Middle East and North Africa
THE LEFT MUST FIGHT FOR WOMEN’S LIBERATION!

By Vicki Morris

At a recent Workers’ Liberty meeting in London, Nadia Mahmood of the Worker-communist Party of Iraq described attending the Cairo Conference in Egypt (3-5 June). At the conference she argued that it was important for leftists to campaign on women’s issues, such as lack of childcare and sexual harassment.

Women under capitalism suffer specific oppressions that need to be fought now, not after “socialism” has been achieved. Large numbers of women can be brought into socialist and trade union struggles through campaigns on such issues — in fact, unless socialists and trade unions take up these issues, it will be impossible for women to be involved in the broader struggle.

Nadia says that some of the people attending the conference said they would think about these ideas. “Think about it”?

The left in advanced capitalist countries in the west largely accepts the importance of campaigning on women’s issues, but only after a political struggle, mainly by women. It will be the same in countries of North Africa and the Middle East.

Women’s position in these regions is dire, particularly in Egypt, the site of the recent inspiring revolution that ousted Hosni Mubarak. It shouldn’t be surprising that in a country where more than 90% of women undergo Female Genital Mutilation, sexual harassment and violence is rife and largely unopposed. Only 24% of Egyptian women are in employment; 40% of Egyptian women are illiterate.

When women have protested about their situation, they have been shoved back in their place with brutal and humiliating treatment. Thugs broke up a celebration of international women’s day on 8 March in Tahrir Square. The army arrested 18 women protesters when it cleared Tahrir Square of protesters on 9 March.

The army then did to 17 of them what the army did to 17 of them later: “...a senior general who asked not to be identified said...virginity tests were conducted and defended the practice.

“The girls who were detained were not like your daughter or mine,” the general said. “These were girls who had camped out in tents with male protesters in Tahrir Square, and we found in the tents Molotov cocktails and (drugs).”

“The general said the virginity checks were done so that the women wouldn’t later claim they had been raped by Egyptian authorities.

“We didn’t want them to say we had sexually assaulted or raped them, so we wanted to prove that they weren’t virgins in the first place,” the general said.

“In Iraq, four women taking part in a pro-democracy rally in Baghdad on 10 June were sexually molested and beaten by government-supporting thugs. The women were part of a delegation from the Organisation of Women’s Freedom in Iraq (OWFI), which holds a protest every Friday in the square to demand women’s liberation. After the attacks, OWFI Director Yanar Mohammed told the press: “It took us so many years to get women involved in the political struggle...And the prime minister decides to send these women home in what he knows is the best way, the most humiliating way. When the humiliation is sexual, in a society like Iraq, they know it will break the women.”

Socialists should support women in the Middle East and North Africa who are fighting sexism in order that they can participate fully in the wider struggle of men and women for a better life. Taking up women’s issues does not divide the socialist and trade union movement, on the contrary, it can only strengthen it.
Sex, Lies And Superinjunctions

By Esther Townsend

Issues around women’s sexuality, and sexual violence have been prominent in the media recently, and provoked people into defending women’s rights. But the people shouting and making noise across the world at events such as Slutwalk have been overwhelmingly young women, highlighting the particular pressures they face.

They are caught between the “don’t lie that it’s up to fast” perspective (i.e. they shouldn’t know about or engage in sex and relationships) and constant pressure in the media and society to look attractive and “sexy”. Young people’s sexual experiences often fall in the gap between these and are largely ignored.

Christine Bär’s landmark research (2010, NSPCC/University of Bristol) has shed new light on young relationships. The study showed high levels of violence in teenage relationships: 25% of girls and 18% of boys reported physical violence; three-quarters of girls and half of boys reported emotional abuse; and a third of girls and 16% of boys reported sexual violence.

Bär’s research highlights two key points: first, how young people viewed themselves in society, and, second, how this feeds into education and services they access.

SEXUALLY ASSAULTED, NOT ALIVE

One current superinjunction, covering the case of Celebrity Big Brother star Imogen Thomas, has been described as “a private matter” — and if discreetly. That is not how it feels to women. We cannot be discreet in our sex lives. Women are used to being watched, and to repressing our sexuality.

The state takes an interest in our personal lives because of the importance of reproduction and work in capitalist society. The most blatant case is that of benefit claimants, whose live-in partners are required to take financial responsibility for them. Unlike the superinjunction celebrities they cannot claim that their relationship is their own private business. The rules on cohabitation cause many women financial hardship and distress. Marriage is another example. You can’t have a private marriage: it has to be publicly witnessed. When a marriage ends, the individuals involved go to court — a public space — if they can’t agree on a divorce settlement.

We should see the superinjunction debate in the context of how the capitalist state regulates personal relationships, and the way that the press encourages acceptance of the social norms of monogamous marriage.

Superinjunctions at best save a few rich individuals from harassment. At worst they reinforce a hypocritical attitude towards sex that says — to men in particular — “we know you might stray, but just do it discreetly”. That is not a healthy approach to sex.

There is a need to think more critically about sex. Many women are able to identify abuse simply because it’s “not nice”. This ignores the fact that young people experience these issues directly and indirectly and that they need guidance in dealing with them.

Many of the young women in the study simply didn’t realise their partner was being abusive — for them control meant caring. And yet the Tory-Lib Dem government plans to reduce and limit sex education:

Following Bär’s research, the Home Office launched a campaign, “Expect...cuts!” Since we now know that young people face high levels of violence in their relationships, are we really going to tackle the problem? We need an education system which deals with these issues honestly and with respect for young people.

Everyone involved (young people, parents and carers, teachers and support staff) must be educated about these subjects and how to deal with them. Education should be age appropriate and sensitive, but it should also recognise that real lives don’t fit an idealised pattern.

We need additional inclusive, accessible and specific services for young people, not cuts!

Importantly, we need to start seeing young people as just that. Young People. They study, work, think about sex and have it, have relationships, and face challenges, including violence and harassment.

The way they experience issues will be new and different for them (with new technologies, different pressures) but young people deserve to have their concerns taken seriously.

Sun article, 2 Women’s Fightback

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The reality of carework is very different. There is no time to provide human companionship.

And what about women who work in the caring professions? A healthcare assistant working full-time can expect to earn around £1 an hour and bring home about £800 a month. The work is long, physically demanding, and involves anti-social hours, but can be worked around childcare which is one reason, rather than our supposed innate drive to care, why so many women work in this field. (Although, ironically, women in a home where I worked were told that a child being ill was no excuse for missing work.)

The conditions as well as the pay are disgraceful. Often little or no training is provided for what is an extremely challenging job. This coupled with chronic understaffing, leads to an almost factory-like processing of some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

Change, breakfast, television on. Change, lunch, sit in chair. Change, supper, time for bed. Even this most basic “care” is rushed, with little time for any more fulfilling human interaction.

Some companies provide only 15-minute home visits. That is barely time to get through the door, let alone wash, dress and feed someone. Especially for patients with dementia or mental health issues. For the person being cared for it might be a “choice” between being washed or eating.

Lifting frail residents improperly can and does result in deaths, yet it is possible to walk into a care job without a CRB check, having had no training at all. My agency told me that it didn’t know how to do something I shouldn’t say, but, rather, watch a couple of times before I attempted it myself.

It is common practice to provide workers with theory designed for feeding people to use whilst attending to personal care. These offer no protection from the germs commonly found in the bodily fluids routinely handled in this most glamorously line of work.

EMPLOYMENT LAWS FLOUTED

Employment laws state that there should be a minimum break of 11 hours between shifts. The laws are routinely broken, with staff arriving back at work as little as eight or nine hours after they left. This is due to poorly designed shift patterns.

We should remember how, at one time, even the idea of women being allowed to work or be unharmed was offensive to the labour movement itself. People thought women should be in the kitchen. As Trotskyists we believe that our role is to educate and agitate among workers, rather than just accept the status quo or reflect the movement as we find it.

The trade union movement, through struggles such as the Bryan & May “match girls” strike and the Ford Dagenham machinists’ strike, has progressed beyond that. Abortion is an issue for trade unions now because many trade unionists are women — PCS membership is around 80% female.

So how do we make such decisions as to whether, on the one hand, to respect all members’ rights or, on the other, to promote one set of values over another? The answer is, simply, trade unionists should take leading role in pushing a socialist agenda, not just accepting whatever views, including sometimes reactionary views, that the rank and file hold.

This is not to be patronising. As Trotskyists we believe that our role is to educate and agitate among workers, rather than just accept the status quo or reflect the movement as we find it.

If the trade union movement had not pushed the boundaries of the prejudices of some of its members, trade unionists would never have gained many of the rights that we enjoy today, including the rights of women.

The Annual conference of the civil service union PCS recently debated motions on abortion rights and Nadine Dorries’ “abstinence bill” (motions A131, A132 and E553).

Conference was almost unanimous for gender equal sex education. The high number of submissions opposing Dorries’ bill showed that the union is interested in such matters, and discussion ranged from a woman’s right to choose and control her body, to same-sex education and anti-capitalism.

Should we be surprised? Is it not a given that in the trade union movement women’s and LGBT rights are something we fight for? Well, for one or two branches, no — if those rights offend any group of members.

Motion A131 said that there is no place for abortion policy in the trade union movement and that PCS should disassociate from any influence from Abortion Rights. This case was lost in the absence of a commitment to PCS’s diversity policy, the assertion being that some members with “deeply held beliefs” will find a pro-choice policy offensive.

This case was pretty much laughed out of the conference, or at least the labour movement itself. People thought women should be out of the political field. (Allegedly innate drive to work in this field.) Should we be surprised?

The trade union movement has been pretty much passive on the issue of abortion policy, the exception being at the most passionate debate on diversity. At what point should we conclude our diversity policy is not strong enough to fight for women’s and female rights?

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Women workers in the Russian revolution

Part 3 of Elaine Jones’ four-part history of the role of women workers and socialist activists in the Russian Revolution.

During 1917 the Bolsheviks were agitating for an end to the war, explaining why it was an imperialist war. Some patriotic pro-war people set up the League of Personal Example and began to organise highly disciplined shock battalions or death battalions to fight which could, they hoped, convince people to die for their country. It was in this atmosphere that Maria Bochkareva was charged to create the 1st Russian Women’s Battalion of Death. In 1917, it fought in the “June offensive” on the Russian western front.

Maria Bochkareva organised her battalion with strict moral discipline and all the punishment and humiliation you would usually find in the army. Bolshevik agitators spread dissent in the battalion, arguing for a soldiers’ committee or for it to be disbanded. Kolontai reports that there were no proletarian women in the battalion, just peasants, wealthy women and students.

Liberal feminists lavished praise on The Battalion of Death. Anna Shulmanova hosted a meeting with speakers Ernestine Pankhurst and Bochkareva in June 1917. Pankhurst had been sent by Lloyd George to bolster the pro-war sentiment in Petrograd.

Another women’s battalion — the 1st Petrograd Women’s Battalion — was ordered to defend the Winter Palace against the Bolshevik-led insurrection on 25 October, but only 153 of the battalion were sent, and in the event even they refused to fight, saying their role was to fight at the front.

Undoubtedly the Bolsheviks, despite the limitations of early 1917, were the best propagandists and organisers of proletarian women in 1917. Everywhere women were being elected to serve on committees. The liberal feminists reorganized their organisation for the vote. Proletarian women too wanted suffrage. The Bolsheviks had to compete (to a certain extent, they were forced to compete) for the political allegiance of women.

By 1917 a third of Petrograd’s factory workers were women; half of the workers in the chemical industry were women; two-thirds of the foods in food, textiles and tailoring were women.

Women’s agitation began to find expression in non-party organisations — to wait for the revolution. As socialist feminists, we see our task as orienting the labour movement, and in many different campaigns — from reproductive freedom to migrant rights to the struggle against cuts. If you’re a feminist socialist, please consider joining us — and, in the meantime, write for and distribute Women’s Fightback to help win the biggest possible audience for socialist feminism.

Women’s Fightback

Socialist women

Nadezhda Krupskaya

She was the daughter of a radical army officer and a governess. In 1889, at the age of 20, she joined a St Petersburg Marxist circle. In the 1890s she married Marxism to workers in the industrial districts of St Petersburg. She was arrested in October 1896, a few months after her partner Lenin, and exiled to Siberia. She worked with Lenin for the rest of his life.

Kolontai on Krupskaya: “...Nadezhda Krupskaya did not speak at the numerous stormy meetings at which the people argued over the great question: would the Soviets dispense with war? She was a master of her own right, occasionally making a brief but telling comment at party meetings.

“In an age of national crisis and danger, when many stronger comrades lost heart and succumbed to despair, she held firm with her unswerving faith in the Bolshevik fact in exile. She died in 1920, from cholera.

Elena Stasova

Elena Stasova became a member of the Russian Social Democratic Party in 1898 and later an agent for the party’s underground news paper, “Iskra” — to move from city to city and take papers across borders.

Kollontai on Stasova: She had a “clear, high-pitched, rare woman’s voice, and an exceptional capacity for work, a rare ability to ‘spot’ the right person for the job... In her hands she holds a notebook, while around her press concedes the same, totally convinced of the rightness of the cause and of its certain victory.”

After Lenin’s death she supported the Joint Opposition against Stalin, before capitulating in 1928.

Klavdia Nikolayeva

Klavdia Nikolayeva was a working woman. She joined the Bolshevik faction in 1908; in 1910 she was arrested, subjected to a trial, and condemned to five years imprisonment. In 1913 she joined the Bolshevik Party.

Konkordia Samoilova

Konkordia Samoilova was born 1876, the daughter of a Siberian priest. She was, according to Kolontai, “a party worker of unparalleled selflessness, a fine, business-like speaker who knew how to win the hearts of workers, speak in simple, direct, in the command of the execution, strict both with herself and others.”