

Life lived in peril: women under capitalism

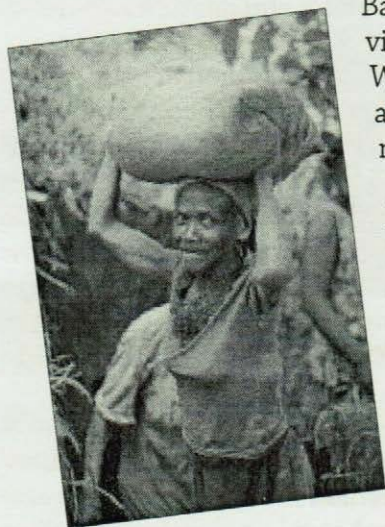
by Anne Slater

Over the last 200,000 years or so women have proven themselves to be inventive, tenacious, and contributing members of the human species. But they certainly aren't treated that way.

Headlines regularly show massive atrocities against women. Girls in India gang-raped and hanged. Hundreds of Nigerian schoolgirls kidnapped by Islamic fundamentalists opposed to the education of women. Over 1,100 predominantly female sweatshop workers in

Bangladesh killed because businesses violated basic safety standards.

Women and men respond to these and other outrages with petitions and marches.



But women in the U.S. have it pretty good, right? After all, we have lady politicians and newscasters, women-owned small businesses and a few female CEOs. Gay marriage is gaining acceptance, women blog, and college students go topless on Girls Gone Wild. But real life for the majority of women is not a stroll down equality lane.

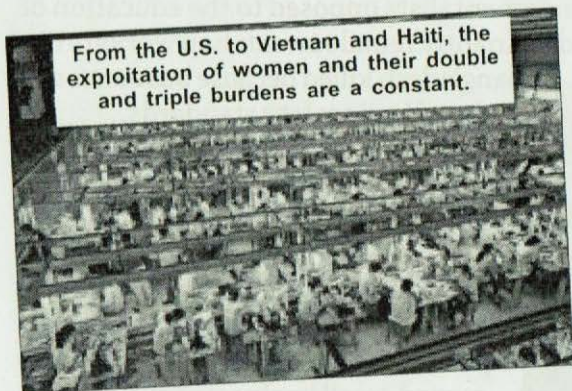
Again, just read the headlines to see an epidemic of violence against females. A high school girl in Connecticut is stabbed to death for turning down a prom date. A killer of six in California, full of anti-Asian self-loathing, declares vengeance against women for sexually rejecting him. One in four women experience domestic violence.

Personal and physical violence is fostered by a political war on women. Undocumented immigrant mothers are ripped from their children. Single moms on welfare are demonized as misbehaving

cheats. With women's wombs under government control, the U.S. Supreme Court decrees that some employers can deny women birth control coverage. (See the statement "U.S. Supreme Court escalates war on women" at www.RadicalWomen.org).

The political subjugation of "the second sex," in turn, is rooted in economic subordination. In the U.S., women earn 77 cents to a man's dollar. So it's no surprise that more than one in seven live in poverty. Add the impact of racism, and that figure skyrockets to one in four for Black and Hispanic women and one in three for those who are Native American. Meanwhile, Democratic and Republican politicians of all genders continue to slash crucial social

services, leading to hunger, homelessness, and death.



Women are the wretched of the world. According to a 2012 World Bank report, "Women perform 66 percent of the world's work, produce 50 percent

of the food, but earn 10 percent of the income and own 1 percent of the property."

How does a culture develop where half the population is hated, denounced, deprived, and part of a permanent undercaste?

It hasn't always been this way. In the book *Revolution, She Wrote*, Freedom Socialist Party and Radical Women co-founder Clara Fraser explains, "We've come a long way, baby, since antiquity, when property was communal, relations between men and women democratic, and females revered and central to the matriarchy — not only as mothers, but as chief providers of food, medicine and political decisions."

The contributions of both men and women were valued as vital for the survival of the group. Descent was reckoned through the female line. Inheritance passed from mother to child.

Fraser tells why this changed: "As wealth and exchange increased, and money evolved, the sexual division of labor caused a funny trick to be played on women. The first surplus, and therefore the first commodity — a use-value deliberately produced for the purpose of exchange — was cattle. And the men owned the herds! An inequality of ownership developed, and a new phenomenon — private property — emerged, snugly in the hands of the males. The primitive collective was destroyed, wrecked by the steamrolling power of the new private property relations."

Rise of the patriarchy. The matriarchy was replaced by the patriarchy, classes, slavery and the state — after centuries of resistance. Women did not fare well. Controlling paternity to ensure the inheritance of private property required brutal enforcement of female monogamy.

In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Frederick Engels writes, "The overthrow of mother right was the **world-historic defeat of the female sex.**" He elaborates, "The establishment of the exclusive supremacy of the man shows its effects first in the patriarchal family." Engels explains that the word "family" derives from a Roman term denoting "a new social organism whose head ruled over wife and children and a number of slaves, and was invested under Roman paternal power with the rights of life and death over them all."

Women's domestic labor of cooking, cleaning, and care of the young, sick and elderly — essential for the life of the species — was relegated to a personal, unpaid service to private families. As civilization developed into feudalism and then to capitalism, the patriarchy remained a common thread holding the economy together.

Modern society, ancient dictates. The nuclear family is based on domestic slavery performed at no direct expense to the system. It is an economic unit of the private property system. Capitalism **has to** have this free labor to make super-profits.

In an economy based on producing and exchanging commodities, a person's market value is based on the labor they sell. The traditional female job of free household laborer is why women are



considered slave or cheap labor outside the home. Racism, another pillar of contemporary capitalism, subjects women of color to super-exploitation.

The feminist movement challenged the status quo and made tremendous gains. Yet those victories are transitory, facing constant push-back. Along the way, however, many men have rejected damaging macho gender roles and joined the fight for an egalitarian society — a welcome and needed development.

Where to from here? The war on women is exploding *now* because the world economy is spiraling downward. Keeping women “in their place” is part of an effort to reinforce capitalist property, class relations, and profits. It goes hand in hand with rolling back workers’ rights, smashing civil liberties, and waging war. It comes packaged as economic necessity or in the morality of right-wing religious fundamentalism of many stripes.

Since capitalism is inherently dependent on women’s oppression, the fight for women’s liberation must be revolutionary. The feminist movement today is dominated by cautious, “go slow and aim low” NGOism. But only a **radical** vision will energize women and men to build a new audacious force for change — one that makes it possible to create the fundamental economic and social transformation that is women’s only real hope for liberation.

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