low pay.

will reasonably feel these stresses as a shared circumstance, but women are more bound to these circumstances.

Women's situation institutionalises low pay and forms of super-exploitation at work – all very convenient for capitalism. The labour movement is attuned to some of these issues – low pay, for example – but not the overall economic injustice shaped by the 'dual role'. For example, there is very little discussion, let alone action taken, by the labour movement on occupational segregation by gender.

Yet the dual role underpins the continuing cultural subordination of women; it engenders bullying, harassment, coercion and violence in interpersonal relationships and at work. It perpetuates sexism and misogyny. Yet there are many campaigns and policies we can fight for which, if won, could help improve the lives of working-class people and cut some of the roots of women's oppression.

- This article is abridged - the full version can be found on our website:





WE DEMAND JOY

Kelly Rogers

We need more joy in our lives. And for those of us trying, one way or another, to raise children in 2026, that's doubly true.

In the spring of 1970 more than 600 women met at Ruskin College, Oxford, for the first National Women's Liberation Conference, where they established four core demands for the women's movement, later expanded to seven. Among them was the demand for free, round-the-clock childcare for children under five.

In August 2026, Zohran Mamdani – the internet sensation Democrat Mayor for New York City – launched his 'Parent's Nights Out' scheme, where the parents of 500 children were given the evening off, while their kids were fed and entertained at several of the city's recreation centres. Of course, four hours a month is not enough to build a life outside of parenthood, and with approximately 1.7 million children living in NYC, the scheme is little more than a gimmick. But in its own, very limited way, it captures something of the spirit of the demand for 24-7 childcare.

Parenthood should not be a prison sentence. It should not mean the end of your social life, your romantic life, or your hobbies. Implicit in 'round-the-clock childcare' are all the things that you could be doing with your time: going out on the piss with your mates, going to the park and reading a book, joining a sports team, or sitting at home and staring at the wall – these are all perfectly good reasons for your children to be looked after by someone else.

CUT TO THE BONE

Since September 2025, working parents of under-fives have been entitled to up to 30 hours of free childcare a week for 38 weeks of the year. With most of us working more than 30 hours a week and more than 38 weeks a year, there is a large shortfall. The rest either has to be paid for, or stitched together using family and friends, if we're lucky enough to have a network around us. Meanwhile, government funding offered to nurseries rarely covers operating costs, and parents are faced with expensive add-ons, such as charges for nappies, wipes and food, or ramped up prices for unfunded hours. In May, the government reported that 72

percent of parents are using savings to cover these costs.

Underfunded and expensive nurseries are just the tip of the iceberg. The last sixteen years have seen the closure of more than a third of children's centres, over 800 play parks, and more than 1,200 youth clubs. This year, London Mayor Sadiq Khan has pledged to fund at least one late-night youth club in each of the 32 London boroughs. More than 130 youth clubs have been closed in the capital since 2010.

Chronic housing insecurity is having a dramatic impact on working class communities too: lack of social housing, sky-high rents, and dodgy landlords all mean that people are less and less able to put down roots. The result? Families are poorer, overworked and, most of all, isolated. Parents – mothers, in particular – have been left to struggle by themselves.

NOWHERE TO GO

But it's not just parents who are lonely. In 1998, Blair's government introduced the ASBO: the Anti-social Behaviour Order, used to persecute thousands of children and teenagers for 'yobbish' behaviour. Not long after, 'mosquito alarms' – devices that emit a high-pitch frequency only heard by people under the age of 25 – became part of the furniture of UK high streets, in a crude attempt to stop young people from 'loitering'. Fast forward to austerity Britain and, with services cut to the bone and the cost of leaving the house rising by the day, children and young people have been left with nowhere to go.

Add to this the fact that, over the past few decades, parents have become more and more cautious about letting their kids out of the house unsupervised. People are less likely to know and trust their neighbours. Road deaths and violent crime have been in decline for decades, and children are safer now than they have ever been, but for reasons both good and bad, our media is full of stories about adults abusing children. People are frightened, and parent accordingly.

In his bestselling book 'The Anxious Generation', Jonathan Haidt lays out how 'play-based childhoods' have increasingly been eclipsed by 'phone-based childhoods', and tracks the deleterious effect this has had on young people's mental health. Self-harm among adolescents has sky-rocketed since 2010,

with the jump significantly higher for girls than for boys.

In recent years, the impact of social media has become much more widely accepted as a public health crisis. A ban on phones in schools came into force across England in July. Scotland is likely to follow suit early next year.

But limiting screen time, by whatever method, isn't enough on its own. Just as essential, Haidt argues, is giving children time and space to play. 'Play is the work of childhood,' he writes, 'and all young mammals have the same job: Wire up your brain by playing vigorously and often.' Play needs to be face-to-face, ideally between children of mixed ages, and free – in other words, with as little input from adults as possible. And as children become teenagers and then adults, face-to-face socialising remains just as important for their development.

Fewer screens and more real-world relationships: it's a simple recipe for a healthier society. Less simple, but just as urgent, is the need to reverse austerity (and then some) and rebuild a 'real world' that is actually accessible.

WHAT DO WE WANT?

So let us bring back the demand for free, round-the-clock childcare. But let's not stop there.

We need:

- Generous parental leave. The Fire Brigades' Union has successfully won 52 weeks full maternity pay in several fire and rescue services: a good benchmark for the rest of us. The paternity leave campaign 'The Dad Shift' calls for six weeks for dads. It's a figure that has been selected, primarily, because six weeks is how long it takes for someone (with little to no complications) to recover after giving birth – in other words, it's so dads can help look after their partners. It's got very little to do with dads bonding with and raising their children, and it's not enough. They need 52 weeks too.
- A shorter working week, with no loss of pay. We deserve time away from our children, if we want it – but we also deserve time with our children, and other loved ones, instead of spending (on average) a third of our lives with our noses to the grindstone. There are plenty of examples where shorter working hours have resulted in increased productivity, but even if it didn't, we would demand it anyway.

- Accessible, high quality childcare and youth spaces, under public ownership and based in communities and workplaces. We shouldn't have to get two buses to a nursery because we didn't put our child's name down six months before they were conceived. We need options, and good ones.

- Free-to-use, well-funded, publicly-owned community spaces. Not just children's centres and libraries (although absolutely these), but neighbourhood canteens, sports facilities, arts venues, and more. An overhaul of policing, including the abolition of ASBOs, stop and search, and other police powers that target minorities and make public spaces unsafe, in particular for young people.

The list, obviously, goes on. And if these demands seem ambitious, then good. They need to be. After decades of decline in the labour movement and the welfare state, we need an agenda that raises our horizons beyond merely taking the edges off exploitation and loneliness.

SPACE FOR JOY

In 2025, birth rates fell for the fourth consecutive year, to a 50-year low. On average, each woman will now give birth to 1.4 children, a figure down from 1.9 children in 2010, and considerably lower than the 2.4 children we heard so much about in the 1990s. One result has been a spate of hand-wringing articles in the mainstream press about the so-called 'fertility crisis'.

The reasons why people are choosing to have fewer or no children are numerous. Some of these reasons are positive (they have better things to do, for one.) But a lot of these articles simply fail to ask the obvious questions. Is it a fertility crisis or a housing crisis? Is it a fertility crisis or a cost of living crisis? Is it the existential dread brought on by the climate crisis? Is it the fact that everything is, actually, quite shit?

We need to fight, tooth and nail, for things to be less shit. For an end to mothers struggling with their kids, alone at home, or stitching together just enough childcare so they can go back to work and give half their pay cheque to a privately-run, falling-to-pieces nursery; an end to young people feeling like the online world has more to offer than the real one; a society that gives us time and space for joy, inside and outside of our families.

UNISON GREATER LONDON YOUNG MEMBERS DEMAND EQUAL PARENTAL LEAVE

Justine Canady

Greater London Region UNISON Young Members have started to campaign on increasing maternity, paternity and adoption leave. This was after inspiration from hearing about the Fire Brigade Union's Fight for 52 campaign, which calls for 52 weeks full pay maternity leave and UNISON members in Wandsworth Council winning an increase in maternity/adoption pay to 17 weeks full pay. The first step young members have taken is to collate all policies of local government and higher education employers, which are often enhanced beyond national standards. This is unlike many NHS Trusts (an industry also organised by UNISON), which rarely offer enhanced benefits beyond the national standards set out in Agenda for Change.

London Young Members also voted to amend a motion to their conference that UNISON policy should be 52 weeks full pay for all parents on the basis that both parents should equally be part of the child rearing. Employers and the government should not enshrine the gendered division of domestic labour into maternity/paternity leave policies and law. The University of the Arts London has equal maternity and paternity policies at 6 months full pay.

While it has long been the argument that the birthing (and potentially breastfeeding) parent requires more physical time off to recover, leaving this parent alone with a new baby does not help their recovery and means that this parent (traditionally the mother) is left with the majority of the child rearing. Further, non-birthing parents (traditionally fathers) often want more time to spend with their new babies but are deprived of this right because of restrictive and reactionary leave policies. Feminists and trade unionists should call for equality in child rearing, starting at birth.

GLORIA STEINEM: THE FACE OF AMERICAN SECOND-WAVE FEMINISM

Dominika Szarek

Gloria Steinem was one of the defining faces of the feminist movement. As the New York Times recently described her, she was 'the personification of the women's movement' – a figure whose name and image were inseparable from the movement itself. For many, she was a crusader for reproductive rights, coining the term 'reproductive freedom', and a champion of women's liberation – a legacy that will endure. Her image – beyond the iconic aviator sunglasses and long, blonde-streaked hair – became a symbol of second-wave feminism and its lasting influence.

Steinem died at the age of 92 at her home in New York City. She was born on March 25, 1934, in Toledo, Ohio.

Her childhood was marked by instability. After her parents' divorce, Steinem lived permanently with her mother, whose severe mental illness left Gloria afraid to be alone with her. Her mother's condition disrupted not only their social life but also their economic stability.

With her father largely absent and providing minimal financial support, the family's financial situation deteriorated further as her mother struggled to keep employment. This became a formative experience for Steinem. She later understood her mother's inability to work not as a personal failing, but as a consequence of a system built on hostility toward working women – a system that exploited them, and showed profound apathy toward women's suffering. Her mother's treatment was, to Steinem, an early lesson that women's oppression is embroidered into the very fabric of society.

She graduated from Smith College, one year after the prominent feminist writer and poet Sylvia Plath. Graduating with distinction, she then spent two years in India as a Chester Bowles Asian Fellow. Her experience in India became

formative. But even before that, Steinem writes in 'My Life on the Road' that she had an abortion just before leaving for India. While living in London at 22, she sought the help of Dr. John Sharpe. In 1957, abortion was still illegal in the UK – it would take another ten years for the law to change. The doctor, who risked his career and freedom to help a young woman, asked her to promise him two things: 'First, you will not tell anyone my name. Second, you will do what you want to do with your life.'

Until she left for India, Steinem loathed public speaking. Only after her work there did she become the confident public speaker we know her as today. Most importantly, during her time in India – working with a direct action group tackling caste violence and religious intolerance – she familiarised herself with the Indian national independence movement, which shaped her activism thereafter. She writes in 'My Life on the Road':

'If you want people to listen to you, you have to listen to them. If you hope people will change how they live, you have to know how they live. If you want people to see you, you have to sit down with them eye-to-eye. Most of us have a few events that divide our lives into 'before' and 'after'. This was one for me.'

She understood the power of grassroots campaigns and collectivism.

After returning to the United States, she served as director of the Independent Research Service, an organisation funded by the CIA – which she claimed at the time were 'the good guys.' The organisation focused on encouraging non-communist American students to attend a Soviet-sponsored festival in Vienna to counter the Red Scare. Shortly after this period, Steinem became a freelance journalist in New York.

Her prominence skyrocketed following her exposé on the humiliating and poor working conditions of Playboy Bunnies. Her article 'After Black Power, Women's Liberation' for New York magazine brought her to the forefront of second-wave feminism and made her one of the movement's most recognisable activists. Steinem also famously argued that economic systems must prioritise reproduction over production, stating that 'every economics course ought to start not with production but with reproduction. It is way more important', and that only through achieving reproductive freedom

• Steinem, 1975



can women's liberation be realised.

This led her, in 1972, to establish Ms. Magazine with a group of fellow feminist activists. Many predicted the magazine would fail and sell nothing. They were wrong. It sold 300,000 copies nationwide in eight days and, within weeks, gained 26,000 subscribers. The topics on the front page ranged from domestic abuse, sexual harassment at work, the socioeconomic impacts of marriage on women, and patriarchal body shame. In 1981, she put endometriosis – and the taboo surrounding it – on the front page, a topic still stigmatised in mainstream media.

That being said, many criticised her magazine endeavour and Steinem's emergence as the chief spokesperson of the women's liberation movement, which they argued required collective action rather than individual leadership or glamorisation. Betty Friedan, author of 'The Feminine Mystique', the book credited with launching second-wave feminism, criticised Ms. Magazine and Steinem for capitalising on and profiting from the women's movement. Friedan also accused her of attracting what she called 'the lavender menace' – lesbians – to the movement, and claimed Steinem came from the 'bra-burning, anti-men, "politics of orgasm"' school of feminism.

Gloria Steinem will remain one of the most influential figures of the feminist movement. However, like any individual, her record is not unblemished. Many criticised her for being a feminist who believed the state and government were establishments capable of reforming. Her involvement with the CIA will forever be seen as an act of state-centric alignment and, for many, a disqualifying factor in viewing her as a radical activist. In 1998 she defended Bill Clinton against sexual assault allegations further entrenching the criticism regarding her activism.

Despite all of this, and despite the many disagreements people may have with Steinem, we can agree that she contributed significantly to the landscape of women's liberation. Her contribution was flawed and, in many ways, status-quo-centric – but it was undeniably significant. We can also remember her quotes, such as the one that has always been my favourite: 'The truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off', or 'Women have two choices. Either she is a feminist or a masochist.'



REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

COUNTERING THE MARCH AGAINST CHOICE

Nels

On Saturday 5 September, March For Life UK's annual anti-choice event returned to London, campaigning for forced births and an end to free, safe and legal abortion access. Once again, we met them with a loud, lively and disproportionately disruptive cross-group counterprotest.

The March For Life crowd this year was notably younger than in previous years. Young people from local Christian groups stood shoulder to shoulder with priests, nuns and older rosary-clutchers. Teenage boys held placards with references to misogynistic 8kun-type memes and shouted, 'Your body, my choice!'. The visible far right presence was smaller than last year – perhaps a result of a clash with Reform's conference.

As usual, the anti-choicers tried their best to drown out our chanting with Christian gospel rock. They proclaimed themselves 'pro-life, pro-family' (read: forcing family life onto others). One speaker described pressure from family

to have an abortion, and how she was glad she didn't go through with it. Another described his guilt at pressuring his girlfriend into having an abortion years ago. Both of these speakers weaponised their experiences with choice and regret in the hopes of taking away others' ability to choose for themselves.

There were all the usual declarations of abortion as 'murder' and 'sin'. On top of that, they spent more time than usual declaring themselves 'true feminists' and 'pro-women'. It is apparently – according to them – more 'feminist' to force people into childbirth than to have the freedom of choice if a foetus might be female. 'Love her [the foetus], too!' – insert eye roll here. But seriously, it's a sickeningly sinister co-opting of feminism to coerce and control.

This year, March For Life UK seemed more concerned about poverty as a major motivation for those seeking abortion. We agree that this is a real and valid issue that takes away the choice of parenthood for many. However, in

response to this 'State-sponsored murder of poor babies' (their words), they did not advocate for measures that would actually help to make parenthood a viable option for working class people – such as comprehensive sex education, better wages, adequate welfare provision, dignified disability support, flexible working arrangements, free childcare, or safe and affordable housing. They instead compared pregnancy terminations in abortion clinics to the Holocaust and resorted back to their usual answer of complete criminalisation.

In a particularly grotesque move, March For Life also weaponised a horrific case of abuse via abortion pill fraud to call for an end to all pills-by-post services. (This paragraph contains a potentially upsetting description of sexual assault – please skip two paragraphs ahead if you would prefer not to read about intimate partner abuse.) Pills by post is an at-home treatment available for pregnancies under 10 weeks which makes termination more comfortable and accessible. The case they used may have been that of the partner of Stuart Worby, from Norfolk. In 2022, Worby accessed abortion pills via a female friend who pretended to be pregnant. He crushed the first of the two pills into his pregnant partner's orange juice, and the next day he administered the second during a sexual assault. His partner had a miscarriage hours later. Worby was jailed in 2024 for 12 years.

The issues in this case are serious. But it is vital to recognise that they relate to intimate partner violence (IPV) and reproductive coercion, not to the provision of abortion pills. March For Life claim

that pills-by-post services enable abuse. In reality, IPV tends to increase following implementation of policies restricting abortion access. Pregnancy is also known to increase the severity of ongoing IPV as well as the risk of partner homicide. Homicide is among the leading causes of maternal mortality. Easier and more discreet access to abortion undoubtedly saves lives.

2026 saw the full decriminalisation of abortion for those undergoing termination. This included pardoning those previously criminalised for it; although it did not include decrim for those providing or assisting access to abortion past the 24-week term limit. Nonetheless, it is a hard-won partial victory to be celebrated.

But with the far right on the rise, we cannot afford to be complacent in defending these rights. For that reason, and for so many more, we will continue to protest loudly every time they hold their sexist, coercive march.

'Get your rosaries off our ovaries!'
'Pro-life, that's a lie – you don't care if women die!'
'Not the Church, not the State, we decide our own fate!'
'Abortion is healthcare, and healthcare is a right!'
'Abortion saves lives, misogyny kills!'
'When abortion rights are under attack, what do we do? Rise up, fight back!'

We stand for reproductive justice and bodily autonomy. For abortion for anyone who wants one, as early as possible and as late as necessary. For full decrim, now!

REVIEW

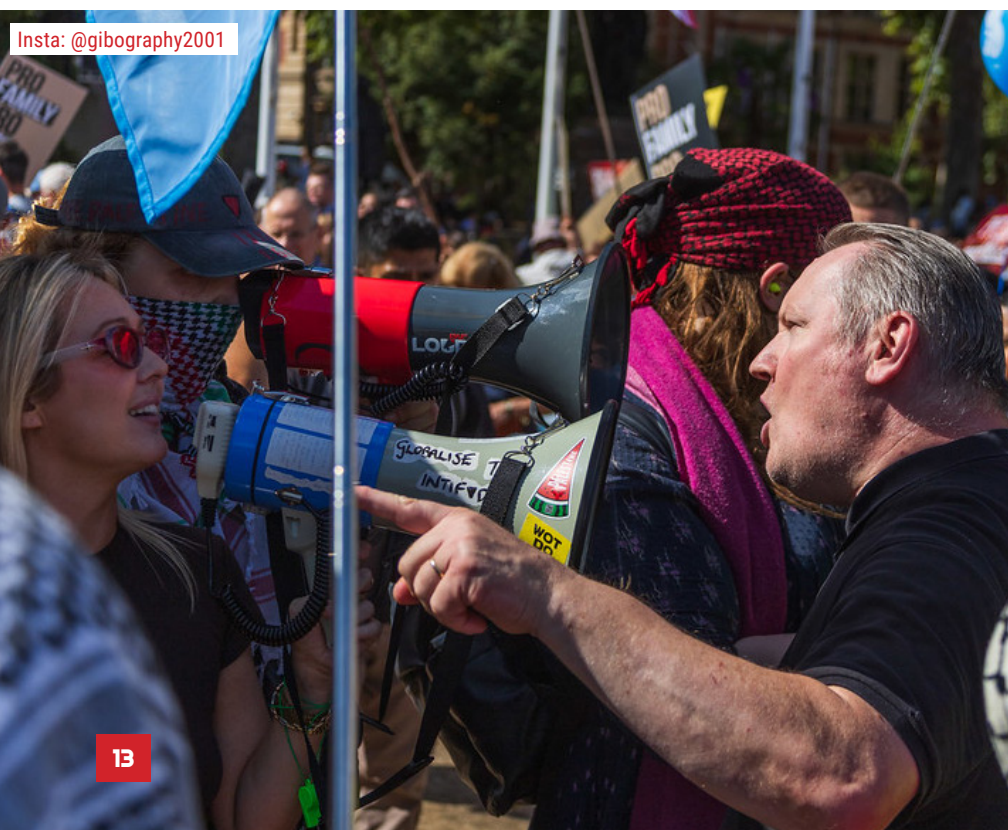
WHAT CAN WE DEMAND OF MOTHER STATE?

Ali Brown reviews *Mother State: A Political History Of Motherhood*, By Helen Charman

In June of this year Reform UK announced plans for a 'Women and Motherhood Protection Act', declaring that 'mothers should be celebrated and protected, not punished for bringing the next generation into the world.' On making the announcement Suella Braverman introduced herself 'As the first Cabinet Minister in British history to take maternity leave, and as a working mother of two children...'

The announcement was in part aimed to distract from the misogynistic rantings of Robert Kenyon, their failed candidate in the Makerfield byelection, but more broadly, marks their place in the tradition of reactionary movements politicizing motherhood as a weapon.

Reform states the aim of their policies is to encourage, 'British families to have more children within marriage.' For the far-right, joint anxieties over falling birth rates and immigration, which come to fruition within the virulently racist great replacement theory, mean asserting control over what counts as desirable and undesirable motherhood is central. When Suella Braverman emphasised that she, '...understands the challenges women face when balancing a career and family life', she is not talking about migrant women struggling to find safety for



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themselves and their children, or low paid workers balancing three jobs and skipping meals to pay the rent.

Pro-natalist policies, espoused not only by Reform UK but underlying much of the political discussion on motherhood in the last 50 years, have defined the role of women to be nurturing the family as a national duty, while cynically undermining the facility for care for the working-class majority.

POLITICIZATION OF MOTHERHOOD

'Mother State: A Political History of Motherhood', by Helen Charman, published by Penguin last year, traces key issues and moments in the politics of motherhood within post-war Britain. She sharply differentiates between the 'politicization of motherhood' (reducing the mother to a weapon deployed in someone else's argument) and the recognition of motherhood as political, which can be liberatory.

Charman's background as an academic of literature and a poet is evident. The writing is great, both strident and nuanced. The compassionate detailing of working-class feminist struggles – including for abortion rights and reproductive justice, within claimants' unions, the early refuge movement, and industrial struggles including Grunwick, the Lee factory occupation in Greenock, Women Against Pit Closures, and the E15 Mums occupation – brings a wealth of knowledge for current activists and, refreshingly (compared to many of the recent wave of, often more polemical,

socialist feminist books) insight into strategies and demands. Issues, events and subsequent debates in the feminist movement – for example over 'natural' birthing, reproductive technology, the role of women as combatants/peacemakers in the struggle against the state, and within their own communities, in Ireland – are discussed with recognition of their complexity, much needed in the current political climate, including on the left.

MOTHERING, THE WELFARE STATE AND FEMINIST DEMANDS

The central theme in the book is the relationship of care and mothering to the nation and welfare state. The book charts the period from the combatant working class movement, including the women's movement, of the 70s, through Thatcherism (led by the archetypal iron matron), the class war and defeat of the miners' strike, the subsequent full-frontal attack on 'the post-war consensus', the continuation of attacks on public services through the New Labour years and finally through to the 'austerity parenting' of the coalition and then Tory governments. In other words the period of ideological and practical dismantling of the British welfare state.

Born in 1993, Helen Charman grew up with a single mum, who laboured as a health worker, as well as in the home, and inculcated 'a conviction that I lived within the shelter of a nurturing state.' The welfare state can be a collective provider of care. Yet it is cleaved to a state machine whose primary function is disciplinary. The welfare state can provide 'respite from the harm that can be perpetuated within the family unit', a partial leveller to inequality and a degree of freedom to women who shoulder the burden of social labour. But these services are not universal, and as the last 50 years has shown, can be withdrawn. The punitive role of the state is evident in benefits system surveillance, embedding of immigration policing in the NHS, and gender role enforcement in education. The maternal metaphor does not break down, alongside loving, mothers can be possessive and controlling.

In this context Helen Charman discusses the contradictions in, 'asking for things from a system understood as unsalvageable at worst, and oppressive at best.' She notes 'the viability both politically and practically of making demands of the state... has been continually disputed by activists.'

Within socialist feminist circles today, it seems to me, many have concluded fighting for reforms is not possible or useful. A crude form of abolitionism is dominant. Demanding things of the state is seen as both naïve and risks seeding illusions. For sure we need a counter to the history of reactionary and racist bourgeois feminism, as described by Angela Davis and many others. There is an understandable reaction to the incorporation of feminism into the state. The tactic of working, 'in and against the state', as described by Katrina Forrester, became focussed on the 'in' part and often ended protecting those with privilege. But there is an alternative revolutionary tradition, one that centres class struggle around immediate needs, while revealing reality of the state, and building a movement capable of confronting this.

Katrina Forrester discusses this in 'Feminist Demands and the Problem of Housework', counterposing the 'demand' for wages for housework to that for the socialisation of housework. She argues that Wages for Housework inhabited an 'oppositional enclave,' a protected space that allowed for the generation of insights, but did not pave a route (especially to those beyond the revolutionary movement) to fundamental change. The demand for socialisation, alongside campaigns of unionisation, functions to 'create constituencies and to disclose distinctive social conditions beyond the fact of women's exploitation.' It is a demand that goes beyond sloganeering, and supersedes charting the stepping stones towards liberation, to recognising working class struggle and building power. On this issue Helen Charman concludes, 'If understanding motherhood as a political state has liberatory potential, its relationship to the state has to be two fold: immediate practical assistance for mothers and children who need it, and a long-term focus on revolutionary reform.'

While I wouldn't agree with the emphasis on some issues in the book, for example on struggles in Ireland and utopian projects, the history recounted in 'Mother State' is of feminist working class struggle and debate, placed firmly alongside, and battling within, the Labour and trade union movement. By animating these struggles on the page 'Mother State' is not only a really good read, but can provoke thought and discussion, including on our strategies and demands as activists.

FIGHT FOR TRANS INCLUSION IN LABOUR AND THE UNIONS!

Vicki Morris

The Labour Party's Women's Conference 2026 meets on 26 September, the day before the start of the Labour Party National Conference (27-30 September).

The women's conference was cancelled in 2025, as the party panicked in the face of the Supreme Court ruling that the term 'women' in the Equality Act referred to people assigned female at birth. This year the conference will proceed but will exclude trans women from taking part in the formal proceedings, following the publication of recent Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) guidance.

An important number of trade unions are boycotting the conference for this reason, including UNISON, USDAW, ASLEF, and the Musicians' Union.

UNISON said, 'The union has decided against sending a delegation to Labour women's conference this year. This is because the party's restrictions on access run counter to UNISON's policy on trans equality... UNISON's policy is that trans women are women, trans men are men and non-binary identities are valid. The union is campaigning for a change in the law in line with this policy.'

As the largest union in the country, UNISON's stance on this is valuable, but it has itself been challenged recently, with the Certification Officer ruling against the union in a case brought by Stephen Flaherty working with Paul Conrathe, a right-wing Christian lawyer who has

spearheaded legal cases against abortion and trans rights.

UNISON was adjudged to have broken its own rules and defied the Supreme Court ruling on gender when it let Ellie Waple, a trans woman, run for a women's seat in its National Executive Council elections in May 2025. (Waple did not win.)

UNISON has now gone into a huddle to discuss its response, a disappointing initial reaction, especially since Conrathe has written to the TUC to ask it to police

the entire trade union movement: 'As the umbrella body for the trade union movement, it can ensure affiliated unions understand that sex-based rules, reserved seats, representative structures and guidance must now be reviewed against the Supreme Court's ruling. This should not be left to individual disputes. A movement-wide review would promote legal certainty, good governance and confidence that unions are applying the law as it now clearly stands.'

UNISON has also just announced that trans women will not be eligible to attend its women's conference this year as delegates, a move that trans rights supporters must oppose.

Meanwhile, a number of London councils are saying they will defy the EHRC code of practice. The unions should follow this lead.

The right are on the offensive on this issue and the union movement must prepare to fight back!

More:

- On Flaherty vs UNISON: bit.ly/unionstrans
- Labour Left Internationalists' model motion (February 2026) calling for an inclusive women's conference: bit.ly/labourwomensconf

• Trans+ Pride, London, 2026



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NHS WALES TAKES A KNIFE TO TRANS HEALTHCARE

Cece Stranding

On 28th August, the NHS Wales Joint Commissioning Committee (NWJCC) indefinitely paused referrals for gender affirming surgery and cancelled all scheduled surgeries through the Welsh Gender Service (WGS), claiming concerns that the Welsh service has a higher referral rate than elsewhere in the UK.

Up to 800 patients have been directly affected by these cancellations, including patients whose scheduled surgeries were less than 24 hours away. In at least one case, a patient had arrived in hospital, undergone pre-operative checks, and discussed their surgical plan with the anaesthetist – only to have the time for their scheduled surgery come and go, and then be told that the surgery would not be going ahead, and that they were being discharged.

IMPACT ON PATIENTS

Gender-affirming surgery is often critical for the health of trans patients, and yet most trans people already have to wait years (or even decades) to receive this healthcare, which has a massive impact on their quality of life. These cancellations already severely impact patients by forcing them to endure the gender dysphoria that led them to seek gender-affirming surgery for even longer, but this is compounded by the mental harm caused by a last-minute rug-pull of surgeries that patients have been waiting on for such a long time. Even patients who had only just been referred for surgery now have to deal with the prospect of their surgery being delayed indefinitely – and from personal experience, while the long waits for healthcare are already mentally damaging enough, what's even worse is the uncertainty of not knowing how long you might be left waiting.

But beyond the patients directly impacted by the NWJCC's healthcare cancellations, trans people who have not yet been referred to these services will also have to contend with the delay and uncertainty. Even trans people outside of Wales who

are waiting to receive healthcare will have to live under the spectre of the potential for their healthcare to be delayed or denied, an uncertainty they will have to deal with for however many years they are on the waitlist for.

Now that the precedent has been set that surgery can be cancelled on the day of the operation, trans patients will likely face elevated levels of stress immediately prior to their surgery – a lasting mark that will negatively impact the outcomes of these surgeries for all patients for much longer than however long the NWJCC's ban remains in effect.

Even healthcare that is not included in the ban is likely to be impacted. Trans patients often have routine healthcare, like Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT), delayed or cancelled by individual healthcare professionals who are either unwilling to treat trans patients, or feel ill-equipped to handle their treatment. In a similar way to how the Supreme Court ruling on the Equality Act has contributed to stochastic violence against trans people, the NWJCC's healthcare ban is likely to worsen the treatment of trans patients by those individual healthcare professionals.

HOW WALES ACTUALLY COMPARES

The reason the NWJCC has given for inflicting this harm on trans patients is that the WGS has 'higher rates of surgical referral than seen in comparable services in England'. The NWJCC has so far produced no evidence of this claim, which appears to contradict the findings of the UK Gender Services Monitor[1], which indicated that the referral rate in Wales is actually lower than the rate of referral in England.

Where Wales certainly does differ from the rest of the UK is in the length of its waitlist. The Estimated Average Waiting Time (a measure of how long a newly-referred patient can expect to wait to be offered an initial assessment) is currently over 10 years in England, 58 years in Scotland, and 41 years in Northern

Ireland. In Wales, this is 'only' 2 years. Similarly, Wales is actually reducing its wait times, only adding 0.76 people to the list for every person seen. Across the rest of the UK, 4 people are added to the waitlist for every person seen, meaning that Estimated Average Waiting Times are expected to steadily increase.

It is worth noting that some Gender Services within England do significantly better on processing patients at a higher rate, and maintaining lower waiting times – specifically the regional 'pilot' services, including TransPlus in London and Indigo Gender Service in Greater Manchester. If the NWJCC sets the precedent that the efficient processing of patients is sufficient grounds for suspending treatment, then these services will likely also come under threat, and the national statistics for England are likely to approach those seen in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

WHAT INFORMED THE BAN?

One source that has claimed a higher referral rate in Wales is a post written by Nick Wallis on an anti-trans blog, which claimed back in May that the referral rate in Wales is 3–4 times the national average – without citation of the data that this claim is based on. On the same blog, on 19th August, Wallis criticised the NWJCC for continuing to allow referrals, and called for the immediate cancellation of surgery referrals. This call was supported by Natasha Asghar, who is a Member of the Senedd and the Conservative spokeswoman for Health at the Welsh Parliament.

On 24th August, a meeting of the NWJCC's Quality, Safety and Outcomes Sub-Committee took place, which preceded the WGS being placed into 'Level 3 Escalation' and the cancellation of all WGS surgeries and referrals.

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Without the NWJCC making public the data which informed its decision, it is currently unclear to what extent the decision came as the result of political pressure from anti-trans activists, rather than any objective review of the WGS.

Regardless of whether Wales has a higher or lower referral rate than the rest of the UK, what's missing from this discussion is any analysis of actual harm being done to patients. Not only has the NWJCC failed to confirm if any assessment was carried out on the impact of cancelling these surgeries before making its decision, but referral rate, even if it were significantly higher in Wales than the rest of the UK, is in no way a measure of harm. Actual regret rates for gender-affirming surgery fall below 1-2%^[2], and not even Wallis' blog has claimed a single anecdote of a patient regretting gender affirming surgery referred by the WGS.

MITIGATING THE DAMAGE OF THE BAN

The damage caused by the NWJCC's

decision was immediate and lasting, and the harm it has likely already caused to trans patients is unlikely to be fully reversible. But the longer this healthcare ban remains in place, the worse the impact will be on trans people awaiting healthcare across the UK. If the ban is not swiftly reversed, there is a danger that it will spread beyond Wales to the few efficient services in the rest of the UK.

It is imperative that this ban is ended immediately. The NWJCC is likely to drag its heels while it 'gathers additional data', meanwhile ignoring the damage the ongoing ban does to trans patients. The NWJCC's upcoming meeting on 22nd September, which is open to the public^[3], will likely address the NWJCC's ban; but continued scrutiny and pressure will be needed to make the NWJCC recognise the harm that their medical negligence is having and end this healthcare ban.

This is a mirror image of what has happened to healthcare for trans children since the puberty blocker ban, where 'safety' and 'data gathering' have been

used as a guise to deny treatment to trans people, while the self-evident harm that this causes is left unaddressed. The NWJCC's ban is a direct result of a failure to end the puberty blocker ban, and until all bans on trans healthcare come to an end, the door will remain open to continued and escalated attacks against the last remaining vestiges of trans healthcare.

End the NWJCC's surgery ban.

End the puberty blocker ban, and all legal attacks against trans healthcare.

Ensure trans people can access the full range of gender-affirming healthcare they require through the NHS, without enduring years-long waitlists.

[1] <https://datastudio.google.com/u/0/reporting/7a80f3a0-3ae8-4eb1-8bf3-1af671779e4d/page/ARUVe>

[2] <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8099405/>

[3] <https://jcc.nhs.wales/the-committee/committee-meeting-papers/>

• Supporters of Workers' Liberty in Cardiff and a coalition of their local comrades called an emergency demonstration to protest changes made to the Welsh Gender Service. The protest (below) drew roughly 200 people in Cardiff city centre. There were a range of speakers from across the local trans community and local labour movement. As we go to press, a petition to the

Senedd (Welsh Parliament) calling for the ban to be lifted has reached nearly 20,000 signatures. Plaid Cymru MS Matthew Jones called for a review of the decision, saying "We need to see the review undertaken as soon as possible – people's lives are being put on hold with potentially serious consequences to people's well-being as they wait."





UKRAINE

• Children of War, Graffiti, Independence Square, Kyiv

CARE, LABOUR AND SURVIVAL IN WARTIME UKRAINE

Dominika Szarek

The Centre for Social and Labour Research (CSL) was established fifteen years ago with the explicit aim of bridging academic analysis and the realities unfolding 'on the street.' Its founders sought to create an organisation capable of producing solution-oriented research on labour rights, protest, social reproduction, and humanitarian conditions, and to use this research to inform international actors, including the United Nations.

During my conversation with Nina Potarska, one of CSL's founders, she emphasised that the very notion of 'normalcy' – as understood in Western contexts – has collapsed in Ukraine. Much of CSL's work now revolves around maintaining the basic conditions of human existence that war has eroded. Their research is not only analytical; it is also an attempt to keep alive a public conversation about Ukraine's need for international support and the social infrastructures required for survival. Nina described how her permanent residency in Canada has become both a refuge from the violence of war and a space where her psychological sense of normality can be temporarily restored. She explained that extended stays in Kyiv or in

frontline regions have become impossible for her mental health; short, intense journeys have become a survival strategy. War, she noted, distorts one's perception of reality, reshapes tolerance levels, and produces a constant oscillation between fear, guilt, and pragmatic endurance. My own experience in Lviv – one of the safest cities in Ukraine – and a brief stay in Kyiv during a period of intensified Russian missile attacks, offered only a faint glimpse of the conditions she described. Even this limited exposure was enough to unsettle me deeply. Yet, as Potarska reminded me, millions of Ukrainians live under these conditions every day, and those in occupied territories face forms of violence and deprivation that remain largely invisible to outsiders.

Nina has always utilised Marxism to make sense of socio-economic realities. However, war has altered perception, and with it Nina's methodological outlook. Where she once relied primarily on Marxism to analyse socio-economic realities, she now emphasises the need to integrate psychological insight into CSL's research. As she put it, 'I used to focus on economic needs... now I'm more attentive to non-material needs like recognition, respect and psychological safety.'

Nina's reflection highlights something our Ukraine Solidarity movement must also reckon with: the psychological toll of war on ordinary people. The very foundations of stability – the conditions that allow collective organisation, political confidence and socialist possibility to take root – are compromised and volatile. Any meaningful solidarity must take this into account.

LABOUR, SURVIVAL, AND RECONSTRUCTION

I asked Nina a broad question – one that felt almost impossible to answer in the middle of a war. I wanted to know which economic sectors and which workers would need to be prioritised for a socially just reconstruction of Ukraine, and how labour shortages might shape that future, especially with millions of Ukrainians now living abroad.

Her answer was complicated, and once again blurred the line between our Western sense of normality and the abnormal reality Ukrainians live in. 'It's a new topic for us,' she told me. 'We're trying to answer it, but it's abstract.' Ukraine's demographic crisis is severe. The country is losing a generation – not just to death, but to displacement.

Millions of Ukrainians abroad are living in limbo: their immigration status uncertain, their futures suspended. 'They are not rooted in those countries,' Nina said, 'but they also don't know if they can return.' And even if they did return, what would they return to? A labour market shattered by war. A country that desperately needs engineers, builders, and specialists to literally rebuild what has been destroyed. A society where survival has replaced planning, and where the fear of a rising anti-reproductive-rights movement hangs in the air. 'Ukraine needs children,' Nina said, 'but if children are not born, what rights will be sacrificed for the collective good?'

Her question lingered. It wasn't just about labour shortages – it was about the political dangers that emerge when a nation is pushed to the edge of demographic collapse.

There was another aspect I hadn't even considered until Nina raised it. With children being raised abroad – or born abroad – their sense of connection to the country their parents call home becomes fragile. The place they 'belong' to on paper is, in reality, only paper. This isn't just about cultural identity; it's about the most basic foundation of belonging to a community: language. If a child grows up speaking the language of the host country, surrounded by its norms and schools and friends, what does 'Ukraine' mean to them beyond a story adults tell? If Ukraine becomes merely a story – something children hear about but do not feel – then how can we talk about the future at all?

Nina also raised a point that cuts straight through any abstract discussion of reconstruction: you cannot imagine a future if you ignore the realities of local life. Different communities in Ukraine have different needs, and rebuilding them will require time, resources, and structures that actually match those realities. In rural areas, for example, survival depends on physical labour. Many people – and statistically, these are now mostly elderly women – live without electricity. Without electricity, there is no clean water. You must walk to the well, haul it back, and repeat this every day. It is physically exhausting work, the kind that only younger people can manage. But the young have left.

And then there is the hardest truth of all: without a ceasefire, a permanent one, and without a peace agreement, nothing can be built. The future becomes almost impossible to imagine. Every economic

decision is entangled with the question of peace, national autonomy, and whether society itself can support the choices that must be made. Reconstruction is not just bricks and wages – it is political stability, collective consent, and the ability to plan beyond tomorrow.

RELATIONSHIPS TO UNIONS, NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANISATIONS, AND THE STATE

The most vulnerable sectors are healthcare and education. They are also highly feminised fields and central to Ukraine's wartime needs. Unsurprisingly, much of their infrastructure has either been destroyed or become inaccessible – and with many schools lacking shelters, forcing families to keep children at home during air raids – the burden of childcare and education has shifted almost entirely onto women. Several people I spoke to in Ukraine told me that educational and childcare facilities now need to be built underground to protect children during missile strikes. In the absence of such infrastructure, women are left carrying the full weight of social reproduction in wartime.

When it comes to healthcare, as Nina put it – especially disability care – will have to become a priority sector. Many veterans will return with varying degrees of disability, and the care work required to support them will fall overwhelmingly on women, who already dominate the sector. Yet wages in the public sector remain painfully low. Nina stressed that

Ukrainians will not return to these jobs until that changes.

I raised examples such as Medryh and the social movement 'Be Like Nina'. The latter emerged in 2019, before the full-scale invasion, after nurse Nina Kozlovskaya published a Facebook post describing the realities of hospital work: low salaries, overtime, and lack of social security. These issues have only deepened during the war and now sit at the centre of debates about post-war reconstruction.

My next question to Nina was the one that Alliance for Workers' Liberty readers will be most concerned with: are you working with the trade unions and campaigns, like the ones I raised above? And if so, which ones?

Nina answered that CSL does work with various unions, but does not have formalised collaboration with healthcare unions. 'We discuss their issues, and they act on our recommendations. We meet at conferences. We have no formal commitments or signed memorandums of partnership.'

Their engagement with the sector is therefore informal and based on shared spaces, discussions, and the use of CSL's research by union activists. She explained that the relationship has become mutually beneficial. CSL's research is used by unions when they formulate demands, whether directed at employers or the government. In a political climate where working-class voices are often treated

• Kyiv children's hospital, Okhmatdyt, after Russian Bombing 2024



as background noise, especially during wartime, CSL provides unions with the evidence and analysis they need to push back.

CSL has, however, contributed to international advocacy on care labour. Nina noted that they submitted a joint stakeholder report to the 54th Session of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Working Group of the UN Human Rights Council. The report, *Surviving to Care: Women's Unpaid and Paid Care Labour in Wartime Ukraine*, builds on CSL's wider research, including *Caring to Survive*, *Surviving to Care*, and their article *The Wartime Care Economy: Insights from Ukraine*. Care work has become a crucial and focal point of CSL's work. The UPR is a UN human-rights mechanism in which every member state is reviewed on its human-rights record every 4.5 years.

CSL's role is not abstract. Their reports, data, and analysis become tools that unions can use to fight for better labour conditions, defend workers' rights, and challenge the government's wartime reforms. They work closely with unions representing care workers – especially nurses – and with independent unions that have historically been sidelined by the state. They also collaborate with government bodies dealing with gender-violence gaps, providing research that frontline workers can use to push for change.

The conversation then turned to the relationship between CSL and the state, and to the broader presence of left-wing ideas in Ukraine. There has long been a stigma surrounding the left – something familiar across all countries that lived under Soviet rule. Left-wing ideas are often associated with a past marked by poverty, repression, and state violence. For years, anything 'left' was dismissed with contempt.

But Nina told me that the war has changed this. In the midst of abnormality, people are beginning to recognise that policies centred on healthcare, childcare, housing, and social infrastructure are not ideological luxuries – they are survival necessities. 'Neoliberalism is not a neutral economics,' she said, and people understand that now more than ever. Fifteen years ago, neoliberalism was treated as the unquestioned common sense of public discourse. Today, its supposed neutrality is collapsing.

Nothing about neoliberalism is neutral. Its economics and its language are deployed

by specific actors for their own gain. It harms people, it harms the working class, and – as always – women and children bear the worst of it. It dehumanises policy and prioritises markets over people.

Nina then moved into a topic I had not asked directly, but which sits at the heart of Ukraine's political economy: the pressure that will come from institutions like the IMF and the World Bank to adopt austerity economics as the price of reconstruction loans. Her frustration with the system was palpable. 'Ukraine is treated as a free market,' she said. War has been beneficial for some. Ukraine has become a testing ground for weapons. It is profitable for war to continue – and peace, by implication, obstructs profit.

When talking about the debt Ukraine has accumulated during the war, Nina reminded me that this debt is tied to the historical responsibility of oligarchs and Russia, and to decades of economic dependency shaped by international institutions. 'We destroyed the army with the help of the IMF,' she said – meaning that austerity programmes imposed before the full-scale invasion forced cuts to military spending, hollowing out Ukraine's defence capacity long before Russia crossed the border.

In 2014, the IMF imposed a Stand-By Agreement following the Maidan uprising. The agreement emphasised 'expenditure-led gradual fiscal consolidation to build confidence and reduce imbalances,' which meant prioritising macroeconomic targets over collective social needs like healthcare, education, and infrastructure. Cost-containment and 'rationalisation' also affected military spending. The programme was presented as a way to rescue Ukraine from imminent state bankruptcy – though 'bankruptcy,' in IMF terms, referred to collapsing foreign-currency reserves rather than the living conditions of ordinary people. Its implications ricocheted through the defence sector, leaving Ukraine vulnerable – and it is not surprising that Russia was able to annex Crimea in that same period.

Another aspect of Ukraine's wartime economy is the deepening of a raw-materials model. Ukraine has become intensely concentrated in unprocessed raw materials rather than high-value production. Nina highlighted how colonialism has mutated into neocolonialism under current economic structures. 'There is no added value,' she said. 'No money to pay salaries.'

Instead of rebuilding industry or creating value-added production, Ukraine was pushed into exporting basic goods – honey, flour, anything that could be sold quickly – sometimes even used as fuel. The full-scale war has exacerbated this negative trend.

I then came back to the question of domestic policy, asking how corruption within state institutions affects labour-market reforms and policy implementation in Ukraine. What obstacles does this create for organisations like CSL when advocating for worker-centred legislation?

When the interview took place, Ukraine had just witnessed large-scale protests against President Zelensky's dismissal of Defence Minister Mykhailo Fedorov – a figure widely perceived as having a strong anti-corruption stance. The protests showed how deeply corruption resonates in Ukrainian society. I asked Nina how these political developments shape CSL's work and the broader environment for labour-policy reform.

Her answer was blunt. 'The level of corruption is always bad.' The phrase captures how corruption has become an entrenched part of Ukraine's socio-economic terrain – not an occasional scandal, but a permanent condition CSL has always had to work around. Nina pushed back against the idea that Fedorov's dismissal represented a decisive anti-corruption turning point. Yes, she acknowledged, the narrative around his 'anti-corruption stance' exists. But in her view, Fedorov is still a representation of the status quo, embedded in the same networks of influence and profit that shape Ukrainian politics. He is part of the system – not a device for the liberation Ukraine deserves and needs.

Yet Nina also noted that the visibility of protest and social disobedience offers a small reason for hope. Pluralism is growing. People are willing to challenge power, and accountability is becoming more visible.

Perhaps – and this is my own conclusion after listening to Nina – protest is not only a reaction to power, but also a crack in the system. A crack wide enough for unions, feminist organisations, and research centres like CSL to push through demands that would otherwise be ignored.

THE CHALLENGES OF FEMINIST MOVEMENT AND LGBTQ+ RIGHTS IN UKRAINE

Dominika Szarek interviews Olha Yashchenko, Feminist Workshop, Lviv

Feminist Workshop is a non-governmental organisation founded in 2014. Their mission centres on expanding and strengthening the feminist community in Ukraine. Based in Lviv, the NGO has significantly expanded its activism in the aftermath of the Russian invasion, which has brought a new set of challenges for feminist organising and goals. While part of the AWL delegation in Lviv and Kyiv, we had the opportunity to speak with Olha, a leading member of the organisation, about the societal challenges the group is currently facing.

ONE OF THE ISSUES WHICH FEMINIST WORKSHOP CAMPAIGNS ABOUT IS THE PROPOSED NEW CIVIL CODE. CAN YOU TELL US MORE ABOUT THE CODE AND THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST IT?

The proposed new Civil Code originated with Ruslan Stefanchuk, a member of the ruling Servant of the People party (Zelenskyy's party) and chairperson of the Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian Parliament). The proposed Code is not being pushed by Zelenskyy himself but by Stefanchuk, who has also been able to get support from other Rada deputies for the proposed Code.

The proposed Code has gone through a number of versions. Some of its worst elements have been deleted after campaigning and debate in the Rada. The clause that girls as young as fourteen could get married if they were pregnant was deleted. So, too, was the clause which banned divorce if the woman was pregnant or during the first year after a child's birth.

But the new Civil Code is still being pushed by the same people, by people who wanted to permit child marriage.

The current version still includes the concept of 'good morals'. It is not a term

which is used in any other Ukrainian legislation. This means that, if not deleted from the Civil Code, the term would be open to abuse – because no-one can say what it means, and because the terminology is absent from other laws – which would impact negatively on women's rights and women's safety. Feminist Workshop calls for 'accountability for violence, not vague good morals'.

The proposed new Civil Code is also very bad when it comes to people with disabilities. People with disabilities still suffer discrimination, but the Code fails to address this. It does not introduce new forms of discrimination, but, at the same time, it does not meet the standards of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

As a result of the war, the number of people with disabilities is increasing. The government has certainly initiated programmes to help veterans with disabilities and their families, but it is not doing enough at the moment.

In addition, the Feminist Workshop advocates for the rights of LGBTQI+ people, which are restricted by the draft Civil Code. The impossibility of civil partnerships, the impossibility of proving the legality of partnerships concluded abroad, the annulment of marriage in case of a change in the gender marker in the passport, etc. We draw attention to the fact that this contradicts Ukraine's obligations regarding the European integration process.

DO YOU SEE ANY SIMILARITIES WITH POLAND, WHERE THE LAW AND JUSTICE PARTY PROMOTED A VERY SOCIALLY CONSERVATIVE POLITICAL AGENDA WHEN IN GOVERNMENT AND CRITICISED ITS OPPONENTS AS 'UNPATRIOTIC'?

Conservative ideas are becoming stronger in Ukraine. But we can change things for the better if the government works with society. Some Rada deputies are more

conservative, and some are more liberal. But what we have now is people like Stefanchuk making emotional attacks on social media on civil society organisations and human rights defenders, accusing us of being stupid and not knowing what we are talking about. But we have not been accused of being 'unpatriotic' as such.

THERE HAVE BEEN REPORTS OF RUSSIAN TROLLS ENCOURAGING SUPPORT FOR CONSERVATIVE SOCIAL POLICIES IN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES. MIGHT THAT BE THE CASE IN UKRAINE AS WELL?

Personally, I'm sure that there is a lot of Russian influence. And not just in the form of the physical pressure and the physical territorial occupation of the war. Russia has occupied us before, we have suffered centuries of oppression, we were colonised by Russia. We understand now how that colonisation has influenced our language and our culture.

I can't prove that there is a 100% Russian trace here, because our organization doesn't conduct such research, but in Ukraine we can see the same signs of what Russia has been doing in other countries, such as some recent protests against immigrants, even though migration is not a problem in Ukraine. This clearly suggests Russian influence. And the people who have staged protests about immigrants are the same people who support the proposed new Civil Code.





Many people are exhausted emotionally and physically. This makes it easy to manipulate them, to use social media in order to influence how they think. People are angry and need to find a problem which they can be angry about together. But if you are tired, then you don't have the strength to ask yourself, 'Is this really true?' You see the posts on social media, such as the ones about migrants, and you join in – 'Yes, I agree'. So, I'm sure that there's a Russian influence.

AND THE CAMPAIGNING AGAINST THE PROPOSED NEW CIVIL CODE?

There is a lot in the new Code which is so vague that it is open to abuse. This has led to different organisations coming together to oppose the Code. People are tired, they just want to manage their own lives, but the Code is a big issue and civil society is standing up against it. We want a democratic society. In different cities people have taken to the streets to protest against the Code. People have different opinions about other things, but we stand together against the proposed Code. NGOs have put together a 95-page document analysing and making recommendations about different elements of the Code.

In Lviv, which is more conservative than other parts of the country due to the influence of the Church, a thousand people turned up for a street protest against the Code in the central Market

Square. The police formed a human barrier to divide the square between ourselves and about twenty counter-protestors who turned up. But they had no idea what the Code was about. They just turned up because they thought that if organisations such as Feminist Workshop were staging a protest, then they had to turn up to and be against whatever our protest was about.

The campaign against the Civil Code gets some support from trade unions. Trade unionists have turned up as individuals to protests against the Code, and in Lviv there were members of the Journalists' Union on the protest. But trade unions are too busy working on their own particular field. Like any organisation, they do not have enough capacity to do everything they want.

WHAT IS THE SITUATION WITH ABORTION RIGHTS IN UKRAINE? IT SEEMS TO BE BETTER IN SOME RESPECTS (E.G. ABORTION ON DEMAND DURING THE FIRST TWELVE WEEKS OF PREGNANCY) THAN IN BRITAIN.

Ukrainian legislation does allow abortions to be performed legally, but there is a difference between what the law says and what happens in practice. There are differences between different cities, institutions, and doctors. Doctors can refuse to carry out abortion on the basis of their own moral views. Some doctors will also try to dissuade women from

having an abortion. Or they claim that they have not had sufficient medical training to carry out an abortion. Doctors are also known to have carried out abortions badly, with negative after-effects, as if they were punishing women for choosing to have an abortion. There is also often still a stigma attached to having an abortion, especially in the more conservative parts of Ukraine. The demographic crisis resulting from the war is a further factor which can be used to add to the social stigma of having an abortion.

HOW HAS THE WAR IMPACTED THE WORK OF FEMINIST WORKSHOP, AND WHAT WORK DO YOU DO WITH WOMEN WHO HAVE FLED THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES, WHERE THEY MAY HAVE BEEN VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ABUSE?

The full-scale invasion of February 2022 has impacted on all people and all organisations in Ukraine, including ours. In fact, just a month before the full-scale invasion, the women who ran Feminist Workshop had decided that the time had come to close down the organisation. They were exhausted and there was a lack of resources. We even organised a farewell party.

But then in February [2022] the feminist community decided that it could not do nothing. We needed a platform, we needed to exchange information, and lots of volunteers from our community came forward to help – to meet people at railway stations, to make food for those fleeing the occupied territories, to help people find accommodation, to set up shelters, to provide help to LGBT people wanting to go abroad... We realised that we had a lot of motivation and a lot of power. The full-scale invasion provided us with a second wave of activity and resulted in new experiences for us.

We have lived in a war for many years – since 2014, not just since 2022. Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are now part of our cities and communities, with the same needs as other women – documents, friends, money, food, safety and respect for their experiences. Our organization no longer has shelters, case management and separate services for IDPs, although we provided such services from 2022 to 2024. Above all, we are a point of stability and safety for women regardless of their status, orientation, previous place of residence, or other characteristics.

BORDERS AND SEX WORK: REFLECTIONS ON SUMMER CAMP READING GROUP

Nels

Workers' Liberty's Socialist Summer Camp this year saw the return of our ever-popular Socialist Feminist Reading Group 'on tour' session. This year we read and discussed 'Chapter 3: Borders', from 'Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight For Sex Workers' Rights', by Juno Mac and Molly Smith.

Why are sex work and free movement so interlinked? How should we relate to the issues of sex work and sex trafficking as socialist feminists? Would sex work exist under socialism? These were some of the themes that came out of the reading.

BORDERS PRODUCE VULNERABILITY

The vast majority of trafficked people are not snatched off the street, authors Mac and Smith highlight. In fact, the majority are seeking to migrate. Much of the Global North is a fortress of hostile borders, and those migrating away from poverty often face very little possibility of entering through permitted routes. But while anti-immigration policies may dissuade some, many will still find other, more dangerous and difficult ways to enter – perhaps compelled by the need to financially support their family, for example. We know that such policies don't stop migration. People migrate to live and work anyway – they just have very few legal rights and protections, and are far more vulnerable to exploitation with impunity. Borders create vulnerability, which is what abusive people and systems prey upon.

Strict immigration policies actually increase the demand for, and the cost of, people smuggling. (That is why the trafficking of kidnapped people is so rare – why do it for free when people will pay extortionate amounts for it?). Those who

migrate via smuggling can easily become trapped in a horrifically exploitative trafficking system due to debts to people smugglers and/or their lack of legal rights and protections. While there are important differences, this actually isn't as dissimilar as we might like to think to the 'tied' visa system, where a migrant worker whose visa is tied to a toxic and exploitative workplace cannot leave their job without risking deportation.

Victims are very unlikely to seek or receive help in these situations. They often have a very legitimate and realistic fear of detention, deportation and arrest for 'illegal working' (a conviction which can result in unlimited fines, confiscation of earnings and/or prison time). Once again, strict immigration policy makes undocumented people – including victims of trafficking – even more reliant on those who can exploit them.

INNOCENT VICTIMS AND WICKED PERPETRATORS

Anti-trafficking posters often depict a dark, shadowy figure kidnapping a young, fair-skinned girl. On the one hand, this plays into the idea of the danger of the foreign Other, the myth of the Black rapist. On the flip side, it creates a standard of innocence for those who are trafficked.

In this idea of lost innocence, there is no space for the woman – and it is usually, but not always, a woman – who paid a smuggler to cross borders in exchange for debts, knowingly or unknowingly to be paid off via sex work, and now finds herself in a shitty situation that she would prefer not to be 'rescued' from (i.e. forcibly moved on and likely deported). Such a worker may have had little choice to support herself and her family. But according to laws, such migrants can be considered somehow complicit in a crime against themselves.



As we have previously noted in Women's Fightback, it is the nature of sex trafficking that the victims will be poor, working class and/or vulnerable. This critique is not to excuse those who exploit vulnerable people. Instead, it is to highlight that the way the law addresses sex trafficking often causes further harm to those who have been trafficked, and to migrant sex workers more broadly.

In reality, anti-trafficking laws are often used against migrant sex workers. Anti-trafficking policing looks very similar to border policing, but with the added paternalistic spin of a rescue operation. Under UK law, trafficking can include arranging or facilitating someone's arrival for the purposes of exploitation for money. Since general prostitution offences are considered exploitation, sex workers can be prosecuted for the offence of smuggling or trafficking themselves, or for letting a migrant sex worker friend stay on their sofa for a night.

Rescue operations often include 'educating' victims about the fact that they are victims of trafficking, and then detention and deportation. They can also include prosecutions for offences such as 'illegal working' – or 'brothel-keeping' for those working with a friend for safety –



• Workers' Liberty Summer Camp 2026, 'Capital in an Hour' session

leading these 'rescues' to involve massive financial penalties. This can include confiscating all earnings and preexisting savings that could be considered proceeds of crime. Such laws compound the harms done to trafficking victims.

FOR OPEN BORDERS, FREE MOVEMENT AND DECRIMINALISATION

Criminalisation creates vulnerability. Full or partial criminalisation of abortion creates demand for and increases the prevalence of dangerous backstreet abortions. Similarly, strict immigration controls create demand for exploitative and unsafe alternatives to safe crossings. And the criminalisation of sex work forces workers to accept riskier and more precarious conditions.

Allowing safe passage for people to work abroad for decent pay, without having to bypass border controls and police crackdowns, would do away with the need to resort to people smugglers and traffickers in order to migrate.

Where sex work is decriminalised, workers have legal rights and protections, greater access to services and support, and the ability to fight back against exploitation

– including the ability to collectively organise for better conditions.

But our demands must also include creating greater choice. We need better wages for other jobs, robust provision of disability, welfare and childcare support, and full legal rights and protections for migrant workers. The majority of people start in sex work out of financial need. For most sex workers, there are few other jobs that can provide the money they need to support themselves and their dependents, with the flexibility they need around caring responsibilities, disabilities or other constraints.

Would sex work exist after socialism? For those who enjoy their work, it would come with the same rights and protections as any other work, with easy access to support services and time away should anything go wrong. For those who choose sex work out of necessity, leaving would be a realistic choice.

Advocating for decrim does not mean that we believe sex work is inherently good. It means that it is work. And like any work, it can range from genuinely enjoyable to boring to traumatic. Nor does it mean that we don't recognise the misogyny of the sex industry. While not true of everyone's

experience, it is often rife with gendered standards, expectations, exploitation and at times violence. But criminalisation doesn't change this – it just pushes workers into riskier situations with fewer legal protections or avenues for support.

We reject moralistic arguments against the decriminalisation of sex work as uniquely degrading or unfeminist. Under capitalism, many kinds of work can be exploitative and many jobs carry higher risk of assault (care work, for example). The idea of 'selling your body' applies as much to manual labour as to sex work.

Workers' Liberty advocates for open borders, free movement and the decriminalisation of sex work.

If this sounds like a discussion you'd have liked to take part in, keep an eye out for Workers' Liberty's upcoming events: **Ideas For Freedom** (21-22 November, Camden School for Girls), and our socialist feminist day school, **All The Rage**, in early 2027.

We also host monthly Socialist Feminist Book Clubs in London, Manchester, Sheffield and Edinburgh - for more info, email womensfightback@workersliberty.org.



• 1880s Political cartoon depicts Prime Minister William Gladstone legislating under the supervision of the Land League

THE TALE OF A GREAT SHAM: THE IRISH LAND WAR AND THE LADIES' LAND LEAGUE

Jack Gwilym

From 1879 to 1882 Ireland was gripped by a mass radical movement which sought to organise tenant farmers in a fight against exorbitant rents and oppressive British laws. The Irish Land League organised thousands of tenant farmers and other members in refusing rent payments, obstructing eviction attempts, and financially supporting tenants. 'The Land War', as it came to be known, was also home to the most significant women's political organising in 19th century Ireland.

Women were heavily involved from the League's beginning, participating in some of the more direct and violent early obstructions against eviction attempts. Its women members, people like Anna Parnell, also found themselves on the movement's more radical wing. Some of the male leaders of the League, such as its president and brother of Anna, Charles Stuart Parnell, sought a longer term strategy of allying with big landlords against British occupation and for home rule, and therefore were apprehensive to annoy them too much.

Some radicals sought the outright abolition of landlordism however, refusing any partnerships with them.

The first two years of the League's activities were largely unaffected by such differences though. Large scale solidarity action, mass meetings and fundraising drives were organised consistently. At its height, the League claimed over 200,000 members.

By early 1881, it became clear that the British state would imminently arrest the all male leadership of the Irish Land League. Refusing to allow the movement to die without its head, those leaders, at the urging of some women members and with the support of Michael Davitt especially, formed the Ladies' Land League, making Anna Parnell its secretary, with the expectation that the 'ladies' would take on leadership responsibilities in the men's absence. This was no immediate victory for the women members of the league however. They were given the keys to this mass movement, but no instructions. Anna Parnell was not even consulted by Davitt or the others before being made secretary, she was simply told the Ladies' Land

League now existed and she was to lead it.

Over the next year, the Ladies' Land League turned out to be a powerful force, one which threatened landlordism and British control of Ireland more than its male led counterpart ever could. Anna Parnell was only one among many women who dedicated themselves immediately to this task. Clare Stritch, Hannah Lynch and Harriet Burneall were also secretaries of the League, a Mrs Dean was its honorary president. Fanny Parnell, sister of Anna, was also involved in solidarity work and fundraising for the League from America. Many women, Anna chief among them, were propelled into something of a national spotlight almost immediately.

They found themselves the headline speakers at mass rallies and meetings and as the key organisers of a lot of the work and actions of the League. Keenly aware of the uniqueness of their position as women leaders of a mass movement, Anna was also sure to make clear that she would not let the expectations of her as a woman prevent her or others from acting as leaders.

Over 1881, the Ladies' Land League picked up thousands of new members and made countless women politically active who had never been before. However, much of the core national organising of the Ladies' Land League was, over the course of its life, to be done mostly by the women who were with it from the start. Attracting female organisers who could dedicate time to a national movement that wanted people to travel and organise constantly was a big challenge when most women were refused enough agency to do so by the men who often had great control over them. This was not the only issue the Ladies' Land League found stemming from the work, intentions and attitudes of men either. Local Land League branches, for instance, were instructed by their leadership to set up local Ladies' Land League branches as well in order to help support the new women's movement. Many, however, did not, likely thinking it a waste of time or actively detrimental to the movement to involve more independent female organisations.

The Ladies' Land League also found out rather quickly why leadership was pushed so abruptly onto them and with little guidance. For while the women thought they were continuing to build an agitational force, they found such a task impossible, as the men had never so much as started it. The Irish Land

League, by 1881, concerned itself mainly with fundraising to pay legal fees and support tenants financially. It used a tactic called 'rent at the point of bayonet', which essentially meant that tenants were to hold off from paying rent essentially until forceful eviction was imminent, at which point they should simply pay up. An obviously flawed tactic, it made impossible the organising of a mass rent strike, as the League's recommendation to tenants was essentially to just pay their rent, albeit late. This also meant that the League was in a poor place financially as, despite big fundraising drives, most of its money went to supporting legal fees and just paying landlords the rent they demanded. The idea that the Land League existed to support tenants in continuous rent boycotts, or to organise a national rent strike, turned out false.

This was a shock to many of the women now involved, not the least Anna Parnell who would remark that she would never have taken leadership of the movement had she been aware of all of this prior. Nonetheless, the new women leaders understood they had an important role to play in an albeit flawed movement. They continued the work of financially supporting tenants in need, and innovated by introducing a tactic of having the League build wooden huts for evicted families to stay in, something the male leaders of the League never cared for. The women also tried to change attitudes within the movement, arguing for more united, radical action in defying landlords.

By October 1881, essentially all the male leaders of the Land League were either imprisoned or hiding from the law abroad. The women, though surrounded by male led local branches, were alone the national leaders of this mass movement they hoped could prove agitational and revolutionary.

As might be expected however, even imprisonment could not deter the men from their interjections. Charles Stuart Parnell wrote his 'No-Rent Manifesto', calling on League supporters to stop paying rent, while in prison with the expectation the leaders of the Ladies Land League would carry it out. While at face value a radical step up in action, a call for a rent strike, it was if anything a confused, late step backwards. Under the Irish Land Act it was technically possible to get reduced rent arrears if a tenant could not pay rent. Charles Stuart Parnell's plan was to put this to the test on a large scale. This legalistic strategy did not aim to build a mass

strike movement and in reality burdened tenants in the short term, often resulting in arrests, in the hopes of reduced rents in the future. The Ladies' Land League now had to raise and pay more money for legal fees and the support of imprisoned tenants and their families on top of previous financial burdens. The men, meanwhile, waited out their sentences, not having to deal with or lead the movement they were influencing. Despite such difficulties however, or perhaps spurred on by them, the Ladies' Land League was able to recruit thousands of new members and new women organisers from 1881 to early 1882, and hundreds of new branches were set up as the women carried on their agitation. They continued to raise funds, hold mass meetings, support tenants and they ramped up their resistance to the increasingly violent eviction attempts of landlords and Police.

By early 1882 the Ladies' Land League had transformed the glorified charity they inherited into something remarkable, a mass movement of thousands, led by women through economic strife and the sexist scorn of men and the press, into a potentially revolutionary force which commanded thousands across Ireland in the support of tenants who refused to pay rent and give into the scourge of landlordism. It seemed as if a proper, organised national rent strike with the goal of challenging landlordism and British rule could actually be Organised.

The British state, and male leaders of the Land League such as Charles Stuart Parnell, were most displeased at this. The British state feared the threat to their rule in Ireland, and the Land Leaguers feared that such a threat would in turn hinder their more liberal goal of attaining home rule without insurrectionary means.

The male leaders therefore, in early 1882 and still from prison, instructed the Ladies League to end the no-rent campaign they made them start in the first place, an instruction the women ignored.

Charles Stuart Parnell and the British government, realising the movement could no longer be controlled from prison, therefore signed the 'Kilmainham Treaty' on 2 May 1882, through which the government agreed to release the men and give some legal and some economic relief to tenants.

On their return to political activity in Ireland, Parnell and the other men

NO RENT!

NO LANDLORDS GRASSLAND

Tenant Farmers, now is the time. Now is the hour. You proved false to the first call made upon you. REDEEM YOUR CHARACTER NOW.

NO RENT

UNTIL THE SUSPECTS ARE RELEASED.

The man who pays Rent (whether an abatement is offered or not) while PARNELL, DILLON &c. are in Jail, will be looked upon as a Traitor to his Country and a disgrace to his class.

No RENT, No Compromise, No Landlords' Grassland, Under any circumstances.

Avoid the Police, and listen not to spying and deluding Bailiffs.

NO RENT! LET THE LANDTHIEVES DO THEIR WORST!

THE LAND FOR THE PEOPLE!

flaunted the treaty as a great victory for the League, that its purpose had been fulfilled and the Land League, along with the Ladies' Land League, would no longer be needed. While there was some pushback from the women of the Ladies' Land League, many knew that a fight to maintain what they had built was all but futile. The men, who most saw as the 'proper' leaders of the movement, were back and they had done well to quell the radical fever the women were able to develop.

For Anna Parnell, the pointlessness of remaining the leader of a movement she and her comrades had no say in anymore, along with the personal devastation of the death of her sister Fanny in July 1882, led her to mostly falling out of politics. She played little part in the activities of the Land League up to dissolution of the Ladies' Land League in August 1882. While moving to England in the 1890s, Anna Parnell never fell out of politics entirely, however, continuing to support radical campaigns. She campaigned for Sinn Féin in a 1908 by-election, for instance, the first one that party ever contested. She was also sometimes still a headline speaker at political meetings and events. However, she would never again take the national spotlight or a significant role in a mass movement.

Parnell never hid her contempt for the men who sabotaged the work of the Ladies' Land League. She remarked that Michael Davitt's book 'The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland', which was all about the Land League, a 'mass of lies'.

Anna Parnell would end up writing her own book on the Irish and Ladies' Land

Leagues, with her own reflections. 'The Tale of a Great Sham' was finished in 1907, but no publisher would take the book. Parnell's critical assessment of the movement headed by her so-called 'great' brother was essentially unacceptable to the many radicals of her time who sought to place him and his movement on a pedestal. Charles Stuart Parnell is only ever referred to as the president of the Land League in her book, not once does she acknowledge that they were siblings, or even write his name. Her book is very much worth reading.

Anna Parnell ended up in Ilfracombe, Devon, where she died of drowning on September 20th 1911. Only seven, none of whom being family, attended her funeral. She never saw her book published.

In fact, it would not be until 1986, when rediscovered by historians, that 'The Tale of a Great Sham' would be published. For those 79 years, there were no readily available accounts of the Land War from the women who led it and radically transformed it.

Historians have, in the past, had a propensity to overlook the grassroots of mass radical movements, where women

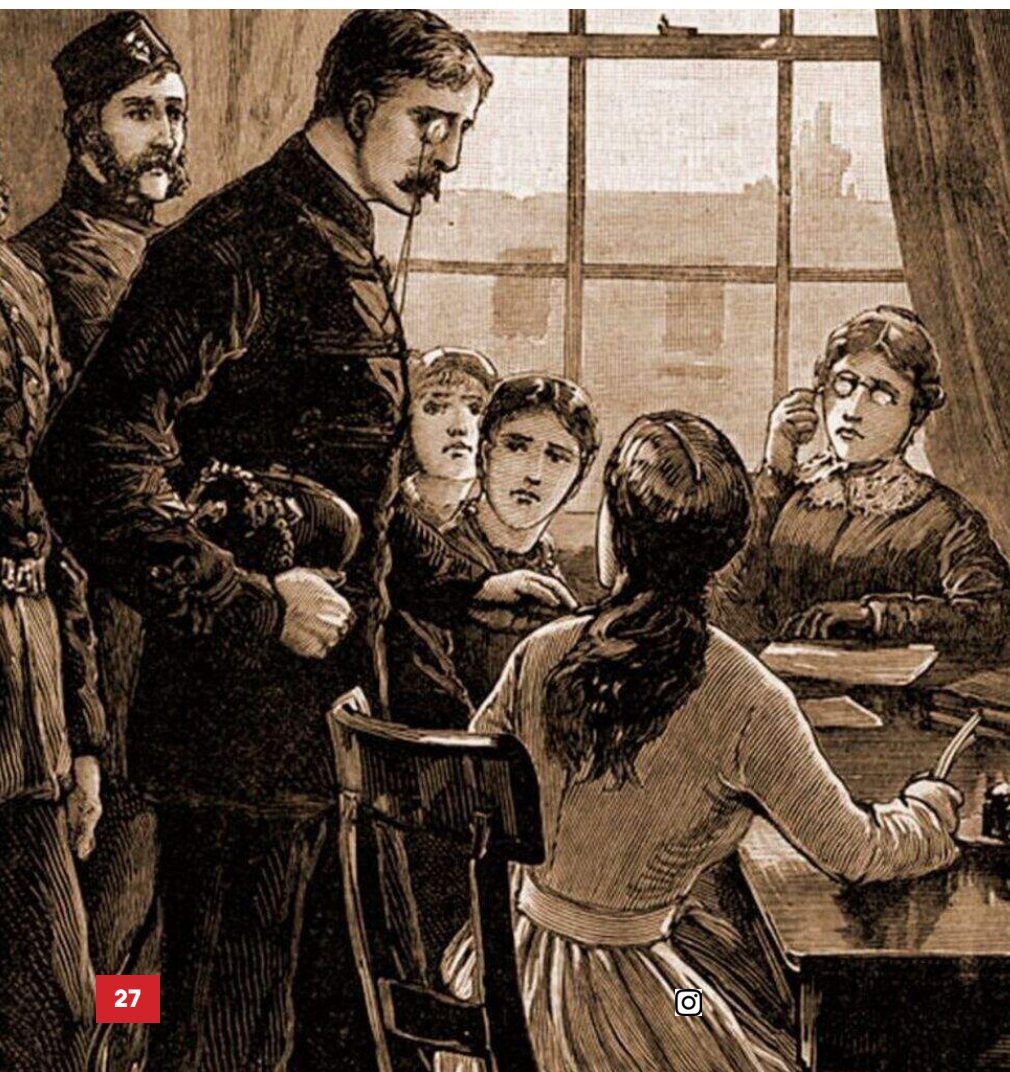
were often relegated, and therefore also overlook the significance of those women.

The Ladies' Land League was, however, a unique organisation in 19th century radical politics. Women were not just relegated to the grassroots, but thrust into the leadership of a mass movement, a leadership that they used to build a more radical movement than their male counterparts ever did.

Nevertheless, it did not escape being forgotten for so long. The willful ignorance of those at the time who did not want to hear or publish criticism of the Land League, and that of historians towards women's political organising in its entirety meant that this history has only really come to light in recent decades.

Anna Parnell, alongside her comrades in the Ladies' Land League, were some of the most incredible and important Irish radical leaders of their time. They deserve to be remembered as such and alongside the countless others who came before and after them who dedicated themselves as selflessly to similar causes, fighting for liberation from sexism, landlordism, capitalism and imperialism.

- The Royal Irish Constabulary break up a meeting of the Ladies Land League



DOLLY PARTON: A FEMINIST ICON

Becky Crocker

When I was around 5 years old, I remember stuffing two tennis balls into my T-shirt (as if they were boobs) and joking to my family, 'Look I'm Dolly Parton!' I made the grown ups laugh. We weren't ridiculing her, though. My family loved her, I loved her. She encouraged you to laugh along with her.

I loved her music. When I was little, my mum would often sing 'Wildflowers' from the Trio album. I was enchanted by the words and the story. When 'Eagle When She Flies' was released in the early '90s, we watched a documentary about it, and I started to realise what a gifted songwriter she was. I loved her later Bluegrass albums. Songs like 'Little Sparrow' and 'Marry Me' sound traditional, like they've been sung for generations. But Dolly's words are almost poetic, letting you know there is a clever and creative mind behind them.

As I grew up, I started to appreciate her in other ways too. I became a more worked out class struggle feminist. I began to see that there was a feminist layer to the

irreverent Dolly I'd always laughed along with. I appreciated how she used her image to play with sexist stereotypes - ('I make jokes about it, but it's the truth that I kind of patterned my look after the town tramp....Momma used to say, 'Aw, she's just trash' and I thought, that's what I want to be when I grow up. Trash').

I re-watched '9 to 5'. By this time, I was a 24-year-old blonde woman working on London Underground, on the receiving end of sexual harassment not a million miles removed from the predatory behaviour of Dolly's boss in the film. Watching it, I had a bit of a lightbulb moment. It helped me clarify what was really going on at work, the starting point for trying to change it, (although we never got as far as holding our boss hostage and taking over our workplace).

Dolly said she wrote the song 9 to 5 while waiting on the film set, drumming the beat on her long fingernails. As well as being politically sharp - 'It's a rich man's game, no matter what you call it/And you spend your life putting money in his wallet' - it also feels heart-felt, and rings with lived experience.

Dolly had fought sexist men in a male-dominated industry (look at the glint in her eye when she sings, 'Just because I'm blonde don't think I'm dumb cos this dumb blonde ain't nobody's fool'), but despite her triumph, she never appeared to hold herself above other women.

Her songs didn't just give voice to her own struggles. She wrote as if she heard and saw women in general. The day after she died, I listened to 'Eagle When She Flies', probably for the first time in 30 years. As an older woman now, with kids and, like most women, a few tough experiences behind me, I couldn't believe it. I thought, 'This could be about me or just about every woman I know':

*'She's been there, god knows she's been there
She has seen and done it all
She's a woman, she knows how to dish it out or take it all
Her heart's as soft as feathers, still she weathers stormy skies
And she's a sparrow when she's broken
But she's an eagle when she flies'*

With this song, and so many others, Dolly gave voice and recognition to millions of women. She described the contradictions in our lives and emotions and said, 'Don't you dare underestimate us'.

DISPLACEMENT, BODY, NATURE AND TIME

ANA MENDIETA AT THE TATE MODERN

Annie Lawson-Foley reviews 'Ana Mendieta' (Tate Modern, until 17 January 2027)

Ana Mendieta was a Cuban-American artist whose work explores themes such as displacement, the body, our relationship with nature, and the passing of time, primarily through sculpture, performance and photography. She worked mostly in New York City, where she lived from 1978, and where she was part of the feminist movement. A new exhibition at the Tate Modern presents over 120 of her works made from the mid-1960s to 1985.

Mendieta was born in Havana in 1948 to a well off family; her father was an attorney and nephew of Carlos Mendieta, interim president of Cuba from 1934-35. At the age of 12, Mendieta and her older sister, Raquelín, were sent to the United States as part of Operation Peter Pan - the US government and Catholic Church programme in which 14,000 Cuban children were moved to the US. The sisters arrived in Iowa, first living briefly in refugee camps and then in a series of institutions and foster homes until they were reunited with their mother and younger brother in 1966. Their father joined in 1979 after spending 18 years in prison for his involvement in the Bay of Pigs invasion.

EXILE

The experience of exile from Cuba shaped Mendieta's artwork; 'Having been torn from my homeland (Cuba) during my adolescence, I am overwhelmed by the feeling of being cast out from the womb (Nature). My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the Universe.' She returned in 1980 with the *Círculo de la Cultura Cubana*, an organisation promoting cultural exchange of which she was a member. The exhibition opens with photos of her 'Esculturas Repuestres' ('Rupestric Sculptures') (1981), a series of carvings in the limestone rock at the Escaleras de Jaruca nature reserve in Cuba, which reference Neolithic art. Many

depict feminine forms. It can be hard to gauge the scale of these sculptures from the photographs, but this is the only way we can view them - this work is impermanent, destined to weather away.

There is also 'Ochún' (1981), an 8 minute 17 second video of a sculpture comprising two ripples of sand - like open brackets or a vulva - on the Floridian coast, between Key Biscayne and Cuba. Sea water washes in and out, gradually eroding the sculpture. The name Ochún comes from the Yoruba orisha associated with rivers, as well as sexuality, fertility and water, amongst other things. Mendieta's interest in spiritual and ritual traditions from the Caribbean, Africa, and Mexico is reflected throughout her work. 'Guacar' ('Our Menstruation') (1981) references Caribbean petroglyphs that depict Taíno mythologies. Guacar is the god of lunar cycles, associated with menstruation.

MENDIETA AND FEMINISM

However, it is not all divine femininity. Through her work Mendieta grappled with violence against women, and its

• Blood + Feathers, 1974





• Moffit Building Piece, 1973

normalisation. For 'Moffit Building Piece' (1973) Mendieta spilt animal blood and viscera outside the entrance to a building in Iowa. Her and Raquelín sat in a parked car and observed passersby. The result is a series of 16 photographs of people staring at and stepping around the blood. They are confronted with the potential evidence of an act of violence, and they move on. The piece was made after the sexual assault and murder of Sarah Ann Ottens, a student at the University of Iowa. Mendieta, also a student at the university, was disturbed by the lack of reaction

from the community. Not included in the exhibition, but also made in response to the murder, was 'Rape Scene' (1973). The performance was staged for a group of students; Mendieta left her door open for them to enter to find her half naked, bloody and bound, and stayed in position while the audience discussed the scene.

Mendieta's relationship to feminism was complicated. Her work was embraced by second-wave feminists, gaining attention in Ms Magazine in 1975, but she was critical of the whiteness of American feminism.

When she moved to New York 1978 Mendieta joined A.I.R. Gallery, the first artist-run not-for-profit gallery for women artists in the US. In September 1980, Mendieta co-curated 'Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists in the United States' at A.I.R. with Kazuko Miyamoto and Zarina Hashmi. The exhibition catalogue and other objects related to her work at A.I.R. are on display. 'Dialectics of Isolation' challenged the exclusion of people of colour from mainstream American cultural life, and of women of colour from feminism. From the exhibition's opening statement:

'During the mid to late sixties as women in the United States politicized themselves and came together in the Feminist Movement with the purpose to end the domination and exploitation by the white male culture, they failed to remember us. American Feminism as it stands is basically a white middle class movement.'

'As non-white women our struggles are two-fold. This exhibition points not necessarily to the injustice or incapacity of a society that has not been willing to include us, but more towards a personal will to continue being "other."'

Mendieta's criticisms of second wave feminism still apply to much of mainstream feminism today.

SILUETA SERIES

A personal favourite from the exhibition is the 'Silueta Series' (1973-85). For the series, also referred to by Mendieta as 'earth-body' works, she incorporated her figure, or its absence, into natural landscapes. Sometimes this is done subtly and barely perceptibly, other times boldly, as in 'Anima, Silhueta de Cohetes (Firework Piece)' (1976) for which she lit up an outline of her silhouette in fireworks against the night's sky. These are works on a large scale, and involve fire, snow, earth, leaves and trees. One room contains several videos playing continuously, shown in the UK for the first time. Some are part of the Silueta Series and again range from subtle to provocative. In 'Grass Breathing' (1974) a patch of grass pulsates gently, in 'Blood + Feathers' (1974), Mendieta stands on a riverbank, covers herself in animal blood and then white feathers.

WHAT DO WE NEED TO MAKE ART?

In 1973 Mendieta worked as an art teacher at Henry Sabin Elementary School in Iowa City. On display are several works made in collaboration with her pupils. Through the audio recording 'Untitled (Soul)' (1973) we hear children discussing the soul (with comments ranging from 'I think it's in heaven' to 'I think it's in the toe nail'). The video 'Parachute' (1973) shows Mendieta and her pupils playing with a parachute, with Mendieta sometimes directing the movements. A typical playground game is used to explore movement.

Henry Sabin Elementary School was alternative; it had a curriculum based on the philosophy of 'open concept',

ORGANISE WITH US

Workers' Liberty members organise in our workplaces and trade unions for socialist politics and trans-inclusive, class struggle feminism. Inside Workers' Liberty, we have industrial "fractions", corresponding to the industries in which we work, so that we can coordinate, discuss and plan our interventions, and support each other in local efforts. Our industrial fractions include: education, rail, healthcare, fire and rescue, local government and the civil service. To organise with us, write to: office@workersliberty.org.

but it speaks to the more open and experimental theories of education popular in the 1970s. This educational philosophy, which allowed Mendieta the time and freedom to make performance art with her pupils, is in sharp contrast to the contemporary British education system.

Today in the UK, primary school teachers are responsible for teaching the whole curriculum, and there is rarely time for art, and other non-core subjects, in the school day due to the devaluing of creativity in an increasingly marketised education system. In the face of ever stretched school budgets, it would seem art is not a priority. Mendieta's work with her pupils reminds us favourable social conditions are important for artists - and potential artists - to thrive.

A VOLCANO

I went to see the exhibition after reading a Guardian article - 'I thought of her as a volcano': the triumphant art and very troubling death of Ana Mendieta'. The quote is from Ida Panicelli, curator of Italy's National Gallery of Modern Art 1979-87 and friend of Mendieta. The article is full of reflections from friends and the force of Mendieta as a character and an artist is clear.

In September 1985 Mendieta fell to her death from the window of her 34th floor apartment. Evidence and reports from friends and neighbours pointed to her husband, fellow artist Carl Andre, having thrown her, but he was acquitted after three years of legal proceedings. During the trial, Andre's defence used Mendieta's work against her, suggesting that it represented suicidal tendencies - working with fire and explosions, burying herself.

Mendieta's death and the way the art world sided with Andre galvanised the feminism of those on Mendieta's 'side' and inspired protest art; a 1992 Guerrilla Girls poster 'What Do These Men Have In Common?' compares Andre to OJ Simpson. However, her death and the controversy surrounding it are not mentioned in the Tate exhibition. Mendieta's estate wants her work to be appreciated for its own merit, not in the context of her death or through the lens of victimhood. They do not find protests against exhibitions of Andre's work useful anymore either - there was one in 2016 at the Tate Modern after they acquired a piece of his. The power and force of Mendieta come through in the exhibition, unshadowed by her death.

OBSESSION: CONSENT, FREE WILL, AND AUTONOMY: HOW A SUPERNATURAL FILM ILLUMINATES GENDER DYNAMICS

Dominika Szarek

This review contains references to sexual assault, and spoilers.

'Obsession' is a 2025 supernatural horror film directed by Curry Baker, an upcoming 26-year-old director. The film, which began as a low-budget independent project, has become an international success. It now stands as the best debut for a horror film in recent decades and one of the most talked about releases of the 2020s. As someone who was initially apprehensive about the film and the hype surrounding it, I can say its success is well deserved - and, more importantly, its messaging feels incredibly relevant and relatable. Some of the best films, like this one, do not merely evoke emotional reactions; they provoke psychological catharsis through their analysis of modern power dynamics entwined with gender and relationships, making this film feminist as hell.

The story follows Bear, a young man who develops romantic feelings towards his friend and co-worker Nikki. It appears at first to follow a familiar, well-rehearsed trope: the "nice guy" falling for the hot girl who happens to be emotionally perceptive enough to make him feel seen, understood, and - most importantly - less alone. That latter aspect is especially capturing. Although we do not know the time where the film takes place - time is irrelevant in the supernatural genre. The relatability of this film is more prominent than ever; our society is lonely and is disconnected. As much as incel culture and its podcast-driven messaging may distort the picture, loneliness is experienced across the spectrum - and the so-called "male loneliness epidemic" is something the film neatly ties into, or at least gestures towards as an inspiration of sorts.

The film opens with a scene of Bear confessing his deeply kept, vaulted feelings to Nikki. His confession is romantic, and some might even say lovely. But despite the initial feeling of

romanticism spewing from this scene, the confession is very much shallow and rooted in how Nikki makes Bear feel. There is not much depth around those feelings or why he likes her. As mentioned, he seems more to want to fill his loneliness rather than have substantive feelings towards Nikki.

However, I believe also that lack of depth is omitted, and in this opening scene sympathy begins to form for this awkwardly love-stricken man. He is an underdog; he is one of us. The alliance is immediately formed, whether consciously or not.

This initial premise of relatability is what makes the film a turning point in how we understand the difference between appearance and actuality. That demarcation also creates space for the gendered power dynamics that later reveal themselves in the most horrendous ways.

This particular theme - the nice guy not getting what he wants or desires - has been recycled endlessly in media culture. I would not say there is a gender empathy gap, but it has been constructed as a cultural theme strong enough for us to feel its effects. The "nice guy" as an unfortunate underdog - too kind, too socially awkward, peculiarly ties into an incel culture in a way. The man who on paper should be chosen by women because he is nice shares the mentality

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of the incel; entitlement. One can't help but notice this uncomfortable truth: they share the same terrain of misogyny. After all, male goodness should be awarded, he deserves a romantic interest because he is nice. In that sense, the trope becomes almost ouroboric. The nice guy deserves a woman, but what happens if he fails, if he is rejected? When does entitlement turn into grievance, and eventual violence?

Back to the opening scene: Bear does not confess his feelings to Nikki. Instead, he practices on a stranger – a waitress – and his male friend mocks him, saying it's far too lame to confess in such an honest way. Again, tying to almost toxic straight men culture, where being vulnerable is 'lame' and not 'manly' at all in patriarchal society.

Throughout the movie, Bear repeatedly cowards out of confessing his feelings, even when they are alone as he drives her home. Nikki even asks him directly whether he likes her. His response? Omission.

He takes out a novelty toy he purchased earlier that day – bought in a store where he was supposed to pick up a goodbye gift for Nikki, who is leaving their workplace to pursue writing. Once again, even in this mundane moment, he chooses cowardice over clarity, worrying whether a real gift would be well received. Instead of speaking, he hides behind the toy.

In the car, he makes a wish: "I wish Nikki loved me more than anyone in the entire world."

In his defence, he did not know whether the wish could work. However, that wish – that single sentence – encapsulates a deeply distorted view of love, or rather the absence of it.

Bear makes a wish that obscures consent, free will, and the autonomy of another human being. He wants her to make him the centre of her world, but who cares that she might be her own person needing love? Most importantly, who cares that she should be able to choose whether he becomes the centre of her universe? His wish erases her ability to consent. He wishes for her to become his property.

That wish alone shows that the seemingly innocent "nice" guy is capable of wanting control over a woman. In many ways, it reveals the strange banality of evil: everyone is capable of harm, meaning many men would obscure consent if it meant getting what they wanted.

To his shock – and, let's be honest, his pleasant surprise – the wish works. Although he is conflicted at first, Nikki suddenly begins making forward moves. Even though she is acting strangely, it doesn't raise enough alarm for Bear. They begin a relationship, and we witness scenes of their honeymoon stage. They are a cliché: two love-struck people in the early rush of romance.

It is not until the dinner scene, when Bear is told that Nikki may have lied about her father's cancer, that he confronts her. Their mutual male friend informs him that Nikki and her father have been estranged for a long time, which only highlights the lack of depth in their relationship. This scene is crucial. Beyond Nikki's meltdown, Bear realises that the person sitting in front of him is a product of his wish. When he asks whether she loves him more than anyone in the world, she says yes – more than anyone. And when he asks why it matters whether her father is dying, she tells him it doesn't. He agrees. This is the exact punctuation of male entitlement embedded in patriarchal culture: as long as I have you, nothing else matters about who you are.

The next scene is disturbing, but also powerful. Bear has sex with Nikki – or rather, he rapes her, because nothing about the encounter is consensual. He knows this is the "wish-Nikki." In the scene, Bear is not even looking at her. She makes intimate noises, but her expression is blank, and we can see she is crying.

The scene was suggested by the actor playing Nikki, and I think it is a powerful choice. It shows how often we imagine rape and sexual assault as something that happens in a dark alleyway at the hands of a stranger – something clean-cut, almost tangible in its simplicity. But this scene disrupts that myth entirely.

Statistically, that myth is not true. Many people – especially men – still struggle to understand what consent is, or are unwilling to comprehend how it can be expressed. Sometimes it is not a strict "no." Sometimes it is body language. The scene is uncomfortable because it is real. It once again shows the banality of evil: abuse is not always clean-cut, and it can come from someone who seems like a "good person," someone we trust.

This is not to say that consent is complicated – of course not. But the scene encapsulates how consent has many forms, and how men are often willing to override them for the sake



of their own desires. Their friends are concerned, but they are not intervening. In fact, Bear is often portrayed as a victim of some supposed manipulation tactics. Even Nikki's friend Sara – who harbours her own romantic feelings towards Bear – is more worried about his wellbeing and whether he is a pawn in some game designed by Nikki. Once again, this speaks volumes: we see how a woman who appears more confident than Bear is assumed to have the upper hand, and how Sara, like many women, still carries internalised misogyny that leads her to side with a man rather than her own woman friend. Although the male friend does tell Bear, 'It looks like you're taking advantage of her', the supposed concern ends there.

Bear avoids any form of responsibility for the state he has put the woman of his dreams in. Apart from saying things like 'She's the one who won't leave me alone', he decides to find a solution by calling the customer service line for the novelty toy. Of course, his request to the customer agent is not to cancel the wish, but to 'alter it' – which he cannot. The agent then asks, 'Do you want to talk to her?' and we hear Nikki's agony and



echo chamber: the personification of his ego, his emotional and physical needs, met without her consent and without her presence.

This ties again into the male insecurity amplified in the age of technology and male podcasting – messaging that tells men to be protectors and providers while simultaneously not “simsps” for women. These narratives amplify entitlement and create a fantasy of relationships as one-sided dynamics, where the woman exists only to meet his needs. It’s not just about sexual intimacy; it’s about emotional intimacy being completely one-sided. He is the only one being comforted or validated. And of course, that is not a real relationship – it is simply him using another person to fulfil his own emotional or physical needs.

A real relationship involves two people with their own lives, dreams, feelings, and disappointments. The woman who struggled to find meaning in her world, who worked a job that drained her passion for writing, is gone – erased by his wish. And Bear was happy to continue the relationship as long as her psychosis remained convenient for him. It is only when her suffering becomes inconvenient to him that he finally seeks to change the course of the relationship.

The distorted view is weaponised by incel podcasts, which prey on men’s insecurities and desperation for companionship. This online subculture further entrenches a vicious cycle by encouraging desire to replace substance and reinforcing a model of love in which men seek not a relationship between two people, but the fulfilment of a fantasy. Affection becomes synonymous with devotion, while substantive communication, mutuality and personal accountability are pushed aside. This cycle has devastating effects on everyone around them, but the collateral damage is often women, who are expected to inhabit those fantasies and accept an asymmetrical form of love.

Lastly, the end scene is particularly hard. When Nikki kills two of her friends under the force of her psychosis, Bear himself takes the pills in order to overdose – having been told by the customer service agent that his life is what keeps the wish-Nikki alive and the real Nikki trapped.

When he dies, the real Nikki returns to herself, except she is surrounded by death. The film ends with her cries and screams. One cannot help but notice how abuse leaves victims with scars

and trauma for life, forcing them to pay for something that was never their fault, while their abuser gets to walk away. In many cases, abusers not only avoid consequences but thrive. One can think of Woody Allen, Roman Polanski, or Chris Brown in modern culture, but people in ordinary circumstances can relate to this dynamic too.

Moreover, Nikki’s cries and screams are chilling because, for women, they are devastatingly familiar: nobody will believe her story. How many victims of domestic and sexual abuse are not believed by the state or even their own families? Her story will be dismissed as a figment of her imagination. Women in patriarchal culture are not only disbelieved – they are often demonised or even punished by law for reacting to their abuse.

The film brings forward a conversation about gender dynamics and patriarchal culture. Many men who would not consider themselves misogynistic or incels feel sorry for Bear. ‘All he wanted was to be loved’, they say, ‘and he paid the price for love.’ But there was nothing loving about his behaviour. He wanted to own a woman of his desire. She was his property. And now her story – her devastation – will not be believed. She will likely face punitive measures from the state. The film makes clear that Bear was the one obsessed, and that he destroyed his friend’s life to fulfil his own desire.

The film carries this messaging with force. It speaks volumes about how misogynistic and patriarchal culture can be instrumentalised by ordinary men. I can give credit where it is due: perhaps this Gen Z director is capturing a new generation’s pain, agony, and the issues that have always existed but have been amplified because they were never addressed in the first place. Perhaps the swath of reactions to this film – and the depth of analysis it has provoked – marks an opening act for a reckoning with the culture we live in. I also cannot help but notice how its themes echo the rise of AI that Laura Bates writes about, where AI reinvents misogyny through producing AI girlfriends and dolls. The film feels hauntingly relevant, and this conversation must be incorporated into contemporary feminism, as consent and a woman’s sense of self are being slowly eroded in an increasingly technologically-mediated world. Perhaps this supernatural film is, after all, a real-life film in disguise – its horror is grounded in the realities women face every day.

pain; her screams are chilling. The agent tells him, ‘It seems like you have a moral obligation toward her.’ Bear is barely fazed. He continues the relationship with a woman who is clearly not herself – who, in one scene, even harms herself. She is completely at his mercy, and her state of psychosis is treated as a mere inconvenience.

Once again, this showcases how male entitlement produces an “unbothered” desire for worship: men want devotion, but not to the point where it causes them inconvenience. And when Nikki – the real Nikki – briefly takes control while sleeping, she begs, ‘Please kill me, Bear.’ She is aware of what is happening to her but cannot stop it. His response – ‘What is so bad about being with me?’ – before he leaves the room, is devastating.

She even says, ‘I was never with you, Bear.’ At first, this can be interpreted as Nikki acknowledging that her being has been overtaken by the demonic version he wished for – and that is true. But the sentence also speaks directly to the one-sided dynamic he created. She was never with him because she was never allowed to exist as herself. She was his

OUR NAME, AND OUR FEMINISM

Cece Stranding

The more observant of our readers will have noticed that the name of this publication is 'Women's Fightback'. Internally, we're having conversations about what that name means, what it should mean, and how well it fits. On its surface, it's a discussion about our name, but I think that, more importantly, it raises questions about what our feminism is: what we demand from our feminism, how we fight to realise those demands, and who that fight belongs to.

When talking about the suitability of the name 'Women's Fightback', there's an easy word and a harder word. I'll start with the easy one:

Fightback – An effort to resist and counterattack from a position where one is apparently facing defeat.

I see the purpose of this publication as being: to fight for an end to the systematic oppression of women (the "resist and counterattack" part of our definition above). Given that the history of that oppression is much older than our society, despite plenty of progress being made in resisting this oppression in recent centuries, "apparently facing defeat" feels about appropriate when considering the wider goal of ending that oppression entirely.

Onto the trickier word:

Women's – Belonging to, relating to, or intended for women.

OUR EVENTS

Workers' Liberty organise a variety online (on Zoom) and in person events, political discussions and reading groups open to all:



Now, fighting for an end to the systematic oppression of women obviously relates to women, as does this publication. That fight is intended for women: both in terms of women obviously being interested in the end of their oppression, and women being the drivers of that fight. But that fight is also not intended for women alone...

FEMINISM – NOT JUST FOR WOMEN

While the majority of the work that goes into producing Women's Fightback, and our feminist work more generally, is done by women (and other non-men oppressed as women), men do also contribute to Women's Fightback, help to produce and propagate the publication, and read and fight for the demands that we publish. This is essential. Not least because, unlike general class struggle, women are not such a majority as the working class as whole.

That does not mean that we need men to 'selflessly intervene' to end women's oppression, but rather that men need to be interested in ending misogyny and patriarchy – and there is plenty that should interest men towards that end, beyond simply caring for women.

Patriarchy and misogyny harm men. Patriarchy demands that there be clear demarcation between 'men' and 'women', which not only means that its enforcers must ensure that there are behaviours that women should not possess, and levels they cannot 'rise' to, but also means that, conversely, there are behaviours that men should not possess, and levels that they cannot 'sink' to. Men, obviously, use these misogynistic standards to threaten and coerce women into subservience, but they also use them to threaten and coerce more reluctant men into their intended role as fellow enforcers of patriarchy. After all, the less that patriarchy is enforced, the weaker it becomes. This results in bullying and violence between boys and men that often leaves lasting scars.

The men who present particular threats

to patriarchy, are harmed particularly. The oppression of gay and bisexual men stems from this misogyny, and this is why the harshest punishment is reserved for those men who are most 'overtly queer' – to privately transgress what is 'expected' of a man is excuse enough for ridicule, but even more severe attacks are aimed at those who publicly challenge the default assumption of heterosexuality, and the expected form of family (and women's place within that family) that follows from that assumption.

Even men who are relatively unimpacted by patriarchy and misogyny can benefit directly from women's liberation. Contemporary feminist demands such as: free 24-7 childcare; expanded parental leave for both mothers and fathers; and reduction in working hours without a loss in pay, to increase the time parents can spend with children – all directly benefit men.

It is in the interests of men to fight back against women's oppression, and so to that end, the fightback certainly relates to, and is intended for men, too.

While some women may respond to this by saying 'Feminism should focus on women's oppression, not men's problems', part of women's oppression is directly caused by the harm that is done to men being passed from those men onto women. Men brutalise women, in part, to demonstrate to themselves or their peers that they are 'domineering' and 'manly'; and when men's misogynistic hazing of each other results in men with emotional deficits, it is primarily women expected to resolve that deficiency for the men in their lives. As such, these struggles are not separate from the fight against women's oppression, but integral to it.

WHAT IS A WOMAN?

In my attempt to define 'Women's' above, I didn't make an attempt to actually define the word 'women' – both because an adequate definition of a woman is too complicated to fit in this article, and because the relentless deluge of disingenuous 'What is a woman?' invocations, used as a stick to beat trans women for at least the past decade, have made the question rather tedious. But if we are using the word in the title of our publication, it's worth reflecting on what it means.

One of the catalysts of our discussion on the name 'Women's Fightback' was the experience of some of our comrades, who



reported that, when selling copies, some people assumed it to be a transphobic 'feminist' (or so-called 'gender-critical') publication – which is why we began integrating the trans flag into the front-cover design.

Now, we should not allow transphobes' transmisogynistic weaponisation of the word 'woman' make it a tainted word, but I think that part of the reason that defining a woman has become such a go-to part of the transphobic playbook is because we do a poor job of defining the word ourselves. That's not necessarily a bad thing – after all, there are likely more possible definitions of the word 'woman' than there are women, but I think it may be cause for further reflection.

As a trans woman, but also a gender abolitionist, my own relationship to my identity as a woman is complex. It is a label that I've had to fight to be granted to me, but also a label imposed onto me, that I find restrictive and inadequate. It is in some ways something I've used to signal who I am, but I also recognise that it is a social, not a personal, categorisation. I am not a woman because I 'choose to be a woman', but because society places me into the category of 'woman' (even when it insists that it does not). A more in-depth exploration of womanhood will have to wait for another time, but I hope this at least highlights the somewhat competing definitions that even a single person can hold simultaneously, and how it can be difficult to reconcile those definitions.

There are more urgent matters to focus on than how we define women, but transphobes have taken this space because we have, to some extent, left it open for them. I think that if we are to keep the name Women's Fightback, we should be thinking about how we reclaim the word 'woman', rather than simply hoping that transphobes will eventually hand it back.

WOMEN'S FIGHTBACK?

Overall, I do feel that the name Women's Fightback fails to fully capture the scope of the publication, and I think it risks not engaging men who assume our feminism to be none of their concern. If a better name comes along, I may well support it. But I also feel that feminists have already given ground that has allowed transphobes to weaponise the word woman, and that dropping the word woman from our title, without addressing the underlying issue that enabled transphobes to weaponise the word in the first place, only gives them further ground.

And more important than the name itself, is the discussion and explanation of our anxieties around keeping or changing the name, which may very well be a reflection of some disagreement in our underlying politics that we have yet to explore and reconcile. In any case, I believe that it's worth taking this opportunity to become more conscious about what our feminism actually stands for, and what aspects of it we may be taking for granted and leaving underdeveloped.



IDEAS FOR FREEDOM 2026

A festival of **socialist** ideas and debate

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NEW NETWORK LAUNCHED AGAINST UNICUTS

Sam Myerson

Over 31 July and 1 August, students and some higher education workers got together in Sheffield to discuss the formation of a new anti-cuts campaign; the Campaign Against Fees Cuts and Debt.

In building for the conference and spreading the work of the loose network the anti-cuts groups have started to do the necessary work of rebuilding a student left. We have seen activists from Workers' Liberty, Workers Power, Socialist Students, and the Communist Workers' Organisation, along with students not in organisations, debate our differences and agree to found a new campaign.

The spread of activists across campuses and the willingness to work together, travel to meet activists, and build the campaign is commendable. We have to recognise that we are starting from a low base. The conditions in which we are organising are very different from even the 2010 generation.

The crisis in Higher Education is at a scale and spread that has not been seen before; it is still varied. Some institutions are making cuts on the back of budget shortfalls, others are using the situation to reshape the university they run. Humanities and the arts have faced some brutal cuts; however, they are not the only courses facing attack. On the national level, the Labour government has made some small moves, including the introduction of a very limited maintenance grant, and under the new Education Minister, has said that university funding and tuition fees are a priority issue – a welcome change from the previous minister who refused to move.

More than half of all students are working more than 16 hours a week. Students

on average have “working weeks” of 48 hours, going up to 56 for some who must work even more to support their studies. Many students are not around on campus other than for specific classes.

There is growing unrest about the financial situation for students and graduates; this is coupled with unprecedented job losses and cuts in universities. More than 15,000 jobs have been lost in the last 18 months. Entire departments and courses have been closed. Tuition fees, while rising, are not sufficient for university funding, and maintenance loans that only some students receive are woefully inadequate.

Student “leadership” has fallen back considerably in this time. NUS is a hollowed-out organisation, from the reformist left to the revolutionary; campus organising is also at a low ebb. The movements that started the encampments in solidarity with the Palestinians have not given rise to new layers of activists.

Conference agreed on a minimum set of demands: oppose all cuts, abolition of fees for all students, universal maintenance grant at the level of the living wage, restoration of funding. That education should not be for profit.

All motions and statements passed at conference will be published shortly. We also agreed that we should, as a priority, campaign against the transphobic and unworkable EHRC guidance. Understanding that while some institutions, like the NUS, have said they will resist, they are very likely to fold when they come under pressure from legal challenges. We also discussed tactics. This was an interesting discussion; there

was one motion which sought to clarify the position on boycotts, titled “Ethical consumption and boycotts”. The motion made the case that support for boycotts must be on a case-by-case basis, and on the presumption that it is to support workers’ struggles.

The campaign is going to continue to meet fortnightly for planning and to bring new activists into the work. Before freshers, we will compile, publish and distribute the ‘Student Worker Fightback’ bulletin to activists ready for distribution at the start of term.

The student movement must be continuously refreshing and rebuilding itself. There are almost 3m students in higher education, with around 500,000 of those being new each year. The campaign plans to organise a series of educational events for activists on the history of the student movement. These will be local initiatives run by activists on the ground, coupled with some national meetings held online.

The campaign has to take the opportunity ahead of it. We have a new Prime Minister, and there is growing unease about the spiralling debt burden on graduates. We can change the balance of forces and make gains. That is going to take serious and diligent work. We will have to work out differences and debate tactics.

We need a class struggle student left, one that takes the fight seriously. Free education is a reality in many places in Europe; in Iceland and Germany it is free for international students too. We have to make links with workers, not just in Higher Education. Free lifelong education is a trade union issue as well as a student issue.

