

Women's Fightback

No. 18 2013 August/September 2013

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HOW TO FIGHT SEXISM

By Esther Townsend

Challenging sexism as part of the fight to end women's oppression should be a central part of the left's activity, in the labour movement and in society.

Unfortunately the problem of sexism is sometimes poorly understood and met with indifference or dismissal by labour movement activists and even socialists.

When was the last time you saw the male general secretary of a UK trade union make a “barnstorming” speech about violence against women and sexual harassment in the workplace? Such issues are not considered central to the union organisation. Yet these are critically important social issues in their own right and ultimately affect how unions organise. If we do not tackle these issues we will not have united and effective class struggles.

This issue of *Women's Fightback* explores current issues of sexism (such as online sexism), and contains discussion articles on the arguments (such as the roots of male violence). Here I suggest some ways to fight.

Self-organisation

Women getting together is a good start — we can think and discuss about how to tackle sexism, share experiences of what's worked and what hasn't, arm ourselves with the ideas, arguments and tactics.

It is vital if we want to be prepared to tackle sexism within our movement, including on the left. It will help us be prepared to challenge arguments such as the one that if we raise these issues, bosses or the right wing in the movement will use it to undermine our struggles.

Getting together collectively means we can remind ourselves we're not alone. Sexism can feel very personal, but it's rarely an individual problem — it's indicative of a broader culture. As individuals we're vulnerable to dismissive managers, poor reporting structures or a lack of confidence. By organising collectively we can stand up for our rights, and fight for change.

Learn our history

From the matchwomen of 1886, through the Ford Dagenham women workers of 1968 or Grunwick film processing workers in 1976-8, through to women workers fighting for decent pay and conditions, to save the NHS and public services, and to defend and extend our reproductive freedoms...there's no shortage of inspirational examples of women collectively organising to tackle sexism, oppression and exploitation in society. We need to educate ourselves, and each other, about them.

Build fighting unions

Unions should be organisations for collective action. They should be democratic, political and rooted in their membership. Currently, after a long period of defeats, they're bureaucratic and sluggish. So in many ways it is unsurprising that they are in no fit state to challenge sexism in society and they're struggling to challenge it at work, or tackle it in their own ranks.

Most unions have fairly good policies on sexual harassment and violence against women. But policies aren't action. Unions pass policy, affiliate to an external campaign, then feel they've “ticked that box”.

The structures of our unions should work for us! They

should be open, accountable and democratic. We need clear **Challenging sexism at work is a vital to organising in the workplace**

processes through which women, and others, can raise issues, with training and support to help members and reps build the skills to use them.

Fighting for women's rights and challenging sexism is central to shaking up the inactive and apolitical unions and making them represent the interests of the diverse working-class. And transforming our unions into political, fighting organisations is key to challenging the systemic basis of sexism in our workplaces.

Reorganise the left

Struggles of oppressed groups are inextricably linked with the fight for socialism. It isn't automatic, but a working-class revolution and a society based on need not profit can lay the groundwork for human liberation. Without an up-rising of all the oppressed a self-liberating workers' revolution is impossible.

Yet despite this relationship, as with the unions, too often the left's attitude to women's liberation is dismissive, opportunist or too simplistic.

It is not good enough to just fall back on the classic socialist texts on women's oppression, good as they are. Marxist theory needs to engage with more recent socialist

feminist and other anti-capitalist feminist ideas. At the same time we need to connect a renewed and living theory up to the labour movement of today.

Workers and oppressed groups will not automatically unite — it's the left's job to argue against reactionary ideas and offer an alternative. It's the left's job to develop a movement which is as clear and militant about women's oppression as about other issues, and inclusive and accessible to oppressed groups.

And it's also the left's job to be honest about its own problems and tackle them. We can start by fighting for democracy and accountability on the left, championing debate and discussion, and thinking harder about accessibility.

If the left is going to grow into a credible force, then it has to be serious about tackling prejudice internally and externally, and place liberation centre-stage.

Deal with sexists

Codes of conduct and safer spaces policies are vital. We need to be clear that sexism (or any other kind of discriminatory attitude), intimidation and bullying are not acceptable.

Our verbal responses to sexism will vary should depend on the situation. It could be tactful or sharper; we should if necessary ask someone to retract sexist comments. Depending on the severity and persistence (and willingness to reflect), we might ask someone to leave a meeting, or organisation.

But silencing and excluding people can't be our first, or only, solution.

First, because the working-class, in particular oppressed groups, have a vital interest in upholding the principle of free speech.

Second, because “banning” people who hold sexist ideas is not straightforward. Sexist (and other oppressive) ideas are widespread in society and our class, amongst men and women too. We should strive for higher standards in our own organisations, but when someone is sexist in your workplace you don't have the option of leaving or getting them to leave.

Attitudes don't change overnight. Many people feel defensive at being challenged and engaging in discussion is difficult for everyone. We need a consistent commitment and flexible approach to discussion, argument and debate and to organising campaigns, meetings, and education (of ourselves as well as others).

Solidarity

When it comes down to it the strongest weapon the working-class has is solidarity. We have a strong interest in overcoming the divisions and prejudices that capitalism creates, and bosses exploit to make us angry at each other rather than them. When workers are in struggle this interest sharpens — we have to unite to win.

But unity doesn't mean ignoring our differences — far from it. History shows that solidarity between men and women in struggle provides the arena to challenge sexism and change attitudes. The same is true of challenging other oppressive attitudes.

A labour movement which began a serious discussion about these principles could begin to sort out its problems and make itself fit to challenge exploitation and oppression in society.

The truth about violence against women

By Heather Downs

Trigger warning/content note: detailed discussion of rape and sexual violence

What are we saying when we talk about “violence against women”? Well, one thing we’re not saying, because we’re not actually talking about it, is *male violence against women*.

The biblical story of Potiphar’s wife established the myth of the vengeance of “a woman scorned” and the damage she could do to a virtuous man in rigidly patriarchal culture. The spectre of false accusation was presented as being as bad, if not worse than, rape. That tradition continued into the middle ages and beyond.

The following is a twelfth century description of how to legally appeal the crime of rape:

“She must go at once when the deed is newly done with hue and cry... and show the injury and the blood and the clothing stained with blood..”

This demand for immediate reporting “to avoid malicious prosecution” was maintained for some centuries and has surfaced again in recent discussions of high profile offences in the recent past, for example in the cases of Jimmy Savile and Stuart Hall.

No allowance was made for the need of a victim to recover sufficiently to prepare to endure a trial.

If the accused maintained his innocence, the victim had to be examined to establish if she had been “defiled”. These requirements were because the crime was not against the victim, but against the property of her male guardian — that property being the guaranteed paternity of inheriting sons.

Therefore, injuries were expected to be sustained by the victim in defence of her “virtue” since her welfare was of minimal concern.

Rape victims were categorised according to their value in providing heirs. Thus, virgins commanded a higher value than prostitutes. Penalties for rape varied accordingly.

This created the unusual situation where the moral worth of the victim is subject to as much investigation as the behaviour of the accused.

Only in the last century did the concept of consent introduce the idea that women had some right to choose who they had sex with and when. In English and Welsh law, marital rape was legal until 1991 — before then, wives were believed to be in a condition of permanent consent.

Given this bleak and disturbingly recent history, it’s really not surprising that so many people believe so many

myths about rape. Many people believe it is just common sense for women to “be careful” about what we wear, what we drink, how we get home and who we go home with. You wouldn’t leave your car unlocked, after all!

You might imagine that the men who do it are violent psychopaths with recognisable characteristics who stalk dimly lit parks and dark alleys to leap out on lone women, brandishing knives.

Or, they are men that prey on the unwary: those who drink too much while wearing too little; those who don’t take reasonable precautions; those who leave their drink unattended and don’t take taxis.

Or they are men in relationships with psychologically damaged women who have a history of “seeking out” abuse.

In fact, one in four women is subject to domestic violence, and similar numbers to sexual assault. Those figures are accepted by organisations from Rape Crisis through Citizen’s Advice Bureaux to the Crown Prosecution Service.

These figures reveal the unpalatable truth that male violence against women forms an integral part of relationships between men and women.

RARE

The Director of Public Prosecutions acknowledges that false reports are extremely rare, estimated at about 2%.

They also recognise the exceptionally low rates of rape survivors reporting.

Only about 15% of rapes are reported and a woman suffers an average of 28 incidents of domestic violence before she contacts the police — if she’s lucky enough to live that long. Men murder two women a week.

You might be surprised at the research that has been done on men who disclose they have had or tried to have sex without consent — so long as nobody uses the “R” word.

In “Meet the Predators” (yesmeansyes.wordpress.com), the writer uses two large-sample surveys of undetected rapists. One is “Repeat Rape and Multiple Offending Among Undetected Rapists” by David Lisak and Paul M. Miller (published in *Violence and Victims*, Vol 17, No. 1, 2002). The other is “Reports of Rape Re-perpetration by Newly Enlisted Male Navy Personnel” by Stephanie K. McWhorter, et al., (published in *Violence and Victims*, Vol, 24, No. 2, 2009).’

That research reaches some surprising conclusions.

Between 6–8.5% of men admitted rape, with an average of six incidents each. Repeat offenders often also admitted do-

mestic violence and child abuse.

30% used force or threats; 7% attacked strangers. The majority preferred to rape intoxicated acquaintances. *None* used force to rape strangers. The cherished myth of the psychotic knife-wielding stranger evaporates.

So why are do so few women report assaults?

It is often said that it’s just one person’s word against the other’s, a choice of he-said, she-said. That isn’t an accurate depiction. Most people who decide not to report do so because they fear they will not be believed.

As soon as a woman reports, her body becomes a crime scene and a source of forensic evidence. So the things many of us would do — washing clothes, bedding and hair; having a bath; getting counselling — are considered to contaminate potential evidence.

If the case is one of the 50% considered likely to result in conviction and therefore get to court, the woman will become a witness — whom the defence is obliged to show is unreliable. Meanwhile, the (alleged) attacker is presumed innocent until proven guilty.

If he is innocent, what does that make her? This has recently been highlighted in cases of gangs grooming teenage girls where defence barristers for each defendant took turns to accuse the girls of lying.

The case of Julian Assange provided an opportunity for some horrendous rape denial and apologism: for example the idea that consent to any sexual activity provides a season ticket for future “insertions”. Likewise, the women in the case are doubted because of their behaviour before and after the alleged rape.

We can’t leave this subject without mentioning male victims. Recent emphasis on spurious claims of some kind of equivalence are misleading and most unhelpful. The vast majority of both domestic and sexual violence is carried out by men on women.

Three quarters of incidents of women attacking men are in retaliation or self defence. The latest CPS figures show that over 90% of convictions for domestic violence were men. Unsurprisingly, sexual offences show the same pattern. About 6% of men and 44% of women victims of homicide were killed by their partners, and most of those partners — of men or women — were men.

Male violence against women is ultimately based on a culture that valorises male aggression and validates women’s primary role in unpaid, isolated domestic care. Until that system is replaced by an egalitarian division of labour, the tension and conflict it creates will find expression in violent oppression.

Solidarity is not just for men!

By Maria Exall

The concept of solidarity in the labour movement is still too often seen as a male preserve. It reflects the view in wider society of political authority as commonly male, and the exercising of political power as a male activity. This prevailing view is the norm in the media, in education, in sport and in wider civil society.

Political sexism is backed up by, and from the same misogynist root as, heterosexism, from which also stem homophobia and transphobia.

Yet the unity of the working class is necessary to challenge the bosses. Our movement has to be inclusive to be strong and therefore must represent the diversity of the whole class, showing solidarity with black, LGBTQ, disabled and women workers.

Challenging sexism, then, is most effectively done by women working together within the movement, supported by other activists who understand that union strength is built by valuing the diversity of our movement.

When women trade union activists take a strong stance on industrial issues in male dominated workplaces they can expect sexism from both management and colleagues. Misogyny and the resentment that goes with it exist at a very deep level. Only progressive trade union organisation can root it out.

There has been a sea change in attitudes over the past few decades within the trade unions which to a certain extent mirrors the change in society’s attitudes, but there are

many instances of progress that have happened well in advance of general social change.

Positive initiatives within the Labour Party in the 1980s helped to create the current consensus on LGBTQ rights and equality in gender representation. Initiatives such as quotas for women’s representation and all-women shortlists were brought in by activists in the trade unions.

Unions should reflect grassroots changes in the workplace and community through their democratic structures. This should include the way women workers are challenging persistent discrimination, and the growing visibility of LGBTQ workers, although sexism, homophobia, transphobia and other forms of bigotry remain a significant problem.

Despite massive advances in the unions (most major unions have equalities structures and comprehensive formal equality policy), the prevailing conception of solidarity in our current labour movement is still often expressed in an exclusive “male” way. Too often, union strength is expressed as (and reduced to) macho posturing; and working class solidarity is defined as male bonding, excluding working class women’s experiences.

Instead of the militancy of class conscious confrontation with our bosses, this type of “solidarity” is simply shallow bravado: an outburst in a battle which will only end in tactical withdrawal.

The misplaced idea of union strength as “male” affects LGBT+ trade unionists, whether they are men or women. The unthinking prejudices people have about gay and bi-

sexual men are as inappropriate to the stereotypical images they have of political leadership as the ones applying to women. As for lesbians and bisexual women, we are invisible, and when we are not we are often seen as threatening and strange. And we still have a long way to go to achieve equality for trans* workers within the movement

The sexism of bourgeois society can pervade the labour movement unless it is challenged. Anxieties about changing gender roles, the all-too-common experiences of sexual and domestic violence can bring things to a head, if the patriarchal hierarchy of leadership remains uncriticised.

Too often the defensiveness of the sexists is expressed in ridicule of those of us who would challenge them. We can be accused of being divisive, of concentrating on fringe issues, of being more interested in fluffy things than the distinctly hard class struggle. The division between “fringe issues” (i.e. equality), and “bread and butter” issues is, of course, false. This is as true in a leftwing political organisation as it is in a trade union.

If you are picked on by your boss or a fellow worker for being a woman, or hounded out of your job for being gay — is that an equality issue or a bread and butter issue? If you are sexually harassed, or experience domestic violence from someone who is a political leader in your organisation or a comrade — is that a “fringe issue” or one that goes to the heart of what it is to be a socialist?

The way we will achieve class unity is not through writing off discrimination as a “fringe issue”, but through challenging bigotry.

Misogyny and sexism online

By Kate Harris

Sexist and misogynistic “trolling”, particularly on social networking site Twitter is in the news.

A few years ago, an internet “troll” was someone who wrote things online for no other reason than to annoy people or elicit a reaction. “Don’t feed the troll” was a common expression, meaning, “Don’t end up in arguments with people whose only aim is to piss you off”.

“Troll” has since come to mean something else — “someone who acts maliciously or nastily on the internet”.

Equality campaigners, socialists and members of oppressed groups are often sent vile material because of their ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or progressive political views.

High profile women such as academic Mary Beard and campaigner Caroline Criado-Perez have recently been the recipients of abusive tweets.

Caroline Criado-Perez successfully campaigned for Jane Austen’s face to be featured on the new ten pound note. Something fairly benign? Not so to hundreds of vile online misogynists, who sent her murder and rape threats. According to Criado-Perez, she received fifty such abusive tweets every hour for twelve hours.

Stella Creasy, MP for Walthamstow, received rape threats after defending Criado-Perez from on-line abuse. She has argued for tougher measures to be put in place on Twitter to stop this happening, including a “Report Abuse” function.

Classics professor Mary Beard was called “a dirty old slut” with “a filthy vagina” by a Twitter user. Beard chose to deal with this by publicly taking the troll on. He has since apologised.

Even as a pretty anonymous woman with a

Anita Sarkeesian of Feminist Frequency parodying some of the sexist messages she is sent

largely obscure political blog, I have received threats and misogynistic insults in the past. I’m sure this is the same for any woman who has a blog that has a slightly wider reach than close friends and political allies.

SHAME YOUR EX Online sexist abuse is nothing new.

Recently I have seen “Shame Your Ex” groups being set up on Facebook (though they are generally quickly shut down). When I last checked, “Shame Your Ex Hull”, “Name and Shame Your Ex Bristol” and “Name and Shame Your Ex Wales” were still online. They consist of men calling their ex-girlfriends ugly, slutty or bad in bed.

A few months ago there was the “Rate Your Shag” phenomenon — groups linked to gangs of students at various universities. They petered out after much criticism and a barrage of complaints.

And let’s not forget “Confessions of a Uni Student”, “The Lad Bible”, or “UniLad”. Lad Bible promoted such gems of wisdom as “Any female proving hard to bed shall be referred to as a Nobstacle course”.

UniLad came under heavy scrutiny after they posted a “joke” encouraging men to ignore women’s knock-backs, on the basis that “85% of rapes go unreported”.

Online misogyny can also come from women. Popular YouTube user Jenna Marbles posted a video last December called “What I Don’t Understand About Girls Part Two: Slut Edition”, which was a mess of victim-blaming, internalised misogyny and poor arguments.

INTERNET REALITY There are some interesting questions arising out of the experiences of women who use the internet.

Does the internet “breed” misogyny or just reflect the world around us? What are the differences between sexist behaviour online and sexist behaviour offline? Do people act differently online? What should be done to combat abusive messages and tweets?

There’s no evidence that the internet breeds misogyny more than any other medium. Like the printing press, it could be used to spread socialist-feminist ideas just as it could be used to spread sexist or

rightwing ones. It entirely depends on the message internet users wish to spread.

It has been said that people feel more able to express bigoted ideas they already hold if they are able to be anonymous and not come face-to-face with people they are offending or oppressing (it dampens human empathy).

But internet anonymity can be a good thing too! It allows activists to have a voice when they may not normally be able to, for example some sex workers, some LGBTQ people and feminists who live in a place hostile to feminism.

More broadly speaking, those living under strict political censorship laws may be able to get around them through internet anonymity: to some extent this happened with activists on Twitter during the Arab spring.

CENSORSHIP Socialist-feminists are usually against censorship because it often stops us from being able to spread our ideas or from being able to organise.

Marginalised groups are often affected negatively by censorship, or censorship laws are used as an excuse

to crack down on them.

In response to abuse and rape and death threats, some commentators and activists have championed a “Report Abuse” button, which Twitter have already have implemented on their new iPhone App.

People who are receiving rape threats should be able to do something about that, including reporting the person who is sending them. Misogynists and abusive internet users should have to face consequences for their actions. At least they should be stopped from sending those messages and re-educated on what is and isn’t acceptable behaviour.

As a socialist I would generally advocate community moderation more than police power, although the choice of whether or not to go to the police should be up to those receiving threats.

Despite the best intentions of those advocating it, the “Report Abuse” button is likely to have either no effect on the current situation, or could even make it worse.

Such a button will not prevent misogyny. It will not stop trolls setting up multiple accounts using multiple email addresses, and simply moving on to the next one after their account being taken down.

Unfortunately, the button could also be misused. Report functions on social networking sites are already heavily misused and abused by those in positions of relative power.

It could be used to shut down the opinions of radicals and marginalised people. The “Report Spam” button has been used against anti-fascist groups and sex worker advocacy groups, and “Report Abuse” could be used in the same way.

There could be misinterpretation of silly but sarcastic tweets, which might have very serious consequences, such as the “Twit-

ter Joke Trial”.

After the third appeal, the conviction was quashed, but a man was seriously fined, given a criminal record and lost his job after tweeting, “Crap! Robin Hood Airport is closed. You’ve got a week and a bit to get your shit together otherwise I’m blowing the airport sky high!” A comprehensively unfunny tweet, but clearly not a serious threat.

Challenging people for oppressive attitudes could result in activists’ Twitter accounts being suspended or taken down altogether.

As popular leftwing tweeter @Stavvers says, “We would be drowning in white male tears, and Twitter would bow down before one could finish typing ‘your a dick’ to a well-known evolutionary biologist”. (She is referring to Richard Dawkins, and the misspelling of ‘you’re’ is part of the joke.)

We might also, very regrettably, see the decline of funny and rude tweets being sent to rightwing politicians. Twitter user @halfabear has had some good moments, including tweeting George Osbourne the following: “I hope your next bottle of Moet is served to you warm, and when you ask for red wine as a replacement, it’s cold”.

There isn’t a quick fix solution to stopping online abuse and misogyny.

Increasing bosses’ control over communication is likely to have a negative effect, if any at all.

Workers’ control of the means of production would help to bring some of the internet under community moderation. Educating ourselves and others on oppressive behaviour and actions would be of great help.

We need to continue the work we do as feminists, as socialists and as socialist-feminists in challenging bigotry and reactionary ideas.

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.

● **Contact: women@workersliberty.org**

Women's Fightback blog read it, write for it!

womensfightback.wordpress.com

DV cuts: “taking women back to the 70s”?

Leanne Connor is a recent graduate of the University of Bristol who wrote a dissertation on “Domestic Violence: a socialist feminist perspective? The impact of the coalition government’s spending plans on women’s domestic violence services”. In the course of the project she spoke to people working in domestic violence services. Below are some of her findings.

In 2010 the Coalition government released a strategy called The Call to End Violence Against Women and Girls (CEVAWG). It stated that: “The gendered pattern of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) needs to be understood and acknowledged”. The CEVAWG Action Plan (2013) extended definition of domestic violence to include 16-17 year olds and controlling and coercive behaviour.

That change was implemented in chapter four of the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims (Amendment) Act 2012. It defines domestic violence as: “Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality”. The CEVAWG Action Plan (2013) also emphasised the importance of women’s organisations. The extended definition was welcomed by Women’s Aid and Housing for Women:

“It will help us in terms of arguing that government policy needs to reflect that wider definition and services in practice need to work in a way that reflects it...” (Women’s Aid)

“We can now use the Home Office definition and then we can use our local borough council definition, so at the moment we are in the strongest position that we have been over the last 10 or 15 years.” (Housing for Women)

However, Housing for Women argued that the government needed to do more.

“No one is aware of it, are they? If you went out and asked a cross-section of people in the street, they would probably not have a clue what we were talking about... I think it would be better to have an awareness campaign as well...”

Furthermore, these accounts suggest that the coalition government ignored the impact of their current spending plans (cuts) on domestic violence services.

The government has said they will “continue to support victims in an economic climate which requires us to spend less and work more efficiently” (CEVAWG, 2010). However, Housing for Women argued that the government’s spending plans fail to support the increasingly high demands on women’s domestic violence services since the economic deficit:

“We are already seeing more referrals coming in... Prior to this year whenever we had voids we used to get about 5 or 6 referrals of which we would take one, now we are getting up 17 to 19 referrals.” (Housing for Women)

STATE FUNDING

Both Women’s Aid and Housing for Women expressed anger about the cuts to public services. One interviewee from Housing for Women said:

“Potentially I think it is going to be a disaster...It is all about making money, it is not about charities and putting the money back in. It is about making money for shareholders, not about a service for the people.”

Housing for Women report that in areas of London, vital services (which their organisation use for counselling and multi-agency support) have closed due to lack of funding. One interviewee uttered a sigh of relief that their own services have maintained funding:

“We have been lucky that we have got three years funding from our local Supporting People team, but for the last three years we have been living under the threats of being decommissioned” (Housing for Women)

The government proposed to support specialist domestic violence services by supporting action at a local level and “shifting power away from central government” (CEVAWG, 2011). However, my interviewees at Housing for Women said the switch to localism had provided an unstable working environment:

“It is creating a lot of competition. So where as once upon a time even the domestic violence sector would have worked alongside each other, we are now competing with one another” (Housing for Women).

Reactions to the idea of “Big Society” were varied. While interviewees supported the idea of volunteers helping their organisation, as this has always been in place, they were concerned that they would have to become reliant on volunteers, due to the increase in workload and the lack of funding to hire new employees:

“My suspicion of the big society is that it maybe was originally intended to mean the state can’t fund everything, so you’ve all got to pull together.” (Women’s Aid)

Housing for Women also argued, due to the “confidentiality and safety aspect of the refuge setting, relying on volunteers is not an appropriate way to meet the increasing demand on domestic violence services”.

In 2012, the government announced their Welfare Reform Act 2012, to be implemented in April 2013; introducing Universal Credit (now delayed), Bedroom Tax, changes to housing benefit, council tax and child tax credit, as well as replacing crisis loans and community care grants with Crisis and Prevention Fund by the local authority. When I conducted my research these changes were yet to be implemented; both Women’s Aid and Housing for Women were unable to see the full impact of the reforms.

Focusing specifically on Universal Credit, Women’s Aid were highly worried about the impact it will have.

“One thing that particularly concerns me is the way that it is paid as one payment to one claimant, which reduces the financial autonomy of the other person who might, quite often, be a woman in a couple who might be financially abused... It makes it much harder for women to leave abusive relationships if they can’t get money of their own, or very little of it.” (Women’s Aid)

HOUSING AND PRIVATE PROPERTY

After discussing the Welfare Reform Act 2012, Women’s Aid expressed a concern that refuge accommodation for women experience domestic violence will not be exempt from cuts to housing benefit:

“The worry is that some of the refuges might not fit into the particular model of this definition, in which case they could lose quite substantial amounts of their rental income.” (Women’s Aid)

Women’s Aid and Housing for Women both admitted strong concerns for the impact of the housing benefit changes on the services they provide, particularly as one interviewee said that “refuges are the place that women who don’t have any money go to”.

Housing for Women argued that the government were putting unnecessary stress onto domestic violence services and the women who use the service:

“Rent arrears can be supported and avoided when we should really be looking at their mental and physical well-being and trying to prepare them so that we try and break this cycle of domestic violence.” (Housing for Women)

Both organisations were particularly anxious about the Bedroom Tax policy for women moving out of the refuge into more permanent accommodation.

“We have also heard it might happen too with women living in their own homes but with sanctuary schemes... the local authority said you will either have to pay the extra Housing Benefit or get a

The cuts

- Between 2010-11 and 2011-12 there was a 31% cut in funding from local authorities (just one source of funding) to Domestic Violence services. The cut was from £7.8 million to £5.4 million.
- In 2012 Women’s Aid estimated that refuge services have spaces for only 65% of the women who need them.
- Other cuts include: specialist services for BME women, Independent Domestic Violence Advisors and Specialist Domestic Violence Courts (key elements in the government policy).
- Cuts in legal aid will have various negative impacts — in areas such as benefits, child custody, divorce and housing. All this at a time of reported rising demand.

lodger. Actually getting a lodger into that situation will be dangerous.” (Women’s Aid)

Both Women’s Aid and Housing for Women felt unease with the coalition government’s focus on home ownership due to the lack of social housing available for women who are ready to leave the refuge. Women’s Aid argued that the need for social housing is much greater than the need for private property, in order to provide women who have experienced domestic violence with an adequate service:

“If it is taking longer to be re-housed that is going to have a knock on effect on the service because they can’t provide for other women.” (Women’s Aid)

“There isn’t the housing to go round for these women, so when they do come to the refuge they end up having to stay longer at the refuge waiting for housing and are more likely to go back home.” (Housing for Women)

FAMILY AND EMPLOYMENT

The Coalition government maintained throughout their Budget statements that their “central goal...is to support working families” (George Osborne, 2012).

Women’s Aid and Housing for Women quickly criticised the government for assuming that everyone understands the same meaning of the “family”, and that they evidently address the nuclear, working ideal:

“The ideology of two parent nuclear families, hardworking families, adds to the overall sense that ‘I shouldn’t leave my abusive partner’... It is not good as a social set up in which people are living.” (Women’s Aid)

This emphasis became significant throughout the Welfare Reform Act 2012, particularly with the introduction of tax free childcare vouchers: “20 per cent off the first £6,000 of your childcare costs for each child” (Osborne, 2013).

This policy fails to support single mothers, specifically mothers who are fleeing domestic violence.

The government declared that “We’ve seen more people in work than ever before — including a record number of women” (Osborne, 2013). Both Women’s Aid and Housing

Facts and figures

- Less than 24% of domestic violence crime is reported to the police
- At least one in four women will experience violence and/or abuse in her lifetime.
- Two women a week are killed by a partner or former partner.
- 89% of those suffering four or more incidents are women.
- Domestic violence accounts for between 16% and one quarter of all recorded violent crime (29% of all violent crime in London).
- In any one year there are 13 million separate incidents of physical violence or threats of violence against women from partners or former partners.
- Domestic violence has a higher rate of repeat victimisation than any other type of crime.
- On average two women a week are killed by a male partner or former partner.
- One third of women leave their abusive partner after two to ten years.

One third leave after 10 years.

- Not all DV takes place in the home or during a current relationship.
- There are many practical and psychological barriers to seeking help. Black and minority ethnic women may fear racism from organisations or additional shame in revealing the abuse. Lesbians and gay men may fear prejudice in reporting to the police. Many women fear losing their children. Women with insecure immigration status and who are dependent on husbands may be refused refuge accommodation or fear deportation.
- In a study by Shelter 40% of homeless women said domestic violence was a contributing factor to their homelessness.
- Genuinely mutually abusive relationships are very rare.
- Broken Rainbow is the only national LGBT DV Helpline. LGBT people need specialist services from people who understand the types of abuse (e.g. threats to “out” at work, to children).
- Neither mental illness nor loss of control due to drugs and alcohol are adequate explanations for most violence (although may be contributory factors).

Tackling DV in workplaces

Domestic abuse and violence has been taken up as a workplace and trade union issue since the 1990s, under the impact of feminist-inspired campaigning and practical work of organisations like Women’s Aid.

Unison was at the forefront of these initiatives. In 2002 the TUC published a guide on domestic violence for unions and employers.

In terms of formal union policies DV has correctly long been seen as a social issue that can not be confined to the “private sphere”. It impacts on our ability to work. In most workplaces someone will have experienced it directly or indirectly. Unions need to negotiate specific policies with employers. Unions can also provide a certain amount of practical support and information, even if it is just flagging up specialised help.

While all UK unions have good policy, and a sincere commitment to do something, it is more difficult to assess out exactly how this is being incorporated into union organising on the ground and success in negotiating with employers. The article about organising in the RMT highlights those issues.

With a 30% cut in funding for organisations that support DV abuse sufferers, it will be increasingly important for workers to be able to access support through their workplace.

By Janine Booth, RMT Executive, p.c.

Transport workers’ union RMT is demanding that employers adopt a policy on domestic violence, and has submitted a model policy to every company it has negotiating rights with. Cross-Europe transport trade union body the European Transport Workers’ Federation is also taking up this issue through the work of its Women’s Committee.

In 2011, RMT’s Women’s Conference passed a policy rightly deploring cuts to women’s refuges. But as a trade union, we also have a responsibility to identify the workplace implications of domestic violence. Transport workers are subjected to an alarming level of assault at work, often taking the hit for frustrations with our bosses’ failure to provide a decent service.

Unions have long demanded the right of transport workers to go to work without being assaulted. But we also need the right to go home after work and not be assaulted.

Domestic violence is a workplace issue that affects its victims — mostly women but sometimes men — at work. It can affect how well you do your job, your timekeeping, and your physical and mental well-being.

Our model policy contains key demands such as:

no disciplinary action under Attendance policies for non-attendance and lateness caused by domestic abuse; protection from abusers seeking you out at work; and time off that you might need to escape domestic violence (or to help a close friend or relative).

You might think that even hard-faced employers would not resist measures that provide a degree of protection at relatively little cost. But while some employers have agreed to discuss the policy, one or two major employers have resisted, arguing that their employees’ personal lives are not their concern.

The idea that domestic violence is a private matter has been around for a long time. It helps to protect its perpetrators and disempower its victims. We can not tolerate employers taking such a stance — especially as they are supposed to have a “duty of care”!

The transport unions refused to be fobbed off. ASLEF is backing up the RMT and making clear that it also wishes to see employers adopt domestic violence policies. The unions have forced the employers to discuss the issue, but their unwillingness is a warning to us that we will need to campaign as well as negotiate.

We have to get the issue of domestic violence out from behind closed doors and into the mainstream of industrial relations.

“They are already suffering through trauma, and they are now being pushed into going back into work, voluntary work or paid work, too soon, which means that it will have a knock on effect and again they will either end up in an abusive relationships, the vulnerability will not be addressed, they won’t have enough time to stay on benefits and get treatment for themselves.” (Housing for Women).

CONCLUSION

The coalition government’s policy choices undermine their stated commitment to eliminating Violence Against Women and Girls in two related ways.

Firstly, by cutting public spending in areas that have a direct impact on domestic violence services provided by women’s organisations, which the government has previously claimed are vital in tackling VAWG, they are failing to recognise the crucial role of the state in promoting gender equality.

This is reinforced by the government cutting public sector jobs where women are most employed, failing to invest in the provision of social housing and promoting an ideology of the nuclear family and patriarchal values which further enforce women’s economic dependency on men.

As socialist feminists argue, capitalism and patriarchy cannot be seen as two separate entities: government policies in the political and economic sphere can have a direct impact on women’s personal lives. In addressing the underestimated problem of domestic violence and increasing demand for specialised domestic violence services, “the personal is political”.

Definitions and prevalence

By Rosalind Robson

Domestic violence (DV) is physical and sexual violence, psychological and emotional abuse, threats and intimidation, financial blackmail, harassment, isolation, also belittling and unreasonable criticism within an intimate or family relationship. It could be part of a pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour. It should include the abusive actions of extended family members including such things as forced marriage and “honour crimes”.

DV cuts across boundaries of gender, age, race, religion, sexual orientation and class. However women are very more likely to suffer, and research shows the most vulnerable are younger and poorer women.

US research shows that domestic violence in LGBT relationships is vastly under-reported. People of all genders and none are as at least as likely to experience DV as self-defined women in heterosexual relationships.

The up-to-date UK data on DV comes from the Crime Survey for England and Wales. This is a large sample survey of people carried out by the British Market Research Bureau (BMRB) for the Home Office.

The BCS estimated that there were 392,000 incidents of domestic violence across England and Wales in 2010 to 2011. Interesting is the positive contrast to 1,116,000 incidents of domestic violence recorded in 1993.

However because victims may be reluctant to disclose experience of domestic violence in a face-to-face interview, the crime survey also captures data on domestic violence via a self-completion module, which allows the respon-

dent to write experiences directly onto the interviewer’s laptop.

The self-completion figures additionally include emotional and financial abuse, along with threats to do such. It adds in experiences of sexual assault (and threats and attempts of such) as well as stalking.

This method shows up a different figure. Seven per cent of women and five per cent of men report having experienced domestic abuse in the last year, equivalent to 1.2 million female victims and 800,000 male victims.

What should we make of the high figures for reported violence and abuse against men? This has been a subject of debate for some years. Some of this research is based on studies of generalised family violence.

Abuse against men tends to occur in what (superficially at least) looks like mutually violent relationships. However the more frequent and severe the violence the greater the gender asymmetry: for example strangling and threats to kill are much more usual as male on female violence.

Women are more likely to use violence expressively (showing frustration and explosive anger) or defensively rather than as a tool of control and domination. Defensive violence can lead to retaliation and escalation of violence.

Sexual violence is a frequent part of the ongoing abuse women suffer — this is left out of the studies looking at generalised family violence.

A more nuanced and complex picture of DV is needed. However the feminist case that violence against women in heterosexual relationships is underpinned by structural oppression (generalised male domination), remains key.

Organise a carnival of the oppressed!

In the opening plenary of Workers’ Liberty “Ideas for Freedom” event (20-23 June) RMT Executive and TUC Disabled Workers’ Committee member Janine Booth argued for class-struggle liberation politics to be at the heart of the Marxist project.

On 23 June 2012, Steven Simpson, a gay autistic student, was verbally abused, stripped, and his body scrawled with homophobic slogans.

He was then doused in tanning oil and 20-year-old Jordan Sheard set fire to his crotch with a cigarette lighter. The flames engulfed his body, his attackers fleeing as neighbours tried desperately to extinguish the flames. Steven died the next day suffering 60% burns.

Steven was murdered because of his sexuality and disability. But on 21 March 2013 at Sheffield Crown Court, Judge Roger Keen dismissed the crime as “good-natured horseplay” that had “gone too far” and sentenced Sheard to only three-and-a-half years in prison. Sheard’s lawyer described Steven’s killing as a “stupid prank that went wrong in a bad way”.

Workers’ Liberty members and supporters, along with others, have organised protests demanding justice for Steven Simpson. The RMT is taking a resolution to TUC LGBT Conference on this issue, and we have won the unanimous support of TUC Disabled Workers’ Conference.

The conference also supported the work we have done on the issue of autism in the workplace. [That work] takes an emancipatory approach, fighting for society to recognise that humanity is neurologically diverse, similar to the way that what was then known as the gay liberation movement began the fight for society to recognise that it is sexually diverse.

The despicable murder of Steven Simpson tells us that despite formal near-equality, homophobia and prejudice against disabled people still exists. It tells us that the institutions of the state are still anti-gay and anti-disabled.

It tells us that formal equality is not enough: we need fundamental change in society. Capitalism is a system that announced its arrival with a claim for “liberté, égalité, fraternité”. But it did not deliver this. It relies so fundamentally on inequality and exploitation that it can not deliver its promise.

Full equality can only be achieved through the abolition of classes: through the achievement of socialism. Marx described the working class as “a class with radical chains ... which can only redeem itself by a total redemption of humanity”.

Working-class struggle, solidarity is the terrain on which prejudices can be challenged and overcome.

But, we can not simply assume that workers and oppressed groups will unite. There is an alarming level of hostility to migrants from many British workers.

Part of the purpose of our socialist group, the AWL, is to be active within the working class arguing against bigotry and division — for workers to aim our anger not at other workers but at those who are really to blame for society’s problems: employers and their political servants.

Lenin also described socialism as a carnival of the oppressed.

But look at those movements whose job it is to create socialism — labour movement and the left. Do they look as though they could organise a carnival of the oppressed? Sadly, I think not. They are struggling even to deal properly with issues of discrimination within their own ranks.

Another part of the job of Workers’ Liberty is to make our movement fit to carry out its job. That means that we mobilise against racism and the far right, on the basis of working-class politics rather than ritual denunciation.

Instead of demonising feminism, we engage with it, and develop and champion a credible socialist feminism.

We also need to make it properly understand the oppression of sections of our class — of women, ethnic minorities, LGBT people, disabled people. To make it militant against that oppression, and fully accessible and hospitable to those members of our class.

Which side is the left on?

By Lynne Moffat

At Unison National Delegate Conference 2013, we discussed a motion about creating “a safe space for women in the labour movement”. We also discussed an amendment about male violence against women. I am still angry about the discussion around the amendment and upset by the fact it was defeated.

The original, uncontroversial, motion was about organising women in the labour movement, actively supporting young women, budding systems and many other ways. The amendment on male violence against women should have been uncontroversial. Sadly, it wasn’t.

This is the text of the amendment:

“We believe that our trade union has the potential to transform society for the better. Therefore we have a particular responsibility to confront and challenge male violence against women within our movement. Male violence against women is not acceptable in any case. It must not be tolerated from those who hold office or power in our movement.

“We recognise the enormous challenges faced by women victims of male violence, and the pressures which women face, including from abusive men, not to complain about violence and abuse. We therefore believe that, when women complain of male violence within our movement, our trade union should start from a position of believing women. We believe that all women who complain of male violence have the right to be listened to and supported.

“[Conference resolves to] Review existing practice and subsequently issue guidance to all Unison bodies about how to respond to male violence against women in our movement.”

Prior to the discussion about the amendment, our main concern was the attitude of the SWP. The National Executive were supporting it. The SWP’s official line was “support with qualifications”. (Yes, I thought that was bureaucratic rubbish too.)

So what were the qualifications? Apparently, the idea of “believing” women when they make disclosures of domestic violence, harassment or sexual violence is controversial. Their argument is that this interferes with due process and changes the presumption of innocence.

The lack of understanding about the barriers women face when coming forward to make a complaint was shocking.

Surely it is well known that whenever women come forward they have their previous relationships, sexual history, drinking habits and mental health brought into question.

That they doubt themselves and don’t expect to be believed.

It should be different in the trade unions. When a union

Perfunctory, shallow, formulaic

By Cathy Nugent

The 17 July 2013 issue of the *Socialist* (paper of the Socialist Party) carried a feature “End Violence Against Women”.

The feature included an extract from a booklet by Christine Thomas about the social attitudes which underpin violence against women, an account of the Campaign Against Domestic Violence (a 1990s campaign set up by the Socialist Party’s forerunner the Militant Tendency), and a list of demands to tackle violence against women.

There are some problems with Thomas’s book (*Women and the Struggle for Socialism*) which are worth debating (for instance her attitude to sex workers organising is inconsistent). However the printed extract (and much of what else is available online) was, in general, thoughtful. Heather Rawling’s account of the CADV was also fair enough, although she might have emphasised how CADV was just *part* of those efforts in the 1990s to get the trade unions to take domestic violence seriously.

Then someone from the Socialist Party’s editorial team deemed it necessary to tack on a series of demands. Most are not so much wrong as perfunctory and shallow. Everything demanded is defined as “decent” — “decent support”, “decent housing”, “decent education”. If we are being honest, “decent” is the stock word revolutionaries use when

But not believing

member comes to you saying they’re being bullied or harassed (male or female), do you say “I’m afraid I need to look at the evidence before I decide”, or do you listen, be supportive and plan how to help them? Why should this approach change with regard to male violence against women?

The first speeches against the motion were all about the fact that it focuses solely on male violence against women. There are so many problems with this I almost don’t know where to start.

Women are the main victims of domestic violence. That is a fact. Two women die a week as a result of domestic violence.

Nothing in this amendment suggested that other types of violence will be ignored or discounted (those victims might like to be believed too). In fact, quite the opposite: reassurance was given that they would be included.

In the debate the majority of speakers in favour of the amendment — notably the SWP but also the Socialist Party — made so many qualifications that at times I got confused.

The whole debate was very muddled. Sadly, many delegations (the majority) come without a mandate and without any discussion about how to vote. Without a delegation lead there was no sense that voting was about anything other than individual opinion.

The fact that this amendment was controversial and was defeated is shocking and disgraceful. It is, however, useful in putting up a mirror to the labour movement and the left. We need to have some honesty and understand where we are before we can fight to change anything. And where we are is woefully behind in terms of our political consciousness on how to tackle violence against women.

Unison has the official equality structures but what it doesn’t have is vibrant self-organisation, real democracy and a rank and file organisation which unites people to fight the cuts and engages them on other issues, including the struggle for women’s liberation. Let this serve as a wake up call.

don’t know enough or have time enough to work out anything more specific. A shame, as there is plenty of very concrete analysis in the articles.

But worse than this is the formulaic politics of the Socialist Party. Almost the grand finale (before “a socialist alternative to class and sex inequality”... to be achieved by joining the Socialist Party) is a call for “a 24 hour general strike against the cuts”.

A concerted fight against all the cuts *would* help fight the 30% cuts (last year) in DV services. But a 24 hour general strike is not the equivalent of a concerted fight back.

Nor is it a perspective to *build* a concerted fight back.

What comes after the 24 hour strike?

In reality the SP don’t think the demand is possible to win in the unions, nor do they do much to actively fight for it.

The demand is just a Socialist Party “badge”, a way to look and sound militant.

Perhaps the Socialist Party are feeling under pressure? They certainly should be feeling shame at helping (along with the SWP) to lose a vote at Unison conference which would have strengthened that union’s policy on tackling violence against women.

• More on the Socialist Party:

Not the way to tackle sexism in the labour movement

<http://bit.ly/sell-sp>

Not the way to tackle violence against women

<http://bit.ly/sp-vaw>

Tackling sexism with solidarity

An admin worker in a male-dominated industry spoke to Women's Fightback about her experiences of challenging workplace sexism. The following text is adapted from an interview.

I'm an administrator working in an office sited in a bin depot that provides refuse, recycling, and street cleaning services for a local authority.

Our workplace is very male-dominated, with only a small number of women working here. Sexism is rife, ranging from leering over pornography in communal areas, and off-hand "jokes" and comments (i.e. mother-in-law or wife jokes, or instructions to "get the teas in darlin'" etc.) to very crude personal insults and sexual harassment.

Dealing with sexist comments

If and how I respond to sexist comments entirely depends on the context and the severity of the comment/incident. There is a very banter-based culture here, and one of the reasons why I perhaps "get away" with not having a lot of comments directed at me personally is because I have built up a persona of being "one of the lads" over the years I've worked here (as a defensive mechanism) so I can simply tell them to fuck off, or give them a playful slap, or make a sarcastic quip back or something like that, always in a jokey way.

A lot of the men here call me "gobby" because I will give as good as I get a lot of the time. I appreciate that a) many women may not feel able to do this (or feel that they should) and b) many women may not agree with this approach, but I feel like this has been the safest and easiest way for me to play it.

I believe that if I hadn't done this, then when I did actually make a serious point, and call them on something that was "worse", they would just roll their eyes if I had a reputation for being the kind of person who takes things too seriously, or "goes on" about things.

Sometimes they will make "mildly" sexist comments, and demand I make them tea and stuff like that, or make suggestive comments, and I might let it slide, or just tut. Because they can "get away" with this sort of thing and know that I can "have a joke", they do actually take me seriously when I make a serious point or challenge them on something "bad".

Sexism towards other women in my workplace

I know all the operational staff that work here, and they all know me, whereas some women who work in the office couldn't even name two of them. This means that sometimes I have been asked by other women to speak on their behalf.

For example, a while ago one of the female office staff complained to me that every time she walked in the canteen they wolf-whistled at her, which upset her and made her feel isolated, threatened and uncomfortable. She didn't feel able to challenge them on this, so asked me for advice. At her request, I spoke to the guys who were doing it (seriously, not in the usual "jokey" manner) and explained that it wasn't acceptable to do this to anyone, and why, and how it made women feel, and asked them to stop, which they have done.

Again, I know that some other women may not agree with this, but I feel that by letting some of the other "minor" things slide, and be able to "have a joke" with them on other things, this allowed me to be taken seriously in this instance, and to let them know they had gone too far. I recognise that even this is not something that women should have to do. However, sometimes you have to make the best of the situation as it exists, and for me, and for the other woman involved in this instance, it certainly did feel like a victory.

Gender differences in challenging sexism at work

The response of male workmates to sexist comments varies. We work in a large workplace (with nearly 350 staff) so it's hard to generalise. Sometimes men will call other men out for how I'm spoken to, but this is more of a case of "you can't speak to her like that" rather than "you shouldn't speak to any woman like that", because of personal relationships, and who I am, rather than the overall principle.

It's not always clear why men make sexist comments at work. At a surface level, possibly because they just think it's a laugh, and so are hoping to get some from others present.

This will make them feel good about themselves and boost their self-esteem.

It could also go deeper, in that they genuinely have no respect for women, or because they have grown up in or are used to being in an environment where women are de-graded.

Many men in my workplace are also illiterate, and it can be a threat to their ego having women in their workplace who do not have these difficulties, and so can do things that they cannot do themselves. As it's a manual job, I think a lot of them take pride in the physical exertion required, which they perhaps feel that women cannot match.

I have never witnessed any other women in my workplace joining in with sexist "banter", but I suppose it could be argued that sometimes by purposefully ignoring certain things when in a group situation I am "joining in" with it.

Violence and threats against women workers

In terms of the worst cases I have seen, we have had a few workers actually imprisoned (the longest for eight years) for violent and/or sexual assaults on women. A while ago I supported a fellow female worker who made a complaint against a worker she overheard making abhorrent comments about a rape case in the news.

Personally, I have experienced sexual harassment ranging from comments about my body and my sex life, to being threateningly brushed up against, and actually groped.

Other forms of discrimination at work

Homophobia and racism are also problems in my workplace. Quite a few people have been bullied so badly over both of these issues that they have left. "Casual" homophobia and racism are very much the norm.

Sexism in our unions, our movement and society

My union branch has never discussed sexism or sexual harassment. Our union nationally has a domestic violence policy, but having worked here and been a union member for about seven years now, I can certainly say they have never been a concerted campaign or focus on any "equality issues". On the other hand, "our union" is us, it's our members in our workplace. We can't make demands of an arbitrary entity.

Sexism in society as a whole is getting worse. We all know about the effects of austerity on women directly — loss of public sector jobs, stopping of funding advice and rape centres etc.

More generally, I suppose, a state implementing austerity has to dissuade women from rejecting traditional roles (housework, childcare, care of the elderly etc.) as it will need to rely on this unpaid labour.

While I wholeheartedly believe in challenging sexism, something that has been very prominent on "the left" recently, is a lot of talk about boycotting people or groups who have bad politics about women and women's oppression.

Whilst I respect a woman's right to "work with" who she

chooses when it comes to campaigns and organisations, when it comes to actual work, and who you have to work with, you don't have that choice available to you.

Seeing as 99% of the men I work with in my job have worse gender politics than, say, the Socialist Workers Party, I can't simply decide that I am going to refuse to work with them because a. that's my job and I have to and b. we are all members of the same union, and if we need to do any organising in the workplace (which we do, often) that would not be possible if I simply refused to.

Changing attitudes through struggle

When I first started working here, we had a strike, and, despite not being personally affected and not balloted for the action, I refused to cross their picket line and stood on the gate with them. This act got me a lot of (admittedly begrudging) respect from the (male) workforce, and a lot of them started talking to me, when they hadn't before, and getting to know me as a person rather than "just a woman", and as an ally and a help in their dispute.

I remember a strike a couple of years after that, and we had won it, and were having a workplace meeting afterwards, with hundreds of staff there, and were congratulating each other, and one man spoke and said I deserved a thank you for "making the teas". He wasn't even making a joke, he actually thought that saying that to me was being nice.

Rather than me having to tut, or say something back to him, a few others (men) instantly jumped in to my defence, outraged at the assumption that that was all I had done, and explained to him the extent of my involvement in the dispute (saying "come off it mate, she's done loads more than that, she's done x or y" etc.). To have that recognition and respect from them meant a lot to me.

I imagine there might be some women who might be disgusted at that and think that should just be the norm, not something to celebrate or be pleased. Or that their respect, or recognition from them, isn't something I should desire in the first place.

However, having spent years experiencing and struggling against outrageous disrespect and blatant sexism in my workplace, contextually I was over the moon, and it felt like a genuine victory and a step forward.

It might sound like a cliché I suppose, but in struggle a lot of people saw me as their equal, and their comrade, and that is how I've tried to play it, and what I've tried to build on, by showing that we may be different in gender, but that we're united as a class.

Sexism at work? Tell us about it

Have you ever experienced sexism at work? Have you ever witnessed it?

As well as facing economic and social attacks, working class women are also facing increased everyday sexism: on the streets, at home and in our workplaces. Unfortunately, this is being met by some in the labour movement with indifference or dismissal. But women should not have to go through it, and out unions should do something about it.

Challenging sexism in our unions, and getting them to support us, is central to getting our unions fighting fit. In order to develop ideas to challenge sexism in our workplaces and movement, we want to learn more about people's experiences.

What form does sexism in unions and workplaces take? Whether it's sexist "jokes", inappropriate comments, lack of respect or support, harassment, or another kind of discrimination, we need to find out so that we know how to challenge it.

We're collecting interviews, experiences and comments from people of all genders and none. Take a look at the questions on the Women's Fightback blog or send a description of your experience to women@workersliberty.org and we'll post it on the blog so we can share lessons. We won't use your name unless you ask us to or are happy with us doing so.

• womensfightback.wordpress.com

Challenge sexual violence everywhere

By Kate Harris

One of the lessons we have learned from the last few years is that many “progressive” people hold reactionary ideas about women. Worse than this, people who hold some socialist ideas do not always follow this through in terms of the way they treat the women around them.

A particularly shocking example of sexist violence in an activist movement has been the epidemic of sexual assaults and harassment in Tahrir Square, Cairo. Extreme violence against women has been a threat or reality for many women revolutionaries.

The *Guardian* reported that on the day Morsi was ousted (3 July 2013) there were more than 80 incidents of sexual assault and harassment in the square. They also reported the endemic nature of this violence — over 99% of Egyptian women surveyed by the UN said they had been sexually harassed.¹

Self-organised groups have been set up to protect women protesters, including Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment (Opantish) and Tahrir Bodyguard. Hannah Elsisi, reporting from Cairo for the International Socialist Network, has been working with Opantish:

“I started my shift with Opantish at around 7:30 last night. We did not wrap up until after 3 in the morning. We received 46 reports of cases of mob sexual assault in and around Tahrir. We were able to intervene in around half, in coordination with other groups such as Tahrir Bodyguard. Some attacks saw the use of blades and sticks. One case had to go to hospital and undergo surgery. Several others needed medical attention. Some volunteers were wounded. The square became undeniably unsafe for women.”²

Elsisi concludes that, “Regardless of the nature of the revolution’s next foe, I am certain that the fight against sexual violence and sexism must be at the heart of the larger struggle for freedom.”

But it’s not just Egyptian activists who have these problems, and it’s important not to be smug about the British left. In recent years we have also seen several crises, with division on the left on the key issue of sexual violence.

We have had arguments about what our positions and

slogans regarding alleged rapist Julian Assange should be. We’ve had to deal with members of our movement sexually assaulting comrades.

At Occupy Glasgow, a young, homeless, pregnant woman was gang raped and the organisers decided not to go to the police at first because it would reflect badly on the occupation.³

In the SWP we have seen swathes of reactionary ideas and practice around the dismissal of the case of a young, female (ex-)party member brought against a senior, male party member, who allegedly raped her, as well as around a separate sexual harassment case.

Sexual predators are opportunistic. Because of the absence of formal security forces in many public occupations, they perhaps feel they can get away with it and turn up specifically to those places to violate women.

That is what many are saying regarding “mob attacks” in Tahrir Square. No doubt those who gang raped a woman at Occupy Glasgow assumed they could get away with it.

Sexual predators exist across society, in the ruling class as well as the working class, with high profile leftwing men being just as likely (or not) as anyone else to be sexually predatory or violent.

An entrenched culture of victim blaming across society makes it incredibly difficult to deal with sexual violence. Instead of asking “How do we stop the perpetrators?” people ask, “Why them? What were they wearing? Had they been drinking? Were they being ‘sensible’?”

This is seen among activists in Tahrir Square, it is seen in the SWP and it was seen at Occupy Glasgow. Further, those who want to do something to stop their attacker repeating their actions are seen as being difficult, obstinate, inconveniencing others. Worse, they are sometimes attacked for making the left look bad, for “dividing” the left, or even accused of being spies who are purposefully trying to bring down leftwing movements.

It’s an extreme form of victim blaming when a man says, in front of a camera, “It’s not a good habit. It’s wrong. But they lead us to do this. From the way they dress. From the way they walk. Everything. They push Egyptian men to do this.”⁴

When other activists say, to be a “decent” girl, you should

shut up and leave it out, they are minimising sexual assault. It’s victim blaming to tell the women who say Julian Assange raped them that they are CIA agents and were a “honey trap” to a weak man who couldn’t help himself. Victim blaming partly caused the vile cover-up that was attempted by senior members of Occupy Glasgow.

Women (and others) who are concerned about the violence from their political colleagues are not “creeping feminists” as some senior members of the SWP have said (not that being a feminist is a bad thing). They are class warriors, cleaning up our movement so it is fit for purpose for the entire class, including women.

As Hannah Elsisi rightly says, we need to put challenging violence against women at the heart of our work and the “struggle for freedom”. Not only is it something to be challenged in its own right, but also women make up a majority of the working class, and there can be no real liberation of our class without women’s liberation.

Reactionary attitudes towards women, victim blaming and sexual harassment and assault must be robustly fought and eradicated from our movement.

(1) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jul/05/egypt-women-rape-sexual-assault-tahrir-square>

(2) <http://internationalsocialistnetwork.org/index.php/ideas-and-arguments/international/165-hannah-elsisi-report-from-cairo>

(3) <http://www.2ndcouncilhouse.co.uk/blog/2011/10/27/de-occupy-glasgow/>

(4) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZmdhwd3axw#at=209> (see speaker at 3:30)

OpAntiSH volunteers in Cairo

Stop violence against sex workers!

By Liz Butterworth

On Friday 19 July, 36 cities around the world hosted protests against the violent abuse and murder of sex workers.

These protests were sparked by the transphobic and whorephobic murders of sex workers in Sweden, Turkey, France, Italy and other countries.

We were demanding “Justice for Jasmine and justice for Dora”, in reference to two recently murdered sex workers.

In the week the protests took place, a trans* sex worker from Turkey called Dora Oezer was killed. Turkish police are looking for her murderer, who some news sources are saying was a client.

Prostitution is legal in Turkey but organising together to run a brothel is not, putting sex workers (especially trans* sex workers) in more danger. In the

same week, Swedish sex worker and activist Petite Jasmine was murdered by her ex-partner on the 11 July. The state had given custody of her children to her ex-partner despite his history of domestic abuse, due to her line of work.

Sweden’s laws on prostitution are supposed to prosecute the client. These laws, often referred to as “the Swedish model”, are often hailed by leftists and feminists who lack a class analysis of sex work and fail to see the harm they cause.

In fact, these laws force sex workers to work in more “underground” settings which increases the risk of the abuse, assault and murder of sex workers.

Sex worker activists often call for decriminalisation and are generally suspicious of any state involvement in their work. This is because attempts to “regulate” the industry in parts of Australia and the

Activists in London protest outside the Swedish Embassy

Netherlands have resulted in the punishment and criminalisation of more

vulnerable and disadvantaged sex workers.

Illegal, unregulated sex

work still happens – but because of the regulation as well as xenophobic anti-migration laws, sex workers are unable to seek any help if they are abused for fear of being prosecuted.

The 19 July protest in London was outside the Swedish embassy. There were about fifty of us, including sex workers and allies and people from various organisations such as the Sex Worker Open University and the English Collective of Prostitutes.

We chanted slogans such as “Justice for Jasmine! Justice for Dora!” and “No bad whores! Just bad laws!” and posed for photographs.

Activists in Sheffield, including some of our comrades, held a minute’s silence to commemorate Jasmine, Dora and other sex workers who are or have been victims of violence. They also left tags with red umbrellas on them in public places, with

details of sex worker advocacy organisations and unions on the back.

There were further protests in Scotland. In Edinburgh, the day before the protest, Lothian and Borders police continued their campaign of violent brothel raids.

Glasgow is gaining an increasingly active sex worker community, particularly through the Sex Worker Open University.

Sex workers’ livelihoods and safety in Scotland had been under further threat due to a bill proposed by Labour MSP Rhoda Grant to introduce the “Swedish model” in Scotland, which recently failed.

We call for solidarity with sex workers around the world. We stand for the decriminalisation of sex work, and say that sex work is real work. No bad whores, just bad laws!

•JasmineAndDora.wordpress.com