

Alexandra Kollontai and the “Woman Question”: Women and Social Revolution, 1905-1917

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Russia celebrated International Women's Day for the first time on 8 March 1913. One week before the celebration, Alexandra Kollontai published an article in the newspaper Pravda encouraging women workers to organize and unite with their male counterparts in order to achieve the economic and political emancipation of both genders. Kollontai wrote, “The backwardness and lack of rights suffered by women, their subjection and indifference, are of no benefit to the working class, and indeed are directly harmful to it.”

Kollontai believed that women's rights were closely related to the rights of the working class as a whole, championed by socialism. She believed that only socialism could liberate even working class women. In addition, she recognized that the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) needed the support of women to achieve revolution. Kollontai proved to be correct in 1917, when working class women began demonstrations on International Women's Day that led to the end of autocracy in Russia.

From 1906 until 1923, Alexandra Kollontai was instrumental in bringing together Marxism and feminism. She worked tirelessly to attract working women to the RSDLP while denouncing the bourgeois feminist movement. In addition, Kollontai expanded on already existing Marxist theory in order to interpret and resolve the oppression of women. She argued that women were not enslaved by economic conditions alone but also by social and psychological factors.

Women brought great change to Russia in the name of socialism, and, more specifically the Bolshevik party. In fact, by the end of World War I, ten percent of Bolsheviks were women, called Bolshevikki. However, in the end, communism did not repay its women. Conditions for women under Stalin were repressive. Kollontai became Soviet ambassador to Sweden but had little power in Russia, and in the 1930s the “woman question” was declared resolved too soon.

The “woman question” had several definitions and interpretations. When it first emerged in Russia, in the aftermath of the disastrous Crimean War, the “woman question” asked if a woman's place remained within her family or if she could benefit society by moving outside the home. This led to debate about woman's right to education and employment. However, in Kollontai's day women worked alongside men. In the introduction to *The Social Basis of the Women's Question* she asked, “How can we make sure that the female section of the population of Russia also receives the fruit of the

long, stubborn and agonisingly difficult struggle for a new political structure in our homeland?" In essence, what is the relationship between women and social revolution?

Kollontai was hardly the first to recognize that a relationship existed. Socialist writers addressed woman's oppression throughout the 19th century. In 1848, The Communist Manifesto briefly discussed woman's subjection to man. Marx and Engels wrote, "The bourgeois sees in his wife a mere instrument of production." They further claimed that the modern family was based entirely on capital. Because of this, the bourgeois family existed for personal gain only while the proletarian family lacked stability.

Thirty-one years later, in 1879, August Bebel addressed the struggles of women working in industry in *Woman and Socialism*, demanding legislation that protected working women and children. He wrote that industry sought female labor for several reasons. First, the increased use of new machinery meant that physical strength was no longer a requirement for employment. In addition, the wages of many men were not sufficient to support their families, so their wives were forced to join them in industry. Last, women, especially those who were married, were accustomed to expect less than men. As a result, women were more willing than men to accept lower wages and less likely to protest maltreatment. This led to conflict between male and female workers as they competed for jobs. Bebel wrote that such conflict was unnatural and the entire working class should unite against capitalism. He declared that both women and men could be liberated only in a socialist society.

We must therefore seek to bring about a state of society in which all will enjoy equal rights regardless of sex. That will be possible when the means of production become the property of society, when labor has attained its highest degree of fruitfulness...and when all who are able to work shall be obliged to perform a certain amount of socially necessary labor, for which society in return will provide all with the necessary means for the development of their abilities and the enjoyment of life.

Frederick Engels wrote more about woman's oppression through the family in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, published in 1884. In this work, he recounted the history of the family, beginning his narrative before the existence of civilized society. Engels claimed that women were once highly esteemed members of society: "That woman was the slave of man at the commencement of society is one of the most absurd notions that have come down to us...Woman occupied not only a free but also a highly respected position among all savages." Women were well-respected

because of their ability to reproduce since in a barbaric society, which was naturally communal, the paternity of children was often unidentifiable.

However, as the economy developed and wealth increased, the male became a more important figure in society and the family. Men wished to pass their wealth to their children and monogamous marriage was established to resolve the issue of unknown paternity. Monogamy began man's domination of woman. Engels wrote that monogamous marriage was characterized by "the far greater rigidity of the marriage bond...Now, as a rule, only the man can dissolve it and disown his wife...Should the wife recall the ancient sexual practice and desire to revive it, she is punished more severely than ever before." Engels wrote that women were enslaved by men as a result of the establishment of private property.

Many who later joined the Revolutionary Movement in Russia, including Alexandra Kollontai, read the works of Marx, Engels, and Bebel. Kollontai's path to socialism resembled that take by many other women. The 1870s saw the beginnings of female involvement in radicalism. In 1872, the same year Kollontai was born to wealthy parents, a radical study group of female students formed in Zurich, called the Fritsche Circle. Because men were more experienced debaters and tended to dominate study groups, the Fritsche Circle only allowed female students, and they often discussed social revolution. Most of these women came from the upper class and felt they owed a debt to the peasants, who had been liberated from serfdom only a decade earlier. Participating in the popular revolutionary movements of their time, a number of these women decided to return to Russia to propagandize among working women. However, many of them became disillusioned and ceased their revolutionary activity.

Kollontai (born Alexandra Domontovich) was well-educated like her revolutionary predecessors and aspired to be a writer. Her parents did not allow her to travel abroad to study for fear that she would encounter and adopt revolutionary ideas. At the age of twenty-two, she refused to submit to an arranged marriage. She married her cousin Vladimir Kollontai, an impoverished army officer, instead. Her parents were supportive but cautioning. Her father feared that "spiritual closeness" could not exist between people of different classes.

Alexandra Kollontai soon became discontent with marriage. She wrote, "The happy existence of a housewife and consort were like a 'cage' to me." Beatrice Farnsworth claims that Kollontai continued to love her husband and son, born in 1894, but that she could not reconcile her affection with her desire to be an independent and important individual. In 1898, Kollontai finally did study in Zurich, following the path taken by many future Bolshevichki. She spent a year studying Marxist theory and returned to Russia in 1899 but never to her husband. However, in spite of her feelings toward marriage, she kept

his name for the rest of her life.

The period immediately following Kollontai's return from Switzerland saw a significant rise in women's participation in radicalism. In part, this was a result of the rise of the socialist movement itself and, in 1903, the emergence of different parties. Until 1905, the RSDLP did not oppose socialist groups devoted solely to women. Such opposition came with the rise of the bourgeois feminist movement.

The majority of socialist women were wealthy and educated. Not required to work because of family wealth, they could devote all their time to becoming "the professional female revolutionaries." Working class and peasant women increasingly sympathized with the socialists. However, working class women did not have time to devote to the movement and few of them got beyond protesting personal grievances.

Some diversity existed within the movement, however. Kondordiya Samoilova and Inessa Armand joined the RSDLP during this time and both later became leading Bolsheviks. Samoilova was the daughter of a village priest and was educated in Women's Higher Courses. In contrast, Armand came from the intelligentsia and received a higher, professional education.

During these years, Kollontai traveled throughout Europe meeting other Marxist theoreticians, including Rosa Luxembourg and Georgii Plekhanov. She also developed her skills as a writer and orator. In 1906, she joined the Mensheviks out of devotion to Plekhanov. However, her pacifism led her to become a Bolshevik in 1915, believing Lenin to be the only socialist leader committed to ending Russia's involvement in World War I.

Socialists were not the only group interested in women's rights. The rise of the bourgeois feminist movement – which coincided with Kollontai's joining the Mensheviks – came with the formation of groups like the Women's Progressive Party and the Union for Women's Equality. The latter had the highest membership of any feminist group and Kollontai considered it the greatest challenge to attracting women to Marxist feminism. The predominant goal of the Union for Women's Equality was suffrage, which was achieved in August 1917 when Russian women demanded the right to vote of the provisional government. Natalia Pushkareva writes that the Russian feminists had only minor success because they attempted "to keep away from a definite stance in the ongoing social and political struggles in Russia." The bourgeois feminists claimed to transcend class divisions, which Kollontai used against them in much of her criticism of their movement.

Women's suffrage, desired by the bourgeois feminists, would certainly have benefited Kollontai. However, "[a]s a mother she needed more – a supportive social structure to remove the inner conflict between the intellectual and the emotional side of her personality." Barbara Evans Clements writes that Kollontai's philosophy toward women and the family developed out of

her personal experience with marriage and motherhood. Whatever her personal feelings, it is evident that Kollontai approached socialism out of her desire to resolve the “woman question” as it related to 20th century working women.

Kollontai worked tirelessly to convince working class women to join the socialists rather than the bourgeois feminists. While the Union for Women’s Equality claimed to transcend classes, Kollontai declared that proletarian women betrayed the entire working class – men and women – if they joined the feminist movement. In 1913 she wrote,

What is the aim of the feminists? Their aim is to achieve the same advantages, the same power, the same rights within capitalist society as those possessed now by their husbands, fathers, and brothers. For the woman worker it is a matter of indifference who is the ‘master’ a man or a woman. Together with the whole of her class, she can ease her position as a worker.

Kollontai denounced the bourgeois feminists for creating divisions between men and women. She called for the liberation of the working class as a whole. However, she recognized that this required the resolution of specific issues that primarily affected women. Woman’s role as housewife and mother set her apart from other workers.

Because of the special roles women played, Kollontai and a few other socialists began to argue for propagandizing and organizing specifically among women. Shortly after joining the Mensheviks, Kollontai attempted to create a separate bureau within the party for women workers. However, she was accused of feminism and separatism, and the Bureau of Women Workers was not approved until 1917. Some socialist women, including Kondordiya Samoilova and Inessa Armand, were able to establish unions and clubs to recruit working class women. These were especially successful in organizing female textile workers. In 1907, Kollontai set up the Society for Mutual Aid to Women Workers, an organization in St. Petersburg that offered cultural events to working class women.

In 1913, Samoilova began writing a column for Pravda about women in factories. The column, called “The Labor and Life of Women Workers”, was so popular that she created a journal specifically targeting working class women. With the help of Armand and others the first edition of *Rabotnitsa*, or *Working Woman*, appeared on Women’s Day in 1914. The journal reached out to working women by highlighting their struggles. In addition to attracting working class women, the editors also wanted to inform proletarian women that capitalism was the cause of their troubles.

Kollontai’s understanding of woman’s role as housewife and mother

inspired her to expand on the ideas of Marx, Bebel, and Engels concerning the oppression of women. Like Bebel, she realized the need for legislative reforms in industry, an issue that she did not believe the bourgeois feminists would address. In the preface to her book *Society and Motherhood*, she wrote that the working class “is the one which most requires that a solution be found to the painful conflict between compulsory professional labour by women and their duties as representatives of their sex, as mothers.” Kollontai wanted reforms such as an eight-hour work day, factory nurseries, maternity hospitals, free medical care, and the prohibition of night work. These reforms would benefit all workers, but particularly women and youth.

Kollontai also, like Marx and Engels, saw the modern family as oppressive to women. She wrote, “[T]he isolated family unit is the result of the modern individualistic world, with its rat-race, its pressures, its loneliness; the family is a product of the monstrous capitalist system.” Economics were, she believed, a significant factor. Bourgeois marriages were based not on affection but on woman’s dependence on her husband for financial stability. No such stability existed in proletarian society, making a healthy and successful marriage difficult.

However, Kollontai was the first to consider that the “woman question” had psychological, as well as economic, elements. Marriage was oppressive to women first because, in the household just as in the workplace, women were viewed as inferior, subject to the rule of their husbands. In addition, monogamous marriage led spouses to feel ownership of one another, encouraging the belief that each had rights over the other. Last, marriage was an attempt for naturally communal human beings to overcome the lonely existence of individuality. Many Marxists believed that bourgeois society had created individualism, and one person – though much loved – could not fulfill the need for community. Even in a marriage of affection, these conditions naturally led to oppression.

Kollontai believed that women’s emancipation could be achieved only when society’s mindset regarding marriage and family changed. She recognized that changes in the psyche of men and women required more time than the economic restructuring of society. Her socialist solution to woman’s subjugation was the eventual dissolution of marriage and the family: “To become really free woman has to throw off the heavy chains of the current forms of the family, which are outmoded and oppressive.” The tasks and responsibilities of the individual family would be transferred to a collective and communal society. Inequality would naturally be eliminated and the need for community fulfilled. Individuals would belong to the community as a whole but never to each other.

Kollontai’s plan included the communal raising of children. She considered it the responsibility of the working community to create conditions

that were safe for pregnant women. In turn, the women themselves should, according to Kollontai, “observe all the requirements of hygiene during the period of pregnancy, remembering that during these months she does not belong to herself, that she is working for the collective.” Once the child was born, it became the responsibility of all members of the community to care for and educate it.

Kollontai’s solutions to the problems of marriage and the family often lacked detail and clarity. However, it was significant because she applied Marxism to areas outside labor and production. After the Bolshevik Revolution, Armand expanded on Kollontai’s theory of the psychological oppression of women. Armand wrote that one step toward liberating women was education. The majority of Russian women were illiterate and lacked practical skills and political knowledge. In addition, women learned from birth – through their fathers, brothers, and eventually husbands – that they were subordinate to men. Armand believed that educating the backward masses would attack woman’s oppression at its roots.

Alexandra Kollontai, Inessa Armand, and Kondordiya Samoiloova – all Bolshevikki after 1915 – were leading figures in the socialist movement. However, not all socialists approved of spending time and resources working among women. Kollontai admitted in her memoirs that she was not always supported by her party. The “woman question” was a divisive issue, even among other socialist women. Many Bolshevik women “consider[ed] proletarian women a backward lot and efforts to reach them a waste of time.” Clements writes that other Bolshevikki feared that focusing specifically on women’s issues would weaken their status in the eyes of male Bolsheviks. In addition, many socialists considered the emancipation of women a natural byproduct of the impending socialist revolution. Therefore, focusing special attention on women’s issues was unnecessary.

Socialist women did have some powerful support. After 1907, Lenin personally chose delegates to attend international women’s conferences. He was inspired to do so when the Second International Socialist Conference passed a resolution demanding that all socialist parties advocate for women’s rights. Lenin also enthusiastically followed the progress of Rabotnitsa.

However, Elizabeth Wood writes that the Bolshevik Party’s dedication to solving the “woman question” was not genuine. Rather the rise of bourgeois feminism sparked fear that other groups would recruit and organize working women before the socialists could. The Bolsheviks could not deny that which Kollontai vigorously proclaimed: the support of proletarian women was necessary to attain the ultimate goal of revolution. However, many leading socialists did not trust the superstitious and backward masses of women, even after their spontaneous demonstrations ended autocracy.

In *The History of the Russian Revolution*, Leon Trotsky described how protests

on International Women's Day – initiated by female textile workers – sparked social revolution. He wrote,

Thus the fact is that the February revolution was begun from below, overcoming the resistance of its own revolutionary organizations, the initiative being taken of their own accord by the most oppressed and downtrodden part of the proletariat – the women textile workers, among them no doubt many soldiers' wives.

Nicholas II abdicated the throne the following week, and the Provisional Government, under the leadership of Alexander Kerensky, granted women the right to vote.

Natalia Pushkareva calls the period from 1910 to 1920 a tragic decade, the heartbreak of which is exacerbated by its potential. She writes, "The goal of this socialist experiment was to fulfill the long-standing expectations of the Russian people to create a 'society of equals,' without lies or injustice, and without restrictions on the basis of sex." Alexandra Kollontai was a leading voice calling for such a society. She sincerely believed that communism would liberate working class women from marriage, motherhood, and financial dependence on men.

For a time, her goals for Russian women seemed on the verge of being achieved. When the Bolsheviks seized power in October, they granted women equal status as men. They mandated an eight-hour workday for all workers and the prohibition of night work for women. In addition, women were kept out of industries that could be harmful to their health and were granted a four month maternity leave.

However, in the following years, a number of these policies were revoked. In 1925, the prohibition of dangerous and night work for women was rescinded because "the building of the new society demanded an enormous effort." In the late 1930s and early 1940s, divorce was made more difficult, abortion was outlawed, and childlessness was taxed. Also during this time, the women's department of the communist party, the zhenotdel was dissolved and the "woman question" declared resolved.

By the late 1930s, life had improved for women in Russia. They had equal status with men in the workplace, improved healthcare, and the opportunity to achieve some education. However, the social and psychological factors contributing to woman's oppression, which Kollontai had such fervent belief in resolving, continued to exist.

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