

Women's Fightback



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www.workersliberty.org/women



Women in the fight against cuts

By a Unison activist

Unison has almost one million women members, who will be an important part of the current struggle to defend our pensions.

The proposed changes will hit women hardest, since so many are working part-time to juggle caring responsibilities with work, and earning significantly less than men.

Women receive significantly less than the average public sector pension which is, in any case, hardly extravagant at

£7,800 a year.

The average is £3,500 for women in the NHS and £2,700 for women in local government.

Women also make up the majority (two-thirds) of public sector workers. Thus they have been particularly hard hit by cuts and privatisations.

Jobs are going, as are terms and conditions (annual leave, sick leave, sick pay, etc).

Even where women still have jobs there has been a generalised attack on flexible working hours and supposed "perks", such as

special leave when your children are sick.

For some women these changes will make the juggling of responsibilities impossible and they will no longer be able to stay in work.

WELFARE STATE
These cuts in services and income are also having a disproportionate effect on women outside the workplace.

We all know that women manage the majority of household finances. Since there's less money around for working-class families

it's women who have to make ends meet.

Women rely more heavily on local services, and benefits, including tax credits.

Cameron's "Big Society" relies on women stepping in to fill the gaps where the welfare state should be.

Two-thirds of the cuts made in the last budget came from women (directly or indirectly).

The strikes on 30 November are the start of a fightback in Unison and other unions nationally against the proposed pension changes.

Given all of the facts above it should be clear that women need to be central to the struggle.

We all know that any struggle needs to be under the control of the workers taking part in it.

This is especially important for women workers, since we make up by far the majority of Unison members. Unfortunately, this isn't reflected in the leadership.

Strike committees are closer to rank and file members, which is good, but they tend to be very male-dominated.

There is not much consideration of timing or childcare, which makes it harder for people (mainly women) with caring responsibilities to attend.

If the fightback is going to succeed it will need to engage the majority of workers including women.

As socialists and trade unionists, we need to ensure that our methods of organising are fully inclusive, and that women workers and service users are fully integrated into their unions.

Women's input is essential for victory.

Violence against women: a class issue

By Rosie Woods

25 November is International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. Many women's organisations will mark the date with events and meetings.

In the UK one woman in four experiences domestic violence at some point in their life, and one in four experiences rape or attempted rape.

Yet in the face of this, refuges, rape crisis centres, counselling and advocacy services, which were already stretched, are being cut further. Other attacks, such as the cap on housing benefit, will make it harder for women to leave violent relationships as they are priced out of housing.

Stigma around the issue of violence against women means that much of it goes unrecognised. Reactionary,

victim-blaming attitudes are still widespread, including in the very statutory services that are meant to help.

There is also widespread misunderstanding about the nature and causes of violence against women.

An oft-cited statistic is that domestic violence increases in times of recession — but economic deprivation doesn't turn men into abusers.

Violence against women isn't caused by stress and it isn't a problem of anger management.

It is a pattern of controlling behaviour and assertion of power that usually starts a long time before the first physical blow is landed.

Domestic violence reporting can go up in times of hardship, and, for sure, domestic violence is created by the society in which we live, but the dy-

namic is complex.

On the other side of the coin is the explanation which guides the action of the women organised around the London Feminist Network and Reclaim the Night (RTN).

RTN is an annual march held on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. It attracts a reasonably large number of women from various political backgrounds and on the face of it appears to be a good action to bring attention to violence against women.

PROBLEMS
However, there are fundamental problems with the thinking behind RTN.

For example, the title, which suggests that the danger of violence women face is mainly from strangers when they venture out at night. In fact

they are in more danger if they stay at home.

The vast majority of rape and abuse is committed by someone a woman knows, usually by a family member or someone she is or has been in an intimate relationship with.

A large percentage of women say that they feel unsafe when walking the streets at night, but this fear is very much a result of the media hyping "stranger danger", while violence in the home remains an often shameful secret. Single young men are much more likely to face violence on the street than women.

Violence is also identified by feminists around RTN as something intrinsic to the male identity — men are the problem and patriarchal society is the root of violence.

For many feminists patriarchy is the defining fea-

ture of our society; a way of organising society that entrenches male privilege and involves deliberate actions by men to maintain women's oppression.

PATRIARCHY
I don't accept the existence of patriarchy as a system.

The history of human society is not based on the oppression of all women by all men. Although the sexual division of labour emerged very early on in human development, it did so as a result of the struggle to control wealth and the division of society into varying forms of class.

Class society under capitalism is a brutal system which warps gender identities, both male and female. Powerlessness, alienation, and a world steeped in violence shapes minds, while sexist repre-

sentations of women, entrenched sexual divisions beneficial to capitalism, and the structuring of society around a private domestic sphere create the perfect seed bed for violence against women to grow.

Economic deprivation doesn't create abuse, but class society creates abusers.

This is by no means a full enough explanation.

But unless we place campaigning in the context of a wider critique of class society, and unless we link campaigning to the broader political struggle of women and men to change the world, then we will not build a movement capable of really challenging the violence which continues to destroy lives.

• More on RTN: www.feministfightback.org.uk

No more sexist banter!

By a Tube worker

Sexist banter is almost commonplace in my job as a London Underground station assistant.

For the last five years I have challenged individual comments, but not really known how to tackle the underlying issue. I have even felt unconfident of how important the issue is. Thanks to a survey on workplace sexism, produced by my union, the RMT, challenging sexism has started to get easier.

Recent examples of sexist banter include my male colleagues commenting on women's bodies: "Look at it", "Look at that thing over there". Also, discussing my prospects of promotion to the grade of supervisor (supervisors wear white shirts), one colleague complimented me: "I can imagine you in a white shirt". My supervisor chipped in: "I can imagine you without any shirt on".

These comments make me feel uncomfortable, out of place in a male-dominated workplace. Comments about my looks and sexual references to my body undermine my confidence in my ability to do my job. It is hard to take yourself seriously when your superiors patronise and sexualise you.

But despite feeling uncomfortable for a long time, I haven't done anything about it because I simply didn't know what to do.

I knew about the workplace sexual harassment policy; one of our comrades was central to introducing it when she took LU to industrial tribunal for sexual harassment over 10 years ago. But the attitudes are so widespread I felt I couldn't use the harassment policy against 99% of my male colleagues. The prospect of bringing disciplinary action against people also made me nervous.

I decided that I wanted a survey of other women in my industry to see if they shared my experiences; on the back of that, I wanted a political campaign against sexist attitudes, rather than disciplinary action against individuals.

SURVEY

So nearly two years ago I passed a motion through my RMT branch, which went to the RMT women's conference and then to the AGM. It asked for a survey to be followed by a workplace campaign.

The survey was published in the summer and I took copies into work. We had talked about these issues before. But it had always seemed possible that this was "all in our heads" or that we were "too sensitive".

Carrying a piece of paper, entitled "sexism at work", with a union logo across the top, helped give us the confidence to understand that what we were experiencing was a real problem, not just a something imagined by our over-sensitive female brains.

It was like a lid had been lifted. One young colleague and I found we had shared the exact same experience of a male supervisor's foul innuendo. We were able to plan together what we would say the next time he did it, each gaining confidence from the other's determination to stop it.

The RMT has had over 100 responses to the survey. A small proportion of the union's members, but enough that the union cannot deny the existence of sexism in our industry. We will have to pressure them to do it, but if the union runs a serious campaign, hopefully sexist attitudes will start to be challenged around our industry for the first time.

In my case, I decided a political campaign was needed against sexism, not just to help women's confidence but to establish these attitudes as intolerable in men's minds too. But I would support any woman who wanted to use sexual harassment policies to challenge unwanted sexual attention. Campaigns like this will hopefully encourage women to stand up for themselves in every sense.

It is up to us how we do it, but as feminists and activists in the workers' movement, this needs to be a priority.

Support sex workers' rights

By H J McQuarrie

Sex work is probably the most contentious and divisive issue within contemporary feminism.

Whilst radical feminists see the sale of sex in any of its forms as inherently oppressive, socialist feminists position themselves alongside workers and as such extend solidarity to those working in the sex industry.

Supporting the rights of sex workers is complex, however, as the sex industry in its present state is built upon a system of inequality and oppression. How should we, as socialist feminists, support our sex worker sisters?

The main difference between socialist and radical feminism is what we target as the cause of women's oppression.

For radical feminists the cause is patriarchy, or the inherent "maleness" of our society and culture. The dominant, patriarchal sexual discourse, and moralisms that arise from it, imply an essentialist view of sexuality that perceives male sexuality to be instinctive and male sexual behaviour to be impulsive.

At its most extreme it denies men free will and self-control and implies a socialised subjection of women.

Radical feminists campaign by challenging masculine discourse as they find it in the world around them, in law, education, film, television, advertising, literature — anywhere and everywhere that culture exists and reproduces the myth of male dominance.

For radical feminists sex work threatens to accommodate and encourage men's access to women's bodies and seeks to remove their responsibility.

They therefore campaign to close lapdancing clubs, eradicate prostitution, and outlaw pornography.

However, socialist feminists do not see sex as the primary tool by which women are subjected to oppressive ideologies.

Such structuralist feminists as Irigaray argue that the differences in sexual attitude between the sexes was a result of the social differences between them.

Within this structuralist critique women are still subjected to sexuality, but not purely through the sex act.

This implies that the sexual subjection of women is



Sex worker supporters

not just the result of sexual discourse, but also of economics and wider cultural discourse, perhaps even that prostitution should not be discussed as a symptom of sexual discourse, but one of capitalist discourse.

Socialist feminists acknowledge patriarchy, but do not see it as the root cause of women's oppression. Instead they view patriarchy as a symptom and a tool of the much wider oppression that women experience within a capitalist system.

Under capitalism women will always be cast lower than men.

Biology often ties us to the home, where we give our labour away for free, caring for children and often carrying out domestic duties like cleaning and cooking.

Although not all women will choose to have children, and not all children will be raised by women, women have always traditionally been the child-rearers and continue to do the majority of childcare to the present day.

Relegated to the domain of domesticity, women have found themselves reliant on the wages of others. Their choice of work is

severely limited due to juggling work around childcare opening hours, and part-time work rarely pays enough to cover living costs.

Under such economic circumstances sex work can seem like a good solution.

Working hours are not restricted to the daytime, often making childcare easier, and part-time work is readily available.

However, even within the socialist feminist framework, sex work continues to oppress women.

OPPRESSION

Because women have been rendered less powerful in society they are not granted the same freedoms as men to choose the form of their labour.

Of course we should acknowledge that no worker ever freely chooses the form of their labour — work is a necessity rather than a choice — but to try and claim that sex work can be equated with any other form of labour would be at best politically negligent and at worse devastating to women's liberation.

This is not to say that

selling sex should be considered different to selling any other kind of labour, but because of how we are socialised to perceive our own and others' bodies, selling sexual labour cannot be equated with selling eight hours a day of pushing paper or pulling pints.

An office administrator wouldn't be called a slut for photocopying meeting minutes, and a retail assistant's children wouldn't be taken into care because her job required her to work three Saturdays a month.

Sex work is not considered work by society, and so sex workers are denied the rights and protection extended to other workers in the form of laws and legislation.

A socialist-feminist stance on sex work must campaign against the inequality that sex workers experience everyday at the hands of the law.

It must also campaign against the social stigma of selling sex. But it must do so knowing that this inequality does not stem solely from the act of selling sex.

Abolishing the sex industry will not in itself liberate women, but nor will legalising the sale of sex.

Sex workers must organise themselves to challenge the prejudices they face in society and we must support them, but they must also organise alongside all workers to challenge the socio-economic oppression that we all endure.

● The anticapitalist-feminist organisation Feminist Fightback has written a statement raising criticisms about the Reclaim the Night protest: al-turl.com/kpx3t

Women's Fightback London meet-up

Friday 9 December, central London venue

Discussion on LGBT liberation
Details: 07883 520852

Campaigning for women's rights in Iraq

Emily Muna gives an account of an interview with Houzan Mahmoud of the Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI)

When you meet an extraordinary person, it can be in the most mundane of places.

Our interview with Houzan Mahmoud, of the Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI), a socialist-feminist activist, was carried out in a softly-lit, sleek little café, not far from Hampstead station.

Houzan was born in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1973; she is a socialist and campaigner for women's rights in Kurdistan, Iraq and the Middle East.

A striking woman, with lots of beautiful, dark hair, sharp eyes, and a loud, happy laugh, there is something about Houzan that makes you recognise her as someone unique from the moment you meet her.

When we first met, the conversation was light, and jovial, and Houzan introduced us to her daughter, an intelligent girl not unlike her mother.

Despite the niceties and pleasantness of being in her company, we were well aware that sat in front of us was a woman who set out to try and change one of the most corrupt, war-torn and impoverished countries in the world.

Before we started, coffees and colas were ordered, and brought swiftly by a tired looking waiter. I set aside spare knives and forks to rearrange space for my writing pad. At the time, I found it strange to think we were about to be plunged, through Houzan's eyes, into the darkness of women's lives under occupation, while sitting in such quaint surroundings.

But as Houzan began to talk, and explain the difficulties and triumphs of being a part of an organisa-

tion that so many women living under such harsh conditions rely on, we are introduced into the true horror the imprints of dictatorship and war left upon the women of Iraq.

How did OWFI begin?

OWFI was formed in June, 2003, three months after the invasion of Iraq in March. That's eight and a half years ago.

Under Saddam, there was no way of forming any women's organisations, trade unions, or any other group independently. Under Saddam, they were controlled by the Ba'ath Party.

Saddam did form a women's organisation called the General Union of Iraqi Women, but this was heavily monitored by the government.

When we set up OWFI, we were just several women who worked from exile, involved in political campaigns. That's where I got to meet Yanar Mohammed (president of OWFI) when she was working in Canada. We got to know each other through our activism.

We formed a coalition of women's rights in Iraq, before the invasion. In this coalition, there were meant to be women in London aiding us in our activity, but they became too close to the British agenda. Yanar went back to Iraq, and I became a representative of OWFI here in the UK.

Are there any other women's organisations in Iraq?

There are hundreds across the country, from liberal women's groups to Islamists and conservative women's groups. However, in my opinion, there are two main types.

There are ones which are based on neo-liberal principles, which become enterprises without any political motivation, and ones like OWFI.

OWFI is different. It incorporates left ideals. Other groups and societies take western money, particularly US and UK government funds, and follow liberal agendas removed from helping women, wasting money and time to "educate" Iraqi women and engage them in the process of transition to so called democracy, i.e. voting, and participating in parliament.

We take an active approach in actually helping them and trying to change society by making women aware of their oppression



Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq demonstrate in Tahrir Square, Baghdad and status in society.

Who joins OWFI?

We are not dogmatic. You don't have to be 100% socialist to join. Our purpose isn't to indoctrinate women into Marxist theory; we want to raise awareness of women's positions and subjugation in the male dominated society!

We have young girls, older women, veiled women, and unveiled women... all sorts of females united to fight for women's freedom!

There are women, however, particularly the younger ones, who enjoy the atmosphere of secularist and socialist views.

WCPI

Some become interested in the Worker-Communist Party of Iraq, and want to know more. They join out of their own interest. We do not actively recruit them.

I personally don't find it impressive or clever to ask people to join organisations I belong to. I have respect for people and if you are an adult then you can make your own decision about joining groups or not!

[Houzan said this very firmly, as if the organisation had been accused of such behaviour before.

[This is not surprising — the Iraqi government is famous for accusing groups dedicated towards freedom of being fronts for other organisations. Recently, the Iraqi Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, leader of the Islamic Dawa Party, accused all human rights groups currently working in Iraq of being fronts for terrorist

need to liberated because they are so judgemental and conservative.

We haven't come across any issues surrounding abortions, but if we did, we would also fight for women's reproductive rights. Abortions are still taboo in Iraq, and I suppose many women choose to have backstreet abortions due to the increasingly religious nature of Iraqi society.

Recently, OWFI has been dealing with the rising number of children born with deformities, particularly near the Hawijah military base. [The town of Hawijah became contaminated, due to the use by the American military of depleted uranium, a radioactive substance outlawed by many governments due to its high toxicity, causing a number of children to be born with severe deformities and health defects.]

There have been so many casualties. OWFI put together a report on a whole generation of Iraqi children born deformed. The report was compiled of records from our activists when they went to the town, to find out more information, and take pictures. They visited children in hospital, and talked to the people of Hawijah.

COURAGE

Our organisation always comes across problems. Our activists get kidnapped in Freedom Square; other were attacked, and harassed. We are intimidated, even threatened.

One of our activists, Aya Al Lamie, was kidnapped and tortured by associates of Maliki at 20 years old.

She is active and outspoken, and quickly became popular. She was kidnapped and tortured for her role and mobilisation during the Iraqi anti-government protests during the Arab Spring.

She was tortured horrifically by the Prime Minister's men, and they kept telling her, "you have to stop your demands".

She refused every time she was beaten and, finally, they conceded to letting her go, but not after telling her "if you continue your activity, we will gang rape you."

When she was released, her popularity had risen and so did the popularity of OWFI due to the stands these brave women take.

But her life is important, and we told her to keep a

low profile. Her nature is very outgoing and outspoken however, and after her Facebook account was hacked, she simply created another.

What do you think of women's organisations in Britain?

I see hope in certain groups, like Feminist Fightback, and some individual campaigners. However, I don't see a feminist movement as such, to be honest.

I find there are a lot of depoliticised charities which are removed from a political and feminist understanding of women's situations.

This country needs a new wave of feminism, breaking away from the liberal and post-modernist feminist movements.

We can say that the post-modernist feminist school of thought sheds some light on the plights of those who were not included in the wider feminist struggle. However, I think too much emphasis on differences has fragmented the women's movement. We need a class-based analysis, moving away from identity politics.

What can socialists, feminists and trade unionists do to support women's struggles in Iraq?

In the beginning there was solidarity from the Alliance for Workers' Liberty, the Communist Party of Great Britain, the Socialist Party and other groups, but it faded after the occupation of Iraq had been going on for a while, due to the discontinuity of media reportage after the media had got bored.

We receive less solidarity than before, and solidarity is important: capitalists are sneaky, they're sly, they know how to support each other. We need to do the same.

After the interview, many things became clear. We need more women like Houzan out there, not tied to lazy and effectively useless liberal ideology, but proactive and willing to risk all to change the way women are perceived in society. We also need to raise awareness of the situations of women across the world, in every society, in every household, not depend on the mainstream media to tell us about their lives.

● OWFI: equalityiniraq.com



Houzan Mahmoud

Liberal feminism: the individual is key

Women's Fightback is a socialist-feminist paper. Sarah Weston examines another feminist trend, "liberal feminism." Future issues of *Women's Fightback* will explore more "other feminisms".

In a few words, a liberal feminist campaign would oppose anything that gets in the way of gender equality.

But the fundamental thinking of liberal feminism lies in a belief in the capacity of the individual woman. Changing the basic structures of society itself is not the issue: it is more about changing the laws that block women's liberation. If this is done, women can change themselves and prove themselves to be equal.

Personal rights predominate over society as a whole; and through women being able to exercise our own personal rights, society will change, not the other way around.

In generalised terms, the "liberal" perspective could be described as seeing freedom as the fundamental value that must be maintained by the state and greater society. This can apply too to the liberal feminist viewpoint: humans as self-owners who should be free to solely make decisions about their own lives, and this right should apply to both men

and women equally.

Men and women should have equal right to things such as freedom of expression, freedom to control your own body, freedom to acquire and control property, all free from coercive interference. The role of the state then, is to protect the individual, man and woman equally, from such coercive interference.

If, then, we are in a situation in which men and women do not have equal rights to such freedoms, the state either does not have the correct laws to prevent this, or they are not maintaining them properly. The campaign of the liberal feminist therefore is a political one, in so far as they must target the political institutions to bring about equality through political reform.

They must challenge existing laws that obstruct women's rights, or demand new ones that will eradicate violation of women's rights. Liberation is therefore individualistic, as it comes from being free to make your own decisions away from the coercive interference of others.

The kind of things that liberal feminists will fight for, then, tend to centre around law and policy change, such as: equal education, voting, reproductive rights, abortion rights, protection against sexual harassment and domestic

violence, and equal opportunities in the work place.

Yes, these are all important things that must be fought for, however, I would argue not only that these things can be fought for as part of the class struggle, but that they must be, in order to free the lives of millions of women from oppression.

ABORTION RIGHTS
Let's take the example of abortion. A liberal feminist campaigns for abortion rights, as illegalising abortion interferes with a woman's freedom of choice regarding her own body. Yet does winning this campaign end oppression for women?

For example, it does not acknowledge the economic and social disadvantage and prejudice that a single mother would face, which could be a factor in her choosing abortion. It does not acknowledge the social or traditional values of a community that would factor in her choice. Or what about the cost involved to have an abortion, if free health care is not available?

Legalised abortion is a far better situation for a woman making a choice than illegalised, but legal/illegal is not the only thing that could interfere in her right to choose.

Statistically, middle-class teenagers are more likely to

have an abortion, arguably perhaps because they foresee a child as having more of a detrimental impact on their life, career choices, etc. The availability of abortions in theory is the same for both middle class and working class young women in Britain, but their social/economic background plays a bigger part in their decision.

What we see here is not that fighting for a change in abortion law, or whatever law, is bad, but that it is limited. It is limited because of the society we live in: the capitalist society.

Whilst we live under capitalism, any rights that women fight for will always be determined or affected by her economic position. Individual empowerment is immaterial: people's decisions are limited by class.

Liberal feminist campaigns have been at the forefront of many, many important things, but the barrier of capitalism will only let this go so far: either you will never escape your economic situation, or you will have to leave your class behind, and succeed as an individual, not a collective.

The women's struggle needs to not just think in terms of making the best of the way society is currently structured, but to restructure society as a whole.

If we examine part of the definition of patriarchy (in this school of thought, the overall oppressor of women) given by the London Feminist Network, we can further exemplify this point.

Patriarchy is defined as the "current and historic unequal power relations between women and men whereby women are systematically disadvantaged and oppressed.

"This takes place across almost every sphere of life but is particularly noticeable in women's under-representation in key state institutions, in decision making positions and in employment and industry."

Is the solution, then, to ensure that more women are in positions of power, that we have an equal gender balance in law implementing, decision making and executive positions? How would this make a difference? A female Conservative MP implementing public spending cuts would affect women no more favourably than if it had been done by a man.

FEMALE MPS
But wouldn't more female MPs mean that women's issues would be taken more seriously in parliament, and would be more likely to carry through legislation that protect women's rights?

Would they be more sensitive to how the cuts disproportionately hit women?

Possibly, but I think this is ignoring the issue. A government with more female MPs may pass such laws, a law that is trying to tackle our sexist culture, the censorship of lads' mags, for example.

But this implies that our sexist culture, lads' mags, etc., is the cause of women's oppression, and not rather it being symptomatic of something more fundamental. The fundamental cause is capitalism, and the sexist culture we live in is a product of that.

On the issue of cuts; yes, arguably a more heavily female government might distribute the cuts more equally, but can we say this is progress? How can terms of equality or fairness be applied to welfare cuts at all? As feminists we should be fighting against cuts, full stop, rather than hoping to convince the government to balance it out.

Essentially, by getting more women into positions

of power, it is only passing on oppressive decisions to a woman: it makes no odds to a working woman whether a man or a woman fires her.

On the surface, society may seem less sexist because we see more women in "successful" positions, but this is simply masking the suffering of millions of women who are oppressed by their economic situation.

I do not want to undervalue the liberal feminist position: many liberal feminist issues are important, and if they were not fought for the women's movement would be in a worse place.

It is important, for example, to recognise and fight against how gender roles are socialised — how masculine characteristics are idealised, and feminine ones undervalued: but part of this recognition is recognising that these are also Marxist issues.

Masculine qualities are held up because they are associated with the successful capitalist; feminine qualities are looked down on because they are associated with the underpaid and under-acknowledged carer, or free-labouring housewife.

Essentially, this is not necessarily a disagreement with what they are fighting for: it is challenging the motive and the method. If we change laws that allow some women to climb the ladder and have a successful career without coercive interference, and say that this is feminism, then we are forgetting the millions of women still oppressed.

We cannot forget that class itself divides: you cannot call for solidarity with women across the world, and ignore the fact that some of these women oppress others. Sisterhood cannot exist purely and indiscriminately whilst class society exists. The women's struggle must be fought alongside the class struggle.

One final example. During the miners' strike, we saw how struggle transformed people. Not just the women, who abandoned traditional roles, and became frontline activists, but also the attitudes of the men towards their wives, girlfriends, mothers and sisters. Alongside the miners' defeat, came a reversal of such attitude changes. A sign that in order for permanent change, the workers' struggle must be won.

The Cleft

Nicola Stott reviews Doris Lessing's *The Cleft*. Let us know if you have a book you would like to review.

I like Doris Lessing and was looking forward to reading *The Cleft*. It's certainly not a new book, but many of the themes still feel relevant to me.

Unusually, the story is told by a male Roman historian working his way through ancient manuscripts which detail the beginning of humanity as an entirely female event.

The story is therefore told by a man who at points in the story relates events to his own life. It's an unusual way to tell a story, especially a story which is so vague with timescale and characters.

Lessing asks us to imagine a society free from men, where women existed in sisterly bliss. The

early part of the book did not disappoint. Lessing portrays the women (the Clefts) as semi-aquatic creatures, happy, fulfilled and living in a highly communal way.

With no knowledge of differences, individuality was not an issue and there was no desire for change. Women's biology was accepted, celebrated, and governed by nature.

Until along comes the unexpected and unexplained birth of the first monsters (men) throwing chaos into the life of Clefts.

The monsters, believed to be deformed Clefts, were treated with cruelty and horror and disposed of by being fed to the eagles. When it transpires the monsters are actually surviving and setting up a society of their own, it forces the Clefts to ask questions and brings disharmony to the community for the first time.

This is where the story begins to trouble me. The

contrast of these two communities seems to support stereotypes that women have long tried to rid themselves of.

Initially men are given a caring role, managing to raise young with no input from the Clefts. It is the Clefts who are callous with life. However, before long it becomes the stereotypes we are all familiar with.

It's the men who are dynamic, seeking change and adventure. The women begin to be portrayed as lazy and passive.

Suddenly the positive traits of the women's lives, their contentedness and communality, are seen in a negative light. Women fall into the role of raising and nurturing the children, cleaning the dwellings and nagging the men.

I'm confused as to what Lessing is saying about women and men and gender. I like many of the stereotypically female traits and early in the book, pre-men, these are

celebrated. Post-men these traits begin to look dull and as though they are inferior. Without men the world would not have moved forwards.

Maybe this is what Lessing is saying — that women defining their own lives saw it as fulfilling and were happy. With men came difference and comparison.

Women began to see the world through male eyes and felt their ideals were inferior. When the women chose to stick to their ideals of home, community and family in comparison to the men they appeared to be holding back advancement.

As would be expected of Lessing, the book does not shy away from the horrors of humanity. It challenges our perceptions of gender roles in some places, but in many others it confirms what we have always been told about the biological differences of men and women.

Women's Fightback

Women's Fightback is a bimonthly socialist women's paper produced by members and supporters of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty.

We believe women's oppression is rooted in class society, and can only be ended by overthrowing capitalism. At the same time, we do not tell women — or any oppressed group



— to wait for the revolution. As socialist feminists, we see our job as reorienting the labour movement towards a fight for women's rights, and the women's movement towards class struggle.

Without the abolition of class exploitation, there can be no end to women's oppression. Without a mass movement of organised, mobilised women fighting for liberation, there can be no socialist revolution. Neither is possible without the other.

Workers' Liberty women are active in the fight to transform

the labour movement, and in many different campaigns — from reproductive freedom to migrant rights to the struggle against cuts. If you're a socialist feminist, please consider joining us — and, in the meantime, write for and distribute Women's Fightback to help win the biggest possible audience for socialist feminist ideas.

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