

# Marxist and socialist feminism

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## 1. Definition

### Context of emergence

Marxist and socialist feminisms were inspired by Marxism and arose in reaction to liberal feminism, whose fight failed to go beyond equal rights. Legal emancipation is not enough to “liberate” women, as it does not lead to the abolition of patriarchy in social relations. Equal rights are also insufficient to overcome economic inequality. Marxist/socialist feminism was particularly popular in the 1960s and 1970s, when Karl Marx's ideas resounded the most, although their origins can be traced back to the late 19th century.

Marxist and socialist feminism can be confused and are sometimes used as synonyms. They can be distinguished from one another by their outlook on women’s oppression: Marxist feminism considers capitalism to be the origin of women’s exploitation –which it analyses only through the class paradigm–, whereas socialist feminism takes both class and gender factors into account when it studies how patriarchy-capitalism articulate.

For these two schools of thought, women as a class are exploited by men. Women’s situation, subordinate to men, is compared to that of the 19th century workers, subordinate to capitalist employers. “Within the family he is the bourgeois and the wife represents the proletariat<sup>1</sup>”, argued Engels in *The Origin of the Family* (1884). According to Marxist/socialist feminism, the oppression of women as a class is based on the global organisation of workforce reproduction.

### What is Marxism?

This movement was led by left-wing men and women inspired by Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels’ (1820-1895) ideas. These thinkers theorised capitalism, a mode of economic production based on the exploitation of the working class’ (or proletariat) labour by the bourgeois class (owners of capitalist companies). Capitalism has created two major social classes: the bourgeoisie, who owns the means of production, and the workers, who only possess their labour force, which they are to sell in exchange for a wage. The blue-collar worker needs to work for another person’s profit.

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, 1884. French translation, 1952, quoted in Wikirouge, 'Féminisme socialiste', [https://wikirouge.net/Féminisme\\_socialiste#Marx\\_et\\_Engels](https://wikirouge.net/Féminisme_socialiste#Marx_et_Engels).

In his seminal work *Capital* (1867), Marx explains that this is an unequal relationship because it is marked by the exploitation of one class by the other: the bourgeoisie profits from the proletariat's exploitation, i.e., it appropriates the results of the workers' labour without adequately compensating (paying) them. The wage that the workers receive in exchange for their labour is always much lower than the value of the produced goods. The company owner materializes a surplus value (a profit) and enriches himself/herself by exploiting his/her workers. The capitalist mode of production therefore makes a commodity of the human being.

## **Marxist-inspired feminism**

Marx did not carry out a gender analysis; women's work, whether of women workers or unpaid domestic work, is relatively invisible in his theories. However, socialist and Marxist feminists draw on them and reappropriate them to overcome these shortcomings. For instance, they work on the idea that human nature is the product of social relations and apply that to gender in order to counter the essentialist idea of a natural femininity.

Eleanor Marx, daughter of Karl Marx, was one of the Marxist feminism pioneers in England, in the 19th century, alongside contemporary Rosa Luxemburg in Poland, Alexandra Kollontai in Russia and Clara Zetkin in Germany. In France, mention can be made to Louise Michel, who played a great role during the Paris Commune (1871) or to Hubertine Auclert who tried to associate the workers' movement and feminism. However, in Marxist circles at the time, feminism was perceived as a bourgeois movement and women's rights activists did not necessarily claim to be feminists.

However, it was less so in France than in Germany, for example, where at the end of the 19th century social democracy used "feminism" as a synonym for bourgeois feminism and thus antagonistically opposed Marxists and feminists. Communist men also feared that women would move away from social class struggle in favour of gender struggle and that feminism would divide men and women of the same class. Russian Marxist activist Angelica Balabanova summarizes this thought well when she writes: "[We] were hostile to any form of 'feminism'. We believed that the struggle for the emancipation of women was only one aspect of the struggle for the emancipation of humanity. [...] We wanted to make women - especially working women - understand that they did not have to fight against men, but with them against the common enemy: capitalist society<sup>2</sup>. »

## **2. Marxist/socialist feminism's great ideas**

### **Double exploitation of women**

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<sup>2</sup> Angelica Balabanova, *Ma vie de rebelle*, Paris, Balland, 1938, quoted in Wikirouge, "Féminisme socialiste", [https://wikirouge.net/Féminisme\\_socialiste#Deuxi.C3.A8me\\_Internationale\\_.281889-1914.29](https://wikirouge.net/Féminisme_socialiste#Deuxi.C3.A8me_Internationale_.281889-1914.29).

For socialist feminists (mainly), women are exploited by a dual system: capitalist and patriarchal. They are therefore overexploited. The term “patriarchy” refers to the way in which our societies are organised, based on male domination and the subordination of women. Just as capitalism organises both the economy and society, patriarchy impacts on many areas, from political, economic, social and cultural institutions to the discourses and practices of daily life. Socialist/Marxist feminists reject radical feminism’s idea that patriarchy is the only system at the root of gender inequality; i.e., the financial dependence of many women in respect to men remains a great obstacle to their freedom.

Marxist feminists have insisted in viewing patriarchy as a product of capitalism. Patriarchal oppression would somehow be secondary, linked to capitalist economic exploitation. For Engels, the emergence of private property (and the traditional family) was women’s great historical defeat: it resulted in the obligation to pass on property and, thus, in the need for monogamous marriage and the control of women by fathers and later by husbands. Women’s oppression would be linked to private property, and should disappear with it: the abolition of private property would lead to the abolition of marriage and family. According to Marxist feminism - and Marx himself – women’s oppression should disappear with the collapse of the capitalist system and the end of class oppression. We can observe how feminism dissolves within a larger struggle for the advent of a communist society.

On the contrary, socialist feminism refused to consider feminism as a sub-category within the struggle between economic classes. Socialist feminists thought of the articulation and osmosis between patriarchy and capitalism. Gender and class intertwine to create new forms of oppression and privileges. Capitalism builds on patriarchy to further exploit women, which does not necessarily mean that women’s oppression is linked solely to the existing economic system.

The over-exploitation of women is particularly visible in the labour market, where women are not only exploited by the capitalist economic system as are male workers, but are paid less than men due to wage inequalities. In a patriarchal logic, women are worth less than men, hence female work is worth less than male work. To this double exploitation can be added a third whenever women workers come from Southern countries, as women workers from some countries are paid even less. Additionally, this cheap labour benefits the capitalist system, which can lower its production costs and increase its profit margin.

Marxist and socialist feminists assert that, in its organization, the capitalist economic production mode favours men’s capacities over women’s. Moreover, it forces women to take on domestic tasks in the private sphere while men earn money in the public sphere, following the *male breadwinner* model. Gender equality is therefore not feasible under a capitalist economy.

## **Unpaid domestic work**



"Capitalism also relies on domestic work". Source <sup>3</sup>

Capitalism has resulted in an international division of labour, but also in a sexual division of labour, where men have been assigned to economic production (paid and recognized work) and women have been assigned to social reproduction. In our capitalist societies, more importance is given to production (of material goods) than to reproduction (of people), which is ethically questionable. The concept of social reproduction refers to women's work within the family that tends to the reproduction of life (giving birth and raising children), society and male workers' productive capacity (caring for men so that they can work). This concept overlaps with domestic or care work, which is done by women, for free, for others (children, men, the elderly), such as household chores. In a capitalist society, domestic work is not valued because it has no exchange value as productive work does. It is therefore devalued, unpaid and not recognised as such.

Capitalism also relies on this invisible work carried out by women, which Marxist/socialist feminists have highlighted, although Marx himself made an invisible issue of it. For socialist/Marxist feminists, domestic work is a way to exploit women: it is work done for free, not remunerated at its fair value, which benefits both men (who do not have to do it themselves and can liberate free time or more time to dedicate to paid work) and the capitalist system (since companies do not need to pay women any wage for these tasks).

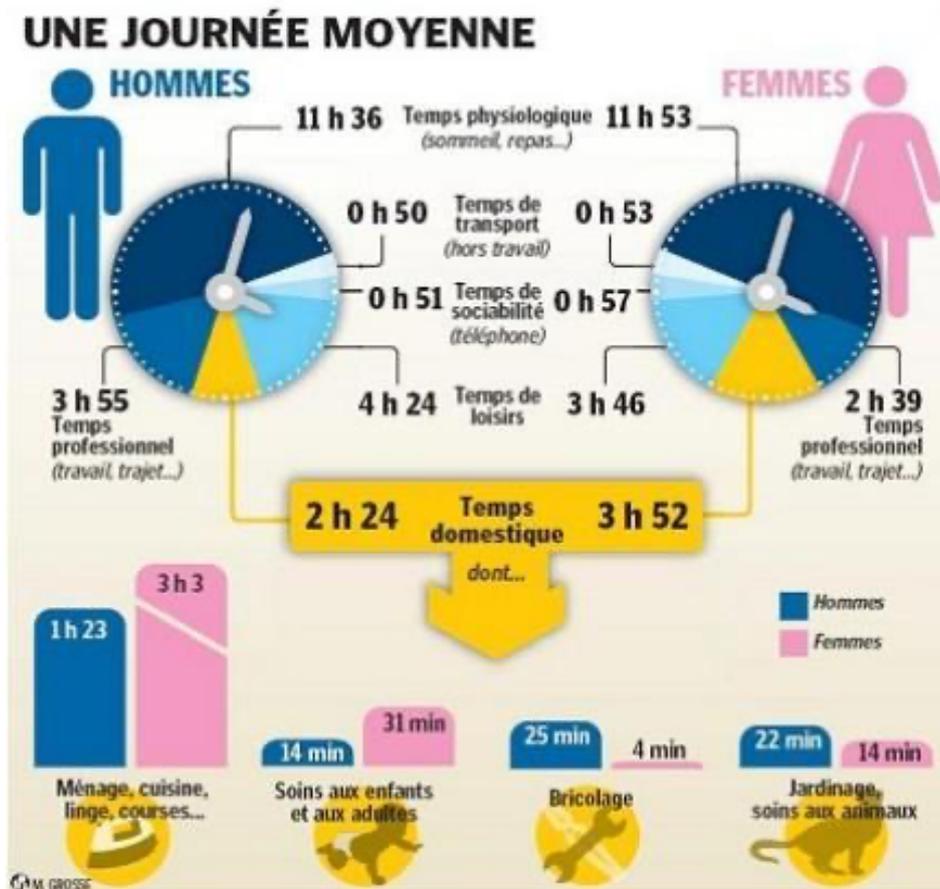
Capitalism could not exist without this reproductive work, because workers would not be able to work for 8 to 10 hours a day if they had to take care of the children, the house, etc. Boys educated by women make future workers who will participate in the capitalist system. The replacement value of unpaid domestic work is thus estimated at one third of OECD countries' GNP<sup>4</sup>!

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<sup>3</sup> Socialist feminism. Wikirouge. 1 October 2015, URL: <https://wikirouge.net/Fichier:CapitalismeTravailDomestique.jpg>

<sup>4</sup> OECD, Cuisiner, s'occuper des enfants, construire ou réparer : Le travail non rémunéré à travers le monde. 2011. Available in French at: <https://www.oecd.org/fr/els/soc/48448172.pdf>.

According to a survey carried out in 2012<sup>5</sup> by the French National Statistics and Financial Studies' Institute (INSEE), in France men are still much less involved in household chores in heterosexual couples, with an average of 2 hours and 24 minutes per day compared to 3 hours 52 minutes for women. Moreover, the distribution of these tasks is still gendered, since men mostly take on tasks socially considered as masculine, such as home improving or gardening. This difference of 1 h and 28 minutes per day translates into 10 hours and 30 minutes more free time for men per week, who can engage in other activities.

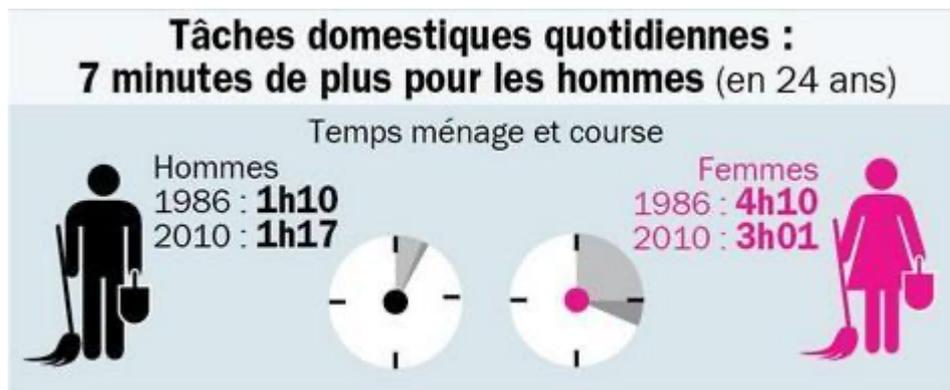


"An average day". Source <sup>6</sup>

Women also inherit tasks that are socially considered as feminine: 3 hours and 1 minute of time are allocated to housework and shopping, compared to only 1 hour and 17 minutes for men. It is also interesting to note that these figures have stagnated in recent years, where the duration of domestic tasks has decreased by 20% for women between 1986 and 2010, meanwhile men's share has only increased by 7 minutes in 24 years!

<sup>5</sup> Layla Ricroch, "Dossier - En 25 ans, moins de tâches domestiques pour les femmes, l'écart de situation avec les hommes se réduit" Insee. Regards sur la parité, 2012 edition in French.

<sup>6</sup> "A quand l'homme de ménage?". Aladom. 9 March 2012. Available in French at: <https://www.aladom.fr/actualites/secteur-service/7297/quand-homme-de-menage/>



"Domestic work: 7 more minutes for men (in 24 years)". Source <sup>7</sup>

#### 4. Solutions proposed by Marxist/socialist feminism

For Marxist/socialist feminism, "women's oppression is an extension of capitalist exploitation of proletariat [...] and will disappear with the advent of a communist society and the reintegration of women into the public sphere<sup>8</sup>". The overthrow of the existing economic system is thus supposed to liberate women. Since capitalism is at the root of inequality and patriarchy is a product of capitalism, gender inequalities would disappear in a classless communist society.

In addition to abolishing capitalism, other solutions are proposed, including the revaluation of reproductive work through the collectivisation of domestic work and child care. As women's exclusion from paid work perpetuates their oppression, women must be integrated into paid work and the public sphere.

While the French communist party (PCF) was openly opposed to abortion from the 1930s onwards, socialist/Marxist feminists began to demand free and open access to abortion in the course of that century. Freedom of love and the control over women's reproduction were gradually claimed in order to reduce and eventually abolish the distinction between private and public spheres, between production and reproduction. Domestic and reproductive work must be included within the notion of labour itself in order to be fairly valued. Marxist/socialist feminism also wishes to promote equal wages and the unionisation of women.

These demands for equality at work, equality in education, equal pay and abortion are common to Marxist and liberal feminism, but their ultimate goal differs: Marxist/socialist feminism ultimately wants to overthrow the capitalist economic system, whereas liberal feminism is limited to reformism and equal rights. Unlike radical feminists, Marxist feminists do not generally seek to exclude men from feminist struggles. On the contrary, they want to avoid a struggle between the sexes, a man/woman separatism, for fear of fuelling a class division should men become an enemy class. A

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Guy Bouchard, "Typologie des tendances théoriques du féminisme contemporain", *Philosophiques*, 18 (1), 1991, 119-167. Available in French at: <https://doi.org/10.7202/027143ar>.

women's movement is necessary, albeit integrated into the revolutionary movement as a whole, having capitalism as the common and primary enemy.

## 5. Strengths and weaknesses of Marxist/socialist feminism

### Strengths

Marxist/socialist feminism has drawn attention to the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy and the importance of taking both class and gender into account in feminist demands. Just as women and men from the proletarian class are not oppressed in the same way, class differences between women influence their gender experience. For example, women from the upper classes may employ poorer women to do the domestic work for them. In addition, being economically independent from one's spouse makes it easier to leave him should there be domestic violence.

Marxist/socialist feminism thus opposed a bourgeois liberal feminism that only defended the interests of rich and privileged women, to instead defend women oppressed both due to their class and gender. But what about other systems of domination, especially racism?

### Weaknesses

Marxist/socialist feminism has tackled the problematic of class and gender head on, but has remained silent on race, sexuality or disability. Women as a class or social group are exploited by men as a class or social group, but modes of oppression other than capitalism and patriarchy must be taken into account to understand our society, how inequalities are caused and the heterogeneity of women as a class.

Today, questioning capitalism does not give Marxist/socialist feminism as much of an audience as liberal feminism, which was part of society's dominant values by accepting and even encouraging the existence of capitalism. That is why this type of feminism is not very present in North America, where fear of communism and even socialism is ever present.

Socialist/Marxist feminism has focused heavily on the economic dimension of gender inequality, to the detriment of other areas of women's lives, such as sexuality, violence or abortion, all of which happen outside the workplace. Within this feminist movement, the focus has been put on economic oppression, as autonomous feminist struggles have been seen as bourgeois and as likely to cause divisions between poor women and men.

In a communist society, after the socialist revolution, it is doubtful whether men would suddenly stop exploiting women; indeed, sexism is found, for example, in communist political parties, trade unions or left-wing militant structures. Viewing Marxism as a precondition for women's liberation makes sexism invisible, and sexism may well persist despite the abolition of social classes and the advent of a communist society. The economic domain must not make other areas (such as the social domain) invisible, for we know now that women's oppression is not only a class phenomenon. Similarly, women's oppression has generally been relegated to the private sphere by the Marxist approach.

Marxist theories have resounded intensely in the 1960s and 1970s, when sociological work constantly used the paradigm of social class and work (sociology of work). Class consciousness among blue-collar workers was also very strong. Nevertheless, the class discourse gradually faded in the 1980s and 1990s, reinforced by the collapse of communism in the early 1990s. Social classes still exist in our society, but the class discourse is scarcely heard. We no longer speak of proletariat or bourgeoisie but of "popular classes" and "middle classes", vague terms that cover very diverse realities.

## **Conclusion**

One can criticise the lack of intersectionality and therefore inclusiveness of this feminist movement, which has been unable to take into account factors such as race or (dis)abilities, leaving many women out of the picture. Moreover, the subordination of women undeniably predates the capitalist system. A certain sexual division of labour was already in place, where women were assigned in priority to reproductive work, which capitalism strongly reinforced.

Perhaps the question is not as much whether capitalism has caused patriarchy or the other way around. It is interesting to see these two systems of oppression as mutually reinforcing rather than to find a main culprit as causing the other, and not to view it as a matter of class or gender struggle but as the articulation and mutual reinforcement of two systems of oppression.

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