

Why the Independent Women's Movement

Why Feminism is a Theory and Practice That Will Move the World Towards Liberty Statements to the Left 1982-1986

by Lee Lakeman

In the fall of 1982 I was invited to participate in a panel of three women: Jackie Larkin, Drena McCormick and myself. "In Struggle" was the host group.

In Struggle was a Marxist-Leninist group organized across Canada and Quebec from 1975 to 1982. This talk was part of a series designed to open up debates on the part (I.S.) and in the left.

I agreed to speak largely because two members of I.S. – I assumed with agreement from their group had been actively helping Rape Relief raise money from unions to support our transition house.

Speaking to members of In Struggle frightened and challenged me. I still found it difficult to feel as well as think that my choices to struggle as a feminist and not as a member of a Communist or Anarchist grouping was not a choice for partiality. Even as I write this sentence, I can see the sexism in it. "Everything female is incomplete", that is - not male, not whole.

I was anxious to say what I thought was wrong with vanguardism, not by analyzing the left, but by highlighting the feminist.

I was particularly irritated by leftists who believed they had to lead the rest of us - especially when "lead" had come to mean teach, direct, and pull rather than "set and example" or "enable with money or goals" the leftists in my experience were often patronising if only by refusing to acknowledge their own lack of freedom and therefore their refusal to share the indignity. All of this was coloured by the fact that in the 60s to 80's the people I met and knew of in the Canadian left were university trained, well paid in ideological jobs and white. I am a single parent of a black child living below the poverty line. Many believed that the working class would and should rule the world, however they didn't see me as working class. I increasingly thought of myself as working class and wanted only not to be ruled by people and to be encouraged to expect other people to rule themselves. These were days in which many people comfortably spouted lines like "feminists have no economic theory," "feminists ignore class and race" and "the women's movement is a mass organization" not a collection of political groups.

I was and am convinced that feminism is a theory and practice moving the world towards liberty.

Looking back at this speech four years later, I can see it still has value. I agree with everything in it except the call for "simple censorship". I now believe that to demand that the Canadian governments censor pornographic material is a dangerous mistake. My and my collective's position on censorship , and other forms of government control, can be found in other articles.

To the left of 1986-87 I wish only to add that I believe the terrible demobilization of your groups in these years has to some extent happened to the women's movement too - for which I have no glib answers. But when the resistance movements rise again and the left tries to swell its ranks - some of my criticism and credos must surely be taken in to account in your structures, platforms and daily lives.

The following are arguments given by Lee Lakeman at an In Struggle! Forum where Vancouver Rape Relief was asked to present what we know about women's liberation, what forms and structures are useful/successful to women and what women's groups have in common with Communist parties and how we could work together. Also, what would be needed of the communists to fully recognize and work towards women's liberation.

It seems to me that any organizer needs to examine the language and behaviour of the oppressed in order to reflect back to us the splendour, ingenuity and valour of our own resistance. This is necessary in order to bring that behaviour and language up from relief so that it can be celebrated and improved on by the oppressed. This idea rests for me on the assumption that we all want freedom from our chains. It also seems to me that any theory of how we are held in place and what we might do next must be built from the lived experience of real women and must mark and honour our already active resistance. Any strategy that demonstrates our belief in a future in which we practise more democracy with more self activity and more sharing of things, time, energy and our belief in a future in which love is a verb.

What then is the lived experience of women? One woman is raped every 17 minutes in Canada. Vancouver Rape Relief received over 500 crisis calls this year. Few of us have equal pay for work of equal value much less maternity leave or adequate child care or meaningful work. One out of four women is violently sexually attacked over her lifetime. Yet the convicted rapist tests out as culturally normal. Immigration laws maintain us as cheap, sexually enslaved labour as farm workers, domestic workers and mail order brides. 400,000 of us are raped by our husbands every year according to US Magazine. Transition houses are full. Single parents are on welfare and are largely female. One out of eight women are sexually abused by the age of eighteen. 40% of those by male family members and 75% are known to the child in some trusted way.

Nine out of ten women report unwanted attention on the job - not just by bosses, but by co-workers. Pornography is a five billion dollar a year industry and there are four times as many porn shops as McDonalds and this does not include corner stores. Few, if any of us, as women live through an entire day without the crippling fear of attack - in our house, on the street, in our job. Valium is the most often prescribed drug. It is prescribed to women to reduce the experience and expression of our rage. Women are still fired from our jobs, harrassed and sometimes beaten for daring to express our sexual liberty by loving with a woman instead of with a man. Safe, legal, first trimester abortions are unavailable to most women in British Columbia.

Shiela Rowbotham says, "Feminism for me is a movement to assert the interests of women as a sex. But more than this, it is a means of releasing and communicating the understandings which that subordination holds in check. The movement for women's liberation is part of the creation of a society in which there are no forms of domination. This society cannot be separated from the process of its making." In the last ten or twelve years, I have watched and participated in exciting experiments of women taking power . We have developed consciousness raising practices to a fine art by developing : CR groups, support groups, festivals, networks, conferences, newsletters, trading journals, women's caucuses, women's centres. We have experimented with ways to study together by creating : magazines, study groups, bookstores, newspapers, women's studies classes, women's media centres. We have developed a practice of mass action demonstrations with: parades, public tribunals, occupations, letter and phone campaigns. We have developed tightly organized centres of activity for self help and the creation of alternative structures in health collectives, rape crisis centres and transition houses.

And, through all of this, we have grappled with how to bridge class and race divisions among us. It is not uncommon, for instance, for women of colour or working class women among us to caucus and make demands on us. Also, ten years ago there were no rape crisis centres in Canada. Now there are roughly forty, most of whom come together nationally as autonomous centres of activity where women women fight back against sexist violence.

As it is clear to Sheila Rowbotham, it is also clear to me that in doing the work we have learned to use our own organizing assumptions and there are many of them. For instance, we have stressed the protection and closeness of a small group. It has been important within that group that every women has space and air for her feelings and her ideas to grow. We do not pretend to a single correctness that can be learned off-by-heart or parachuted in by a "real" organizer. We know our feelings, practices and ideas move and transform themselves by working with women. We know that all we need to express and contribute. We expect our views to be considered because they come from our lived experience. The words we use seek an openness and honesty about our own interests and what we say. It is very important to be able to say, " I don't know, nobody knows and we need to find out." Without being dismissed as stupid. Our politics have tried to allow for the experience of vulnerability and openness to every woman's feelings which consciousness raising at best implies. Communication of ideas has been an extraordinary collective process.

We have rejected central organization and hierarchicahal structures. We have rejected traditional ideas of leadership and prefer to see it as a function rotated among us. The structures that we have built have been for the purpose of serving particular needs of women. The organizational experiments in fighting back have been extremely diverse involving women in quite different ways.

Again, Shiela Rowbotham writes, "The women's movement has touched many areas of politics socialists have neglected and its hold goes much deeper. It absorbs more of your being." We've

been close to our own weaknesses and pain in all of this. It is hard to disentangle ourselves enough to make more distanced theoretical criticism while holding on to the realization of how creative our organizing has been.

In our consciousness raising together, organizing together, taking care with each other, and dreaming together, some things have become more clear. Our chains are daily forged, not just by the armed forces of the state or its institutions; not just by the ideas created by state or corporate machinery, but also by the individual men in our lives who collude in our oppression actively. It has been essential for us to gather as women, to clarify our strategies and demands. We plan not only to take power from every state and corporation but also to take it from every man who puts us here and every man who gains by our being held here, and that is all men.

I can group some of our resistance and organizing work under three headings and show you some of what I mean. Under the general heading of violence against women, we have worked to counteract pornography, prostitution, sexual harassment on the job, rape, wife abuse, and the sexual abuse of children. It is true that most of us want money and law reform and changes within the institutions which will help in all of these areas. However, not only do we want men to stop buying pornography and stop other men from buying pornography, we do not want censorship which also can so easily be used against us. Not only do we want the removal of restrictive laws against all women on the streets and for the police to respond when a prostitute calls for protection from her slave master, but, also, we want men to stop buying and selling women. Not only do we want more transition houses in the hands of women but we want men to stop battering and threatening women and to stop tolerating jokes about doing so. Not only do we want rape legally defined by women, court processes to be humanized and rapists politically defined, but also, we want men to stop coercing women for sexual submission or bullying us with their size or their needs.

In the general area of our sexual liberty, not only do we want to remove restrictive legislation against abortion, more availability of birth control information and better V.D. clinics, and to remove the power of the courts to punish lesbian mothers. We also want men to stop being so sexually irresponsible. We want men to stop harassing lesbians, men to stop fucking kids, men to stop assuming sexual permission from women, men to stop demanding or refusing monogamy as though they were the only person in the relationship.

In the general area of taking responsibility for each other's nurturance into full human potential, not only do we want 24 hour child care centers of all children, but also for men to stop failing their personal responsibility to the children around them. Not only do we need adequate medical care in every community and old age shelters but also we want men to see to the nutrition of their own families and the burying of their own dead and to the safe birthing of their young.

We have learned from bitter experience not to restrain our struggle in any other struggle. For many of us, coalitions and alliances with men on the left or groupings on the left which are

controlled by men have been told just that, submission. Again and again we have been told that our demands are somehow, wrongly phrased, unimportant or diversionary. Now, in our caucuses, centers, mass actions and alternative structures, we don't want you. If men mean to support us, there are many ways. For example, get your individual boot off the neck of the women in your life and demand that the men in your life do so as well. Get to the background including during International Women's Day and stop challenging us for the appearance of leadership. Find out from us how we think, feel and organize. There is information for you learn, structure from which you can take example, rage for you to acknowledge. Do more caring of the people in your life. The practice will build your humanity as it has ours. In any case you will need to because for some time we are going to be about the business of liberating ourselves.