

AE11

PAPER FROM AZASO GSC - DECEMBER 1983

ORGANISING WOMEN STUDENTS.

For "AE"

Womens Oppression

It is generally known that black women are triply oppressed i.e. class, race and sex. It is terms often used and quite loosely thrown around. But it is important not only to realize this, but to understand its implications in maintaining the oppression in its position of power.

The incorporation of women into the productive sphere has resulted in greater exploitation of women and the strengthening of economic power for the capitalist.

The social oppression women suffer, though common to most societies, furthers the interests of the present status quo. We must remember that exploitative society promotes the ideology, culture and education that serves its interests. Society will keep women in a state of subservience, because by doing so it is ensuring that more than 50% of the population is kept in a state of bondage.

The question arises as to why we need to organise women. The organisation of women is a fundamental necessity in the struggle for liberation. We need to organise all the oppressed and exploited people. That includes women and that is the whole basis of the National Democratic Struggle.

If we intend to eliminate the whole system of oppression and exploitation, then we are forced to liberate women. That is the type of society we envisage.

SPECIAL PROBLEMS OF UNIVERSITY WOMEN STUDENTS.

Let us look at the special problems facing women students.

Women students find themselves in a peculiar situation. Politically they suffer the same type of oppression as their male counterparts. Careerwise they are on par with males — therefore they do not suffer the same type of oppression as would a working class woman. The main form of oppression they do suffer is social oppression. They experience it in their studies, their home, their social relationships and they even experience it in the political sphere — in meetings, student structures etc.

One problem that does affect them directly is that of maternity e.g. student nurses are fired if they fall pregnant. In Turfloop pregnant students were expelled. Students are not allowed maternity leave if they give birth, and there are few day care centres and creches for those students who have children.

Another special problem facing women students is the illusion that if they are career women, they lose to some degree their so called femininity. So it becomes important for them to hold onto that femininity — to be seen as the stereotyped female, while still having a career.

ORGANISATION OF WOMEN STUDENTS

Because of the special problems facing women students, it is important how we organise them and in what direction we take them. It is very easy to misdirect this type of struggle and waste a lot of energy and potential fighting battles that will not really solve any problem.

Because women students experience mainly social oppression, it is easier to organise them around these issues. But there is a danger in this if you do not relate it to the broader struggle. Before I go any further, I think it is important to point out the different forms of feminism. It is rather a pedantic exercise, but I have found through experience that once it is clearly understood people can place the liberation of women in its correct perspective.

There are 5 main types of feminism.

1. Liberal feminism - it is the type that most people know and what immediately springs to mind when you talk about feminism. This is the type of feminism you find in most western worlds, where women call for equal rights of women, the same pay as men, the same status as men etc. So what they are calling for is equality with men, without challenging the status quo. So in actual fact the status quo is not changed, but men and women are given the same opportunities, the same rights, the same status. This type of feminism is especially prevalent in middle class housewives in America and Britain, who are bored and frustrated with their position in society.
2. Radical feminism - is an extreme form of feminism. Radical feminists identify the male as being the main enemy, and the cause of their oppression. The main thrust of their campaigns are anti-male, having slogans like women power and believing that women are superior. This type of feminism is commonly seen with university students.
3. Lesbian feminism - stems directly from radical feminism. Because of the anti-male feelings, women tend to shy away from relationships with males and instead tend towards lesbianism.
4. Socialist feminism - believes that the primary struggle is the struggle for national liberation and secondary to that is the struggle for women's liberation. We are not saying that one is more important than the other. What we are saying is that they are interdependable and one cannot succeed without the other.
5. Marxist feminism - similar to socialist feminism, but is on much more of a theoretical basis. Marxist feminism believes that women oppression is a result of capitalism. Therefore, if capitalism is overthrown, women's liberation can be achieved.

So, going back to the problems facing women students and the issues around which these students can be organised. I have mentioned that it is easier to organise women students around social oppression. The danger here is that if it is not related to the broader struggle, it can very easily tend towards radical feminism. And noting that university students are prone to becoming radical feminists, this must be avoided at all costs.

Other issues that women can be organised around are issues like:

1. Rape and sexual harassment.
2. Expulsion of pregnant students.
3. Establishment of creches.
4. Maternity leave etc.

But these issues in themselves are reformist. I cannot overstress the need to relate these struggles to the broader democratic struggle.

METHODS OF ORGANISING WOMEN STUDENTS.

Having looked at the issues around which we can organise women students, what then are the methods we should use to organise them. I want to divide this section into different categories and look at each one separately. I will look at campuses where there has been no organisation before, and campuses where there are women's groups. I will also look at resident students and day students.

Campuses where there is no women's group.

The first thing to do in this instance is to identify a woman activist, because this work needs to be done by a woman.

If there is an issue that can be identified, then this issue can be taken up and students mobilised around it. If there is no identifiable issue, then we have to start off at a real basic level. A survey can be carried out, asking women students what are the problems they experience, the need for women's group etc. Or a group of students can be called together to discuss common problems they all experience. You find in this situation, students will find it easier to talk, because then they know that they are not experiencing the problems alone e.g. like having to be home early, expected to do household chores yet still study, problems with parents and sibling etc.

From these discussions, the whole socialisation process can be discussed.

A group of activists can be identified and seminars and discussion groups can be held - these can pertain to women issues and issues on the broader struggle.

What is important is that we do not have only discussions and seminars, but that these students get involved in practical activities e.g. skills workshops can be held. These can be very simple, like basic layout skills, how to draw up a poster etc. or students can get involved in community work. Or you could ask the students to carry out a survey with the working women on campus (the cleaning women or the canteen workers) and ask them the problems they experience as working women.

As the group develops, these women must get involved in broader student activities, but at the same time women issues must be highlighted and these problems taken up.

Campuses where there are women's groups.

Here the task is slightly simpler. The problem here is how we draw in new people and yet still develop the activists already involved. This needs to be done on 2 levels. On the one level we need to take up issues that would appeal to the broader women students, and on the other level we need to organise activities which will develop women activists - this will include programmes on a more theoretical level e.g. education seminars, group discussions etc.

Again women activists should be encouraged to get involved in broader activities.

Resident students and day students.

Issues that res students can be organised around are things like time restrictions which can be a big problem for them.

What should be encouraged in the residences is that coffee clubs should be formed.

In these coffee clubs there can be informal discussions on problems, other issues etc.

Day students have always been a problem for both male and female students. I think what needs to be encouraged here is involvement in community issues and programmes must be encouraged during the day which these students can attend.

In organising students, we must identify the type of constituency we are dealing with. There are certain issues which students might shy away from e.g. in certain campuses, rape might be a mobilising issue, while in other campuses it might be a deterring factor. The same applies with contraception. An issue that might draw interest is a topic like make-up - why do students use it, or magazines like Fair Lady - the woman you want to be. What is important is that these discussions must be directed.

RELATIONSHIP WITH AZASO

This depends on the existing conditions on a particular campus. On some campuses the women's groups are overtly Azaso e.g. at Wits.

In other campuses, the women's groups do not want to be openly identified on campus. These groups either work alone or are covertly supportive of Azaso. At UNB and Howard College, the women's groups, though not affiliated to Azaso, have the women's organiser of Azaso chosen from the group.

I think that the relationship the women's group has with Azaso can be determined by that particular campus.

In conclusion, I just want to say that I have outlined briefly how women can be organised. There will be many other ways that women can be organised in different campuses. Those campuses can most easily identify these ways.

I will conclude with the words of Machel as to why and for what we organise women.

"Women must be mobilised for internal struggle and for mass struggle, and they must be organised. They will then be able to internalise the political line to start the offensive. They must be involved in the battle for political education of the next generation and in the battle for large scale mobilisation and organisation of the masses. Their commitment to the liberation struggle will then become concrete action, leading them to take part in making decisions affecting the country's future".

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