

# Positive Action - Women in our parties

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*“What is at the bottom of the incorrect attitude of our national sections? In the final analysis, it is an underestimation of women and of their accomplishments. That’s just what it is! Unfortunately we may still say of many of our comrades, “scratch the Communist and a philistine appears.” To be sure you have to scratch the sensitive spots, such as their mentality regarding women.” - (Clara Zetkin, Recollections of Lenin, 1919)*

## Introduction

There are three possible approaches in considering the importance of the real integration of women and of the struggle against sex discrimination in political organizations and in particular in our organizations.

First, from the point of view of the class struggle, that is the general political struggle. The integration of women is essential if we really want to achieve the unity of workers, of the proletariat. We cannot ignore the situation of women. But in building real unity of all the oppressed, we have to work with the various contradictions that still exist among the oppressed under patriarchal capitalist domination, resulting from women’s oppression and subordination. Today there is another element - the increase in the number of women in the organized labour force, a change in the social composition of the proletariat with a more acute differentiation in the exploitation based on sex differences - but this is an additional reason, not the fundamental one, for adopting an aggressive policy to integrate women into revolutionary organizations.

Second, from women’s point of view, our presence and effective participation in political organizations is a fundamental aspect of developing our identification as revolutionaries. If we start

from the need to incorporate individual members, in practice, over the long term, this identity is extremely weak if there are not a large number of women as it can then only be created by male discourse. This is why we are not talking about creating appendices to the revolutionary political project that give women a space, but about a construction which also involves women, in which the struggle against gender oppression is more than a programmatic discourse, but the transformation of daily practice in the field of gender with the development of the political elements necessary to transform society. In such a perspective the very presence of women, in both numerical strength and real political weight, is essential because, together with the development of the women's movement, this is the only guarantee that the demands and needs of women will be present with the radical dimension necessary to a revolutionary process. The experience of revolutions in various countries demonstrates this clearly. However liberated from patriarchy the male comrades are, any political organization or project of social organization in which women are not represented on an equal basis reproduces the forms of domination of women and their exclusion from public life.

Finally, from the point of view of the total socialist project that we want to develop, we cannot talk about socialism only in male terms, in which women will remain in the same sort of social division and roles, where they maintain a split personality and are potential and daily victims of the power and violence of men.

We also have to respond to the present situation in the workers' movement and in society. There is an organized pressure, a pressure from women, not only for the integration of feminism and women's demands, but also for a numerical increase of women in political and trade union organizations. This stems from the pressure of the organized women's movement and from the objective changes which have taken place over the last decades in the social situation of women: at the level of education, the integration in the labour market, the extension of contraceptive means, some alterations in the structure of the family.

The bourgeoisie in various regions, in Latin America, in Europe and probably in other parts of the world, has been rather flexible and rapid in responding to the pressures created by this new situation. It has tried to broaden the base of its rule by adopting some aspects of feminist discourse and even by allocating some token spaces to women. Despite the limits of such policies, they have been made more successful by the weakness of our response. This is particularly so when, as in the majority of the cases, we have limited ourselves to the adoption of a discourse defending the rights of women without changing our political practice or increasing the effective presence of women in the spheres of power in our own organizations. The social democratic parties have made progress in the sense of establishing quotas of women in their electoral lists or in the party leadership bodies. It is true in general that these measures have not been accompanied by radical demands for the social transformations necessary to end women's oppression. But it is also true to say that they have been more daring in their proposals to increase the number of women than most revolutionary parties and than our own sections.

We will attempt to briefly explain the difficulties in women's political participation and the obstacles deriving from these.

In political organizations, there is a general dynamic of exclusion of women. The "natural" dynamic is not the presence or participation of women but rather the reproduction of the social dynamic of discrimination and exclusion of women from public spaces.

First we can say that the division between private and public continues within our political organizations and our political vision itself. The social role attributed to women - primarily within the family and in private reproduction - prevents women from developing social and political participation on an equal footing. This is also a central element in the construction of our

personality: the way in which we perceive the possibilities or absence of possibilities of entering into public life. Women's participation in political life demands a break from their education and socialization in order to enable them to move into a space which is not normally assigned to them. This division, taken at the level of a party, implies that the male comrades have enormous difficulties in relating to women as political beings and reproduce the way they divide between public and private in their relations inside the party. For this reason we accept a schizophrenic behaviour in which there is no coherence between public and private life. This is a source of permanent tensions between men and women in their relations inside a political organization.

The second question is related to the sexual division of labour. It is obvious that the clearest part of this division is the permanent allocation to women of domestic work, of responsibility for the family and home. Although there have been some progress in some countries, the bulk of domestic work and responsibility still falls on women. For most activists this bourgeois ideology which forms the family structures remains practically intact, essentially because of the privileges and facilities it offers men in their political relations. This aspect of the sexual division of labour deprives women not only of time for political activity but also absorbs most of our personal, political and intellectual energy.

Within parties this type of division is reproduced in many ways. The women do the menial work, and the men do the political work. Within political organizations we reproduce the same mechanisms of depreciation of women's work as in the labour market. It is like the reverse of the tale of King Midas: whatever we touch is devalued. The best example could be the different value given to organizational work when done by men or by women.

The third point relates to the continuation of patriarchal power established inside parties. This patriarchal power, power of men over women, manifests itself by the maintenance of an immense authoritarianism of men: women's discourse is devalued, and must be backed up by a man; in some cases, leaders use their position to obtain emotional and sexual privileges from women.

These are some of the elements that create this dynamic of exclusion of women from the political organizations.

### **Why this discussion is necessary in the Fourth International today**

Most women comrades agree that they joined revolutionary parties to make a revolution that was both socialist and feminist. This is why we want to build parties that are socialist and feminist, and why we have put this discussion on the agenda as part of the discussion on building the Fourth International. A combination of internal and external, positive and negative, factors make it necessary to return to this discussion:

- The International as a whole failed to consolidate politically and organizationally the gains made in the debate on women's liberation at the 1979 World Congress. There has been a general decline in the political level of debate and education in the sections, and a process of depoliticization particularly on the questions of women's liberation. The debate on special measures was left unfinished and arrived at some mistaken conclusions.
- The sections were slow to analyse the changing character in the workforce and what effect this had on the political recomposition of the workers' movement. While we were able to state that in the current economic crisis women would not be driven from the workforce, we tended to underestimate the significance of the ideological offensive of the ruling class on questions of the family, reproduction, sexuality and racism. Consequently, we were unprepared for their effect on the

workers' movement.

- In several countries in Western Europe and the United States a downturn in the mass activity of the independent women's movement has taken place, in other cases the women's movement, under the impact of the economic crisis, has moved to the right. All too often the sections have reacted to these events by deprioritizing women's liberation work. But when trade unions are on the defensive revolutionary organizations do not conclude that it is impossible to recruit working people. And even when there is a downturn in the women's movement or the feminist current is weak, this is not an excuse to put our feminist goals on the shelf.

- In some countries in the Third World there has been a massive process of women's organization around demands of the general struggle. When women from popular sectors began to mobilize, at the same time several of our sections started to do broader work both in unions and in other mass sectors that were on the move, amongst them women. However, this implied an enormous pressure on the women comrades who worked in specifically feminist groups to leave them because they were not "mass" organizations. Faced with this pressure, many comrades abandoned work in specifically feminist sectors, or left the sections. In this way, we lost trained women cadre and later found ourselves without participation or very often legitimacy in the feminist sectors of the women's movement when they began to move nearer to the mass movements and with a big backwardness in our level of discussion on feminism both inside and outside our organizations.

In those cases where - on making the turn to these mass women's movements - feminism became secondary, positive action measures were also weakened and women militants' situation inside the party suffered accordingly. There is also an organic discontinuity in our organizations: sections have appeared and disappeared since 1979.

- In general, the sections did not foresee these sorts of problems or think about how to help comrades to confront them. We were not conscious of how much women developed out of their direct experience as participants and leaders of the women's movement and therefore we did not take conscious measures to pass on those lessons and skills to younger women members, especially as they were unable to obtain this experience directly.

- In Western Europe we have seen the development of young women as political leaders in youth organizations. This indicates that positive action can have an impact on changing the revolutionary party as well. Two factors explain the capacity of revolutionary youth organizations to incorporate young women into leadership structures. Most importantly, youth groups are constantly preoccupied with leadership renewal. The search for new leaders places emphasis on conscious leadership development. This sets the stage for allowing young women to think of themselves as potential leaders and to receive the necessary training. Second, young people's consciousness has been influenced by feminism and they have less need to cling to past habits. Young women are more insistent on change, young men are at least a bit more open to change.

In Third World countries, young people constitute a considerably larger proportion of the population than in industrialized countries. While the great majority of young women have not been directly influenced by feminism, they have been brought up in a period of economic and political crisis which has objectively presented them with a situation where women are more present in public life than were previous generations. Nevertheless, women continue to be subjected to the most brutal forms of oppression. At the same time, a large number of children and adolescents continue to have children themselves, which means their social and political integration takes place in ways more similar to that of adults than is the case for young women in developed countries. This is one of the reasons why neither youth movements nor youth organizations in solidarity with the Fourth International have developed. The development of young women as revolutionary leaders generally

occurs in the framework of the adult organizations, which implies specific contradictions in their participation and the need to pay particular attention to their development.

In addition, most young people are freer of responsibilities than they will ever be again. This is particularly true for women. Therefore the skills and attitudes gained during this period of rapid change will be important for years to come. If women gain political confidence as leaders in the youth organization, this can provide an essential framework for advance in the revolutionary party.

- Many sections have decided to adopt some form of positive action plan following debates over the lack of full integration and/or loss of women members. These plans vary according to each national situation. Examples include inviting women's commissions to Central Committee meetings, establishing women's fractions on a national basis, holding special educationals on women's oppression, setting various targets to increase women's participation in leading bodies, holding special meetings where women can discuss and monitor a positive action plan.

The efforts that have been made in the last few years by some sections to change the situation using goals or quotas of women in the leaderships (particularly at national level) have shown that:

- It is possible in the majority of sections to considerably raise the number of women in leadership bodies; there are women capable of taking on these tasks and if they were not assigned to them previously it was because of the obstacles which existed.
- In the bodies in which more women are incorporated than previously as a result of this mechanism - insofar as this is accompanied by a discussion among them of the problems they face as militants, and the party continues to build the movement - this can improve the conditions for their political work. If more account is taken of the need for women's training, internal discussions on sexist violence take on another tone and relationship of forces, their needs are legitimized as needs for the leadership body (and not personal ones) in relation to meeting hours and forms of discussion; our external policy on women can be discussed with greater insistence and precision, etc. In summary, the conditions are created for establishing a relationship of forces between women and men which create conditions making it possible to change the unfavourable situation for women, and thus help the positive development of the organization as a whole.

However, even in those cases where women have been in a majority in leadership bodies, they have not had the same power as the men. For example, they have lacked the informal networks and political authority of the longer-serving men. The men still set the tone of the meetings and determined the political agenda. Even when women were quite numerous in the leadership, they frequently suffered from overwork and felt less effective. They saw that they had less back-up within the organization than the male comrades. Thus, positive action has not solved all the problems - in fact it has often helped to identify new ones.

- In most Third World countries where we have sections, women militants face additional types of problems in their political work: parties prefer men to establish relations with other parties because of misogynist traditions and sometimes justify excluding women from leadership on this basis; the lack of acceptance of women in public spheres; difficulties women face in fulfilling political assignments because it is often dangerous or illegal to be out at night or to travel. In cases of clandestine groups or where cultures isolate women's lives to an extraordinary extent or when the feminist movement is weak or not present at all, as in many Third World countries, the difficulties of women militants become greater. Also, recruiting women becomes more difficult.

- The general problems of leadership functioning often find their sharpest reflection among specifically oppressed layers within the party: women, youth, immigrant workers, members of

oppressed nations and races, etc. This reveals both an unhealthy process of leadership selection and a weakness in finding ways to help members who face specific social obstacles to their political development. Informal discussion and collaboration between comrades to prepare meetings and decisions are important aspects of collective working, but a process from which women are usually excluded. Informal discussions with women comrades usually deal with questions other than the political discussions and decisions to take. Even when proposals are to be put forward that concern a woman comrade's political responsibilities or tasks it is not an automatic reflex on the part of male comrades to consult with her.

- Given limited resources and time pressures, sections often merely reproduce society's sexual division of labour. The criteria for selecting leadership are frequently biased against the selection of women because it has an inbuilt set of assumptions based on a "masculine" model that have not been consciously analysed. For example, when women comrades are proposed for tasks, sometimes the limits on their activity because they are mothers comes into the discussion. In the same discussion, on proposing a male comrade for this task, the discussion does not take into account that he has children, which may or may not limit his ability to take on this task. Underlying this is the tacit acceptance that childcare falls on the woman comrade, not on the male comrade. It is also common for there to be stricter criteria for evaluating women, not only in terms of their political capacities but also, in some cases, their personal behaviour.

These obstacles mean that leadership selection tends to eliminate women from these responsibilities, depending on the level of the leadership body: there are fewer women in local leaderships than in the base; fewer in the regional than local leaderships; fewer in the national than in the regional; and fewer still in the international than the national.

Given the competitive atmosphere in leadership bodies and a lack of self-confidence among women, women in leadership positions who manage to survive are sometimes forced into traditional "helping" roles, relegating themselves into seeking advice from a male mentor with more knowledge and experience or ending up by taking refuge in the technical aspect of their task.

- Political debates aimed at discussing women's problems and issues have often been hijacked for other purposes or, alternatively, women have been forced to discuss their concerns within the straightjacket of a factional framework, given that they did not have the power or experience to transform the overall climate of the organization.

We have perpetuated styles of debate that do not create forums in which genuine discussion can take place. Instead of being able to move forward on the basis of these discussions, debates become battlegrounds in which "winning" involves using forms of psychological terrorism to "smash" your opponent. Faction fights often had the effect of either demoralising women, causing them to withdraw from the leadership, or encouraging women to adopt these norms of behaviour to "prove" themselves equal to men.

This intimidating atmosphere is also difficult for many male members to deal with but unlike most women they try to overcome these problems by adjusting to the competitive mechanisms and conforming to male leadership models. Thus it is clear that a central problem is the lack of collective functioning, which reinforces the existing sexual division of labour. (Weakness in collective functioning is also revealed by other divisions such as between youth and adults, workers and intellectuals.) It is not always possible for women to challenge such forms of functioning head on - in fact, it takes a great deal of leadership experience to figure out how to organize a successful challenge.

- Women face specific problems because of their day-to-day responsibilities and their social

conditioning. Of course women come into revolutionary parties from different social and educational backgrounds, with different sexual orientations, and at different ages and periods of struggle. Therefore they have differing levels of experience, knowledge and self-confidence. Women do not always manifest their lack of confidence by timidity - the opposite can occur. Placed in positions of responsibility women can also react by becoming defensively aggressive. But however individual women have dealt with the sections' leadership structures, the present structures of the organizations indirectly discriminate against women. If we do not adopt and monitor positive action plans, this process will only continue.

- An uneven consciousness on the problems facing women has been a historical problem for the Marxist movement. It has led to a different appreciation of feminism and what constitutes "proletarian morality." Issues such as sexual violence and intimidation have not been fully discussed and resolved in our movement. But the positive and negative experiences of several sections provide the basis for our drawing some definite conclusions regarding unacceptable behaviour towards women comrades and women in general.

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Much that is said here has general implications for party building and is not the exclusive experience of women members. We would argue that a positive action plan represents a break with spontaneist conceptions of party building. There cannot be a policy of feminization without a worked-out project of building the revolutionary organization as a whole. The debate around positive action can be used to strengthen the whole organization, its apparatus, education and collective functioning. Some conclusions flow from this debate:

- a. The national sections need to be alert to new forms of women's radicalization and the political evolution of debates in the women's movement.
- b. Sections need to stress their socialist feminist goals more boldly.
- c. Women in the sections need to wage a collective battle, with the support of the whole organization, to transform the way in which the sexual division of labour manifests itself within the party.
- d. Key to building a collective leadership in revolutionary parties is an awareness of how the sexual division of labour manifests itself. The only way that can be overcome inside the revolutionary organization is through a monitored program of positive action. The development of a collective leadership will not come about spontaneously, but only through a series of thought-out proposals.

## **Past experiences - women and the revolutionary Marxist movement**

This section will outline some specific features of women's past involvement in revolutionary parties:

Under capitalism the rise of the class struggle led to a rise in women's self-activity and involvement in radical and socialist movements. The founders of Marxism contributed certain bases to a materialist understanding of women's oppression. However, the Marxist points of view in relation to women's self-organization have evolved with time according to the degree of pressure exercised by the mass of women, both within the party and in society as a whole.

At the beginning of the century, revolutionaries usually opposed the autonomous organization of women, arguing that women need to be organized as communists. But as a way to get around Bismarck's repressive laws, socialist women in Germany organized separately from men and a vibrant political movement developed. Certain specific forms of women's activity were maintained even when the law was changed (for example, celebrating International Working Women's Day, publication of a women's magazine).

Lenin, Clara Zetkin and other leaders of the Third International discussed a broader approach, particularly during the debates on the united front and work within colonized countries. Specific measures to organize women workers included women's departments of the party and women's journals. The backing of the international bodies of the Second and Third Internationals was vital to combat backwardness in different national situations. Special measures were adopted to organise women's work in the colonial world. (See Resolutions of the Third Congress of the Comintern, 1921)

Today we are committed to organizing women around their own needs (economic, social, ideological). This means building an autonomous women's movement on a revolutionary basis. We emphasise campaigns that involve masses of women in action and project the need to build alliances with other social movements, especially working to deepen the ties between the women's movement and trade unions. In countries where the majority of women first become active in their social sector, as in the Third World, we emphasize mass action and the need to unite women as such around their gender demands. We also seek to attract women to the revolutionary party.

In the past individual women were prominent within a variety of revolutionary parties. These were primarily intellectuals who led unconventional lives, the most well known being Alexandra Kollontai and Rosa Luxemburg. Their biographies illustrate that the lives of women revolutionaries were full of personal dilemmas. But they were forced to make a stronger break with conventional morality and family life than male revolutionaries of that time and place. Clearly one vital ingredient to their survival as political people was the network of female friendship and support they built.

Modern feminism has begun to unearth information about the role of working class women in earlier socialist and working class movements (for example, utopian socialism, the suffragette movement, the German Social Democracy) but their participation was still much more limited than the possibilities open to women today.

The changing pattern of women's lives, the continued entry of women into the paid workforce, the influence of feminism, the greater cultural and political level of the mass of women and increased access to fertility control make it far more possible today to win broad layers of women to revolutionary parties, and to see them develop as leaders, than ever before. Nonetheless, the stages of women's lives and the fact that women are still the primary child-rearers means that women are still more often expected to make choices between being a mother and being a revolutionary militant, not to mention taking a leadership role in the organization. We need to do what we can to lessen the impact of the special problems women face and convince individual party members through our practice that we are serious.

## **Women and the Fourth International**

Our information on the early history of the FI from this point of view is very limited but our initial impression is that the downturn in the 1950s included a low awareness of feminism. However a number of articles in the FI press indicate that a certain level of understanding on the nature of women's oppression existed, but there was little discussion on the issue. Traditionally women in the FI were "helpmates" who did the small organizational tasks that kept the sections going during the



hard times. Often they held fulltime jobs, assuming the role of breadwinner, thereby providing the section with the possibility of paying their husbands a meagre movement salary.

The rise of the second wave of feminism had a big impact on the FI. Comrades in Canada and the United States led the turn to the women's movement, partly because the feminist movement and the campaign for abortion rights developed there earlier than in most other countries. As the result of women comrades' involvement in a feminist movement and as women were recruited to the revolutionary organizations from that movement, sections developed a relatively high proportion of women members. While the revolutionary parties of the pre-World War I socialist movement never exceeded a female membership of 10%, in the 1970s a few sections had more than 40% women members.

By the mid-1970s the sections of the FI were plunged into feminist campaigns. Our international press reflected strategic debates from the feminist movement and reported on new research on women's history. The International proved its usefulness in promoting an international campaign on abortion rights. Women's Commissions in Europe, the United States and Mexico all contributed to the 1979 debate on the political and ideological analysis that formed the resolution on women's liberation. The debate on positive action was concentrated in Europe, Canada, the U.S.A., and Australia precisely because they already agreed on many basic issues about women's oppression, because there was a mass feminist movement in these countries. Although in its analysis of the modern movement it reflected basically the experience of the advanced capitalist countries, this text was fundamental for educating comrades in the basic principles of feminism, although the discussion remained uncompleted and the assimilation of the principles laid out was partial and unequal.

Today, we have to revise some of the conclusions of the discussion. It was dominated by an inadequate and idealistic vision on the assimilation of our programme. We were not able to consolidate in terms of organization what we understood politically, because the document had an idealistic conception of the way in which men's sexist and heterosexist attitudes could be challenged and failed to analyse how they were reproduced in different generations, including among revolutionaries. This applies to all questions related to the family and sexuality - not only women's position but everything which challenges the heterosexual model, and to religious prejudices - not the individual right to religion and faith, but conservative traditions in relation to women.

The other weakness of the document was to put forward the goal of full political, social and legal equality of women as if it could be achieved by a spontaneous and gradual extension of the rights of men. This idea did not take into account the dynamic of exclusion of women from public spaces and of men's privileges.

The degree of organization of women in the FI at this stage was halted by the effects of the turn in some sections, or by the ill thought-out and schematic idea of being "a useful party" with mass influence in others, although women participated in both processes. Additionally, one aspect of the turn to industry was to emphasize sectors of the industrial working class that are overwhelmingly male.

Combined with the declining impact of the women's movement, this led to a loss of women cadre, particularly the layers of women recruited in the early 1970s. Recruitment of women declined and the organization saw the work of women comrades active in the women's liberation movement as less central - leading to the marginalization of feminism within many sections.

For the women who made the turn into male-dominated industries, many faced problems of sexual harassment and isolation from other women workers. Women who stayed in public sector unions, or

in “female” occupations, found their experiences ignored. There was also a loss of prestige in many sections for those women who had led a mass women’s movement but who no longer had such a strong base from which to operate. Unless they could learn to operate in another milieu they were seen as less valuable to their sections and marginalized.

A crucial error was ending the International Women’s Commission in the International, especially given the small number of women in the International leadership. Between 1979 and 1985, at the same time as new sections were joining the International, there was no collective reflection on the political questions posed by the women’s movement in advanced capitalist countries or the rise in new opportunities, given women’s self-organization in the semi-colonial world.

In several countries when our comrades pointed to how women were discriminated against in political and public life, they found themselves in a compromising position. Women faced the same situation within their own party. If we are to build egalitarian and revolutionary parties, we must overcome this contradiction and reflect the full participation of women in our own internal life and public activities.

Pressure for formal reports at the Latin American and European Political Bureaus led to reports on the situation of women in Europe and Latin America and a self-critical resolution on the Place of Women in the FI at the 1986 IEC. A document on Europe was passed at the 1987 IEC and a report was given on Latin American feminism. A report on Women in the Third World was also on the agenda of the 1988 IEC.

The principle of positive action was revived in the 1986 debate. Both International and European structures were established for the coordination of women’s work. Mechanisms for advancing political analysis and coordination for the Latin American sections were also agreed upon. But there is a discontinuity between the work and theorization we did a decade ago and what we are attempting to launch now. The women’s movement has changed dramatically. Today it is vibrant in places it did not exist ten years ago, and vice versa. One question we must ask ourselves is what kind of positive action is appropriate now?

### **What we mean by “positive action” for women and why it is necessary**

A revolutionary organization exists to organise the mass of the working class in alliance with the oppressed masses to take state power and transform all social relations of exploitation and oppression. It is this strategic goal which provides the basis for the united action of members of revolutionary parties. The active involvement of the working class in the revolutionary party is a pre-condition for even beginning to attain these goals, as it is the decisive force for revolutionary change. The hegemony of the working class must be promoted within the revolutionary organization.

Alongside this understanding must go an appreciation of the changing nature of the modern proletariat. New layers are becoming part of the proletariat both in the semi-colonial world and in Western Europe. Most often these are specifically oppressed groups, including blacks, women, oppressed national minorities - groups which the organised labour movement often ignores. If revolutionary parties are blind to colour, sex, nationality, caste and social or class position they will end up reinforcing inequality. This would be like fighting to end inequality by failing to liberate the motor force necessary to carry out the task. Positive action for women is not counterposed to developing proposals for any other specially oppressed layer. In fact, women are often members of those other oppressed groups. Therefore many of the reforms that women want to implement will enable these other oppressed groups to play a stronger role in the party.

Positive action means taking concrete steps to break down barriers to women's participation in the political life of the party. It means recognising the discrimination that women face in society today. It takes into account the social differences between women as well as recognises the oppression that is common to them as a sex. Positive action fits best in an overall plan that takes account of the existing needs and strengths of the organization. It needs to consider the party's next steps. It requires a conscious and self-critical approach to the history and development of revolutionary organizations. It rejects the notion that these problems can "work themselves out naturally." Positive action measures are "artificial" because we want to combat the "natural" tendency.

In the life of our parties very often the forms of functioning and debating derive from the sexual division of labour. The mode of functioning, the nature of leadership and the style of work all operate on what is essentially "masculine" terrain. The privilege of individual development is counterposed to collective work. What prevails is a markedly greater value given to individual development, to personal initiatives and competition to the detriment of collective work. If we are to build a collective leadership team that can incorporate the skills, insights and experiences of the women cadre, we must find ways to cut across this unhealthy division. Not only are skills fragmented along gender lines, but those that have been ghettoized into women's sphere are overlooked and devalued, in the sections as well as in the labour market.

Essential to the process of developing leadership criteria is the necessity of identifying the variety of leadership skills necessary for the organization's growth, and not just those skills that are seen as typically "male." The truth of the matter is that the stress on individual initiative and competition has too often produced a battleground of contending forces rather than a coherent organization in which debates and differences are resolved in an atmosphere of genuine respect. Both the skills of abstract theorising and the skills of working collectively must be integrated into criteria for leadership. These need to be woven into the political fabric of the revolutionary party and learned by all, and renewed as the leadership is renewed.

A further problem is the different criteria for political evaluation, not only for the allocation of work but for the individuals as well. This is striking in the case of positions considered important when the situation of women is taken into account concerning their having children or not, the way they live their sexuality or other considerations which have a different weight when they apply to men or to women. It is worth mentioning here that these prejudices also apply to homosexuality whether male or female.

Thus it becomes vital that the whole organization develop a commitment to challenging that reproduction of the sexual division of labour, it is not possible to leave the task to individuals or to the women only - but women will be a major factor in assuring that we will reach our goal. It must be the whole weight of the organization that pushes against the routinism and inertia of the sexual division of labour.

In addition, the symbols used by political organizations are symbols of male power. Not only in terms of language but of aggressivity, and of everything which is developed in the representation of politics. It is very frequent to find an extremely intimidating atmosphere in debates and discussions not only in the way they take place but also because of the frighteningly large number of men which always puts women in an extremely unfavourable relation of strength. This is even more true when we have no means of fighting against social mechanisms of discrimination against women be it in terms of crèches, issues linked to maternity, times of the meetings, and all the other issues which make women's political participation difficult depending on their social situation. We know very well that there are limits: political organizations cannot get rid of the social differences that exist in society and this is all the more difficult the smaller the organizations are. But this cannot be an excuse for not attempting to find alternative ways of enabling women's political participation.

We can say that the political milieu is still marred by an atmosphere, behaviour and forms of relations which exert daily violence on women. Whether in the use of language, in offensive patronising, in manipulations, in psychological violence, fear is imposed by certain forms of functioning or debate, including the physical and sexual violence which is not absent in revolutionary organizations. And here, in general we find the development of a type of patriarchal and sexist solidarity among men which makes even more difficult to fight against this violence.

Another problem is the undervaluing of feminist work. The weakness of our intervention in the movement imposes great limitations on the feminization of our organizations. The pressure of the movement is fundamental to alter the relations of strength in favour of women. But the weaknesses or setbacks of the movement cannot be an excuse for us not to participate in it, and even less for not developing policies of effective struggle against discrimination in political organizations. Our organizations cannot be so vulnerable that they change their attitude to feminist work according to what happens in the movement. This type of change has however a negative consequence on the militancy of women and their decision to do or not to do feminist work, because this area of political work has little status. It is evident that our militant activities are valued on the basis of other elements and not by feminist work.

In addition, our male-dominated parties produce political analyses that constantly miss out a gender analysis. We can produce conjunctural analyses as if women did not exist; we discuss revolutionary processes without women; we make general political analyses of a given society as if women did not exist.. On top of that, women's work remains treated as if it was only the work of women and not of the party as a whole, including its leading bodies. Here again we can see a very negative dynamic of neutralization and division of women which undermines the building of our strength as militants.

The consequence of this dynamic of exclusion means that women in general stay on the margins of the general political project. And we feel on the margins because in fact we are. Not because of any psychological problem specific to women, but fundamentally because we pay a very high personal price to try to reaffirm our revolutionary political identity every day when it does not exist inside our organizations. This leads to a great loss of women cadres, who take much longer to be replaced. And it weakens our intervention.

## **Recruiting women to revolutionary parties**

Part of this discussion includes looking at the image our sections project. We want to make sure our sections are attractive to women and provide suitable environments for the training and development of women cadre. We can do this by considering our public image:

- We need to have a profile which clearly reflects our commitment to winning women to our perspectives. This means utilizing symbols and heroes that incorporate women's revolutionary experiences, as well as covering issues from women's perspectives - whether this means discussing problems of everyday life, sexual politics and sexual orientations, community or trade union issues, or international concerns - developing women as educators, propagandists, writers, candidates and spokespeople for the sections. It means developing collaborative relations with women who are leaders of a variety of social movements, and making sure interviews and statements by them appear in the party press whenever appropriate. That is, in every way, the presence of women in the revolutionary process is affirmed.
- The party needs to experiment with structures that can help to draw women sympathizers closer to the organization. Women's book clubs, educationals specifically designed for women (sometimes involving men, other times only for women) or more externally-oriented women's clubs are all

methods to be considered. In the semi-colonial countries it has been useful to have workshops where the relationship between women's oppression and problems of daily life is demonstrated.

- The party's organizational structures and methods of operating need to be reconsidered in the light of providing a supportive and collaborative atmosphere for women. Above all, it means developing a political atmosphere in which members are not made to feel "stupid" or intimidated, either by unwanted sexual advances, sexual harassment or elitist attitudes. Central is the development of non-factional styles of debate and a comradely spirit of working together. Such an environment will reinforce women's self-confidence and allow for growth.

- We also understand that the size of the organization implies problems of a particular nature in line with its growth. The smaller the organization the more difficult it will be to identify the problems women confront as objective problems of a social character. The growth of the party with a greater number of women means giving greater attention to women's special problems. This means changing our educational methods, functioning and language, and also discussing the importance of organizing childcare for meetings and external events of the party. Independently of which collective solutions appear appropriate, it is important to note that mothers and fathers need to be sure that their children are being looked after properly. Ill-prepared childcare is just as disruptive to our functioning as ill-prepared meetings.

### **What other measures should a positive action plan include?**

The development of a policy of positive action means the development of a general policy and not of isolated measures. A general policy to fight against the "natural" dynamic of exclusion. In that sense, it is obviously artificial since the "natural" means the exclusion of women. Here we can say that the first condition lies with the alteration of the relation of strength. To this aim we need not only to develop a general programmatic and political integration but also to develop a conscious policy to change our functioning, to ensure a fundamental policy of integration of women in the leadership and leadership tasks. We, women and men in political parties have known for a long time that real changes do not occur if there are no changes in the leaderships.

Added to this it is fundamental for the building of the strength of women to be able to organise internally in all the ways necessary to the various objectives of building our strength: in numerical terms, in terms of the organizational conditions, of the development of solidarity amongst women. Implementation of only one measure, whichever it is, as the solution to the problem, has a limited effect.

However, it is important to give some ideas on possible measures to be included in such a policy:

#### **Organizing our feminist work**

**i.** Creating and/or strengthening women's commissions in the sections.

**ii.** Strengthening bodies that exist to organise the women's liberation work in the International and encouraging regional organizing among women in the FI.

**iii.** Regularly discussing women's liberation work on leading bodies and taking collective responsibility for any problems that arise. Disagreements and differences among women will emerge and should not be viewed as unhealthy. They do not have to be hidden from the organization as a whole.

**iv.** Inviting members of women's commissions to discussions of the leadership if they are not members of the relevant body.

## **Education**

**i.** Placing a high priority on education, debate and analysis of women's liberation issues for all members and ensuring that some understanding of these issues is central to the criteria for recruitment.

**ii.** Organising educational events in which women play an equal or majority role. Ensuring that styles of delivery are not so traditional that they discourage women and less experienced comrades from participating.

**iii.** The European schools/extended fraction meetings have been relatively successful given the small resources put into building them and because they bring together comrades who have experience in organising over a long period with younger comrades who are today leading the youth organizations.

**iv.** The educational aspect of the Latin American fraction meetings has been important in developing a common understanding between the comrades of a certain number of theoretical and political questions. This type of initiative should continue in these two regions and be extended to others when possible.

**v.** The first international FI women's seminar was successful. We must ensure that the second is equally so.

## **Party image and profile**

**i.** Ensuring the press has articles by and about women - and covers issues of particular concern to women. Pamphlets and other publications need to have a feminist profile.

**ii.** Ensuring that we have recruitment campaigns aimed at women.

## **Leadership**

**i.** Ensuring that women are visible as leaders of the organization.

**ii.** Encouraging the development of young women as political leaders in the youth organizations and sections.

**iii.** Taking time to train women in branches and national leadership responsibilities so that they feel competent in the tasks they perform.

**iv.** Not overburdening a small number of women with so many tasks that they become "burnt out" and are forced to withdraw from activity.

**v.** Making knowledge of, and interest in, questions of women's liberation a criteria for participation in the leadership.

## **General behaviour and functioning**

**i.** Having a code of practice that specifically outlaws forms of sexual intimidation and violence.

**ii.** Avoiding sexist language and jokes.

**iii.** Organising meetings that allow for maximum participation through adequate preparation of chairing and speaking procedures that ensure equal rights to all participants.

**iv.** Taking account of the problems of parents with children in planning national and local events.

**v.** There is a need to place a higher value on developing a convivial atmosphere in our political activity, eg having socials at political events.

### **Self-organization and democratic centralism**

In relaunching the debate on this question we have to be clear about the parameters of a revolutionary organization. It is impossible to liberate women without overthrowing the private property relations which reproduce women's subordination in society. Membership in a revolutionary organization is conditioned by this understanding. No one particular form of organization can end the oppression of women.

Many comrades use this objective limitation to argue that "not much can be done, women cannot be liberated without changing the social structures and making the revolution." We must reject categorically this type of reasoning as being conservative and reactionary.

Revolutionary Marxist organizations, understanding material limitations, must adopt an attitude of creating all the counter-tendencies possible today to existing oppression. We do this in relation to the limits of the workers' movement and racial oppression. It also has to be done as regards women's oppression.

But revolutionary organizations can take steps to reach out to women on their terms, look at their political experiences and adjust their own functioning to make them as women-friendly as possible. Women's fractions, commissions and organizers can help push this process forward.

In general the most positive experiences and the most political discussions take place where the leadership through the CC or the Women's Commission has structured these discussions. The idea of special women's meetings to discuss political questions relevant to women and to which all women in the organization are invited to attend, can be a good model to promote the self-organization of women.

### **Criteria for leadership**

The leadership question is one important aspect of the positive action debate. If approached without an overall plan it will not address the problems of women throughout the organization. We have to have objective criteria for leadership that guarantee a real change in the composition and functioning of leaderships. Just as political continuity is a factor in leadership selection, so is working in a collective team, taking the lead in developing key areas of work, having earned the political confidence of rank-and-file activists and comrades. When a leadership constantly under-represents the number of women in the whole organization it is a sign that the body itself is somewhat disfunctional. We should aim for parity where possible but this should not be a rigid, inflexible schema because women do not wish to reverse roles but to transform the workings of the party. Where parity is not possible we should adopt targets to increase women's representation in relevant leadership bodies.

One suggestion for helping to integrate new women onto leadership bodies is that they should be given time to learn their new tasks and an opportunity to identify practices in the organization they think need changing. This is best facilitated by women's commissions, fractions or a specific caucus meeting that can help to identify such areas and organize report-backs to the relevant leadership

bodies. Leadership bodies need to be held accountable for the organization as a whole.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this document is to restart the debate on positive action. In a sense, it comes ten years after it should have been written. But it is not too late to crystallise organizational as well as political gains out of an important period of women's radicalization, backed up by the self-organization of women and promoted by the leadership.

The women's movement does not have the institutional expression of the trade unions. We have tried to create structures and an understanding inside our sections and the International so that revolutionary continuity on the problems of women are not lost or abandoned. In some countries the women's movement has faced a downturn. But the lessons are not lost for that country or internationally if the gains of modern feminism are fully reflected in both our programme and our practice. It is only by working through the proposals in all the sections that we will be able to make an international balance sheet on this question.

It is worth restating the positive nature of the policy which has been developed in the recent years by the FI. A series of important measures have been applied, which are not however sufficient. The central challenge which remains is that of obtaining this type of policy in a more complete way inside the sections. By taking such special measures, within the framework of unifying the party as a whole, we will not only counter any philistinism among communists, but win and keep more women in our ranks. This is central to ensuring that the political projects of our organizations are collective projects of women and men.