

Feminism and the Labour Left: a perfect political union?

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Socialist and feminist politics have sometimes had a difficult relationship in the past, but an intersectional approach can move past these issues. This article looks at the importance of culture and policy, and sets out four ways feminist policies should feature in Labour's programme for 2018 and beyond.

Socialist politics has had sometimes a difficult relationship with issues of gender inequality and feminism, but, since at least the 1980s, the Labour Party has committed itself to championing gender equality alongside issues of class and economic equality. This article examines the relationship between socialism, Labour, the Labour Left and feminism historically, before turning to key feminist policies and debates in the present, in order to suggest how gender should feature in Labour's programme for 2018 and beyond.

Socialism and feminism have the potential to be reconciled. The theory of 'intersectionality', an idea coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in the 1980s, offers a way forward. Applying an intersectional approach involves identifying the different strands of people's experiences and vectors of identity and oppression stemming from gender, race, class, disability, religion and immigration status. This has yet to become mainstream within political parties, but it is vital for Labour to take intersectionality seriously if we are to deal effectively with all the facets of inequality in twenty-first century Britain.

Socialism and feminism in history

Marxism and feminism have often occupied a tense and uncomfortable position alongside each other in politics. Some feminists contend that marxism is inherently masculine, pursuing the interests of the white, male working class and focusing on class inequality to the exclusion of gender inequality.

According to lawyer and feminist legal scholar Catherine MacKinnon, marxism focused on how the state manifests class power and inequality and how a class-based society can be transformed.¹ It offers little space for thinking about gender as a distinct axis of inequality and oppression. MacKinnon succinctly sums up the divergence between feminism and marxism: ‘sexuality is to feminism what work is to marxism: that which is most one’s own yet most taken away.’² Feminism and marxism, in this reading, have fundamentally different priorities.

Women were also generally marginalised from radical and liberal politics in the nineteenth century. The Chartists famously demanded universal *manhood* suffrage in the 1840s. And MacKinnon highlighted the fact that liberal thinker John Stuart Mill’s famous petition in Parliament in 1866 for women’s suffrage was partially justified on the basis that ‘the majority of women of any class are not likely to differ in political opinion from the majority of men in the same class.’³ The class of a woman’s husband often determined her position in society. Gender inequality has not always been at the heart of left politics.

The traditional focus of the Labour Party in the early and mid-twentieth century was often on ‘labourist’ issues, neglecting women’s and ethnic minorities’ roles in society. Men and class were prioritised over women, gender and other vectors of inequality. This stemmed partly from the socialist ideologies that shaped the early Labour Party, and, even more so, from the significance of trade unionism to the party. The trade union movement has historically represented a particular sub-section of society: broadly, white working-class men who are union members, and who are particularly likely to be in stable, skilled or semi-skilled manual work. The visibility of women at the top of trade unions is woefully lacking, even though we now have our first female TUC general secretary, Frances O’Grady. In the many years she has worked for the TUC, O’Grady has consistently aimed to challenge the ‘male, pale and stale’ stereotype and shift

the movement 'to a profile that better fits a six million plus membership that is now 50:50 men and women'.⁴ Trade unions are, however, still largely controlled and dominated by white men. The lack of women in leadership roles will inevitably impact upon the prioritisation of women's workplace issues, such as gender discrimination and sexual harassment.

It took collective action from women within the Labour Party and labour movement more broadly from the 1960s to the 1990s to demand that gender inequality was put firmly on the Party's agenda. Eventually all-women shortlists were introduced at the 1993 Labour Party conference, and a record number of Labour women MPs were elected in 1997 under Tony Blair's leadership. This initiative was a move from the centre of the Party. Yet many on the Labour Left had also championed gender equality and the representation of women in politics in the 1980s: in local government, Labour in places like Sheffield and the Greater London Council created women's committees, gave grants to feminist organisations, and fought for gender equality. This inheritance must be built on today.

Prostitution: a flashpoint issue

In recent years, the leadership of the Labour Party and some trade unions have championed the full decriminalisation of prostitution. This would allow men the right to use their capital to buy women's bodies; those bodies would become *just* another mode of production in the free market. Prostitution is a gendered issue: approximately 80,000 people, mostly women, are prostitutes in Britain, and the majority of buyers are men.⁵ The gendered dynamic of prostitution is lost on Aslef, however, a British trade union for train drivers, whose membership base comprises of 20,287 men and 1,067 women, and which backed a motion for the decriminalisation of prostitution, which was put to a vote at the TUC Congress.⁶ Former deputy Labour leader and feminist Harriet Harman intervened in the debate and condemned the move arguing it would 'legitimise their exploitation'.⁷ Delegates voted overwhelmingly against the motion.

Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell have both also supported decriminalisation; both have a long history of supporting the English Collective of Prostitutes, a campaign group that seeks the decriminalisation of prostitution. At

Goldsmiths University in 2016, Corbyn said, ‘I am in favour of decriminalising the sex industry. I don’t want people to be criminalised. I want to be [in] a society where we don’t automatically criminalise people. Let’s do things a bit differently and in a bit more civilised way’.⁸ He does not support the criminalisation of men who buy sex (the ‘Sex Buyer Law’) either.

While the criminalisation of women who work as prostitutes further victimises them, calls for full decriminalisation imply that the purchase of women’s bodies can be civilised. This is a highly questionable claim: statistics show over 50 per cent of prostituted women in the UK started being paid for sex acts before they were 18⁹; over 50 per cent prostituted women have been raped and/sexually assaulted;¹⁰ 9 of 10 prostituted women report wanting to exit prostitution but feel unable to.¹¹ In Germany, where prostitution is legal, the consequence is increased demand and soaring supply. Prostitutes can be hired in a similar way to hiring an uber and 99 euros buys access to King George Brothel where it is possible to have sex with as many women as are available and the drinks are included.¹² Sex in a context of inequality – payment for a woman’s body – is unequal and consent cannot make it equal. In 2014, the European Parliament passed a non-binding resolution in favour of criminalising the purchase of sex because it reinforces the objectification of women and sustains prostitution.¹³

How have some trade unions and the leadership of the Labour Party got the issue of prostitution so wrong? We can trace their views back to early Marxists and socialists’ assumptions about class, capitalism and work. Marx himself stated that ‘prostitution is only a *specific* expression of the *general* prostitution of the *labourer*’.¹⁴ Marx believed prostitution simply represented the exploitation and degradation of wage labour. Selma James, a supporter of Jeremy Corbyn and the first spokesperson of the English Collective of Prostitutes, argued that women’s work, whether outside the home, in the home, or in the bedroom, should be compensated with a wage (hence her most well-known campaign, ‘Wages for Housework’).

The Left of the Labour Party, the English Collective of Prostitutes, and some trade unions are working to monetise and unionise all ‘work’ (ironically a capitalist and libertarian argument), without recognising the intersections of structural inequality that underpin prostitution. Rather than seeking to include prostitution within a

capitalist framework of 'labour', efforts should focus on eliminating an industry that is designed to exploit women in often vulnerable positions. Without an intersectional approach to understanding issues that affect minority and disadvantaged groups in society, the left appears to apply a monolithic trade union and labour-based approach to all issues. Work does not *always* liberate people.

Of course, prostitution remains a relatively marginal issue in British politics. But examining it points to conclusions about how gender fits into Corbyn's political project. It is telling that in July 2015, when Jeremy Corbyn first stood as leader of the Labour Party, he produced a six page manifesto, 'Working with Women', which stated that his aim is to 'achieve equal and better pay for all, and support career progression for all women through better trade union recognition and collective bargaining'.¹⁵ But feminist issues cannot be subsumed into class inequality. Labour needs to recognise this.

Gender and feminist issues in Corbyn's politics

The Labour Left argues, with some justification that Corbyn's anti-austerity strategy speaks to women's needs, since women have been the main targets and victims of Tory austerity policies.¹⁶ By prioritising the public sector, in particular the NHS, education and social welfare, which employ many women and which women are more likely to rely upon, Labour argues that it is ensuring women's needs are met. But this still focuses on work and economics.

Second wave feminists sought to make the private political. As critical theorist and feminist Nancy Fraser states, feminism 'rightly criticised the constricted political vision that was so intently focused on class inequality that it could not see such "non-economic" injustices as domestic violence, sexual assault and reproductive oppression'.¹⁷ Under Corbyn's leadership, Labour needs to take more seriously these 'non-economic' injustices. In 2016, when Jeremy Corbyn stood for a second time as leader of the party, he produced a 10 point manifesto 'to rebuild and transform Britain', but there was no specific point relating to women: rather women were shoehorned into education and securing an equal society.¹⁸ Labour's 2017 General Election manifesto was widely popular, but paid scant attention to gender inequality.¹⁹ The party needs to do better.

One policy floated by Jeremy Corbyn in 2016 caught the attention of the public: the introduction of women-only, or gender segregated, train carriages to reduce sexual harassment by men towards women. The policy was met with public ridicule. Critics contend that it is a throw-back to the 1970s that is symptomatic of Jeremy Corbyn's understanding of gender politics. In fact it is a policy that has roots in the late nineteenth century. Women-only train carriages were introduced in 1874 by the Metropolitan Railway and officially abolished by the British Rail in 1977. This policy proposal puts the onus on women's behaviour, encouraging them to sit in segregated train carriages because of a belief that some men will always sexually harass women, just as some anti-rape strategies place the onus on women's behaviour, as women are told to dress modestly, to drink responsibly and to return home at a sensible hour because some men will always rape. The emphasis is on women's behaviour: what women *could* and *should do* to prevent men from abusing them. Instead the focus should be on perpetrators of sexual assault and harassment and their behaviour towards women.

Gender segregation is a much debated issue in feminist theory. Feminist scholar Andrea Dworkin contends that mainly right-wing women and men legitimize gender segregation under the 'separate-but-equal model'.²⁰ This model justifies the perpetuation of the subordination of women to men by suggesting that the genders are inherently different. In the case of train carriages, men and women ride separately, yet each is doing equally what is appropriate to their gender. In the case of prostitution, according to Dworkin, the sexual subordination of women to men is seen to be in the nature of things and a logical premise of social organization. The left needs to reject all understandings of gender based on a 'separate-but-equal' model.

There are many policy proposals that Labour could adopt to demonstrate a commitment to tackling gender inequality in an intersectional way. I will share *just* a few preliminary ideas of potential changes to domestic policy.

The sex buyer law: Eliminating prostitution

The introduction of the Sex Buyer Law for prostitution, which criminalises buyers of sex, de-criminalises prostituted women and ensures state investment

for women exiting prostitution. Failure to end the demand for prostitution signals a failure of the state to end violence against women (see above for the statistics of violence against prostituted women). The Sex Buyer Law has been adopted in Northern Ireland, Ireland, France, Canada, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. Sweden was the first country to introduce the law in 1997 and subsequent research has shown that:

- Street prostitution halved between 1999 and 2008 and there is no evidence women were simply displaced to indoor prostitution or prostitution was advertised online.²¹
- The number of men paying for sex in Sweden declined. In 1996, 13.6 per cent of men reported buying sex by 2008 this figure reduced to 7.9 per cent.²²
- Public attitudes have changed towards the law. In 1996, 45 per cent women and 20 per cent men supported criminalising sex buyers by 2008, 79 per cent women and 60 per cent men were in favour of the law.²³
- According to the National Criminal Police, Sweden has become a more hostile destination for traffickers.²⁴

Prostitution disproportionately impacts upon the lives of vulnerable and marginalised women whom are exploited under conditions of sex inequality. The Labour party is a political party that strives to create a more equal society. In a gender equal society, prostitution would be an issue confined to history books. To achieve the elimination of the sex industry, the Labour party must adopt to Sex Buyer Law. It is the only law that has evidenced a marked reduction of prostitution and thus safety for women.

Quotas for women

Quotas for women in male-dominated professions, which includes but is not limited to Members of Parliament, the judiciary and the boardroom. The Labour party is the only political party to champion all-women shortlists for Members of Parliament and consequently the Labour party has the greatest number of women in parliament. An effective democracy requires the representation of a cross-section of society rather than one demographic background. Britain has failed to introduce gender quotas in any public sphere. The dogmatic argument is: we live

in a meritocratic society, and if you work hard, you will succeed. However, the Labour party understands better than any other party that structural inequality means people are not competing on an equal playing field. Privileged white men have an advantage over others in terms of their capital, gender and race, which has led to them being disproportionately represented where power is wielded.

Gender quotas ensure the redistribution of male power, which is a core principle of feminism. Since Norway, Iceland, Finland and Sweden's introduced a law on quotas for women in boardrooms, these countries have nearly doubled the average percentage of women on boards to around 34 per cent, which is a stark contrast to countries without quotas in place (at about 18 per cent).²⁵ I am a strong advocate of quotas for women in the judiciary. Government judicial diversity statistics in 2017²⁶ show that women comprise only 28 per cent of all court judges, 24 per cent of Court of Appeal judges and 22 per cent of High Court judges, which is consistent with 2016. The gender imbalance between male and female judges in the UK is amongst the worst in Europe. Gender quotas in the judiciary have been tried and tested, having been introduced in the International Criminal Court, the European Court of Human Rights and the Belgium Constitutional Court, which ensures a more equal gender balance in the judiciary.²⁷ Should the Labour Party attain political office, Baroness Shami Chakrabarti would become the Attorney General and gender quotas could firmly be on the agenda. In her book, *Of Women: In the 21st Century* Chakrabarti²⁸ sets out a compelling argument for quotas in the judiciary as well as other fields.

A radical transformation of rape law.

Britain's rape laws are not working. Approximately 85,000 women are raped in England and Wales every year, that's around 11 rapes of adults every hour; only around 15 per cent of those who experience sexual violence report to the police;²⁹ conviction rates for rape are far lower than other crimes with only 5.7 per cent of reported rape cases ending in a conviction³⁰; and only around 57.9 per cent of rape prosecutions result in a conviction.³¹ Women are often reluctant to report cases of rape, given that during investigations and at trial women's sexual history is put under the microscope; women are expected to relive intimate and often traumatic memories before non-medical professionals; and they are often

at the mercy of an under-resourced CPS and police force who are expected to present a robust case.

To prove rape, it must be shown beyond reasonable doubt that the defendant did not have a reasonable belief that the complainant was consenting to penetration. Consent means 'if she agrees by choice, and has the freedom and capacity to make that choice'.³² But how can a woman be free when she is not equal? MacKinnon³³ proposes a radical transformation of existing rape laws. At present there is a presumption that if sex happened, the woman consented to it unless the prosecution proves she did not. MacKinnon argues that even if there is consent that does not make sex equal, mutual or welcome but it can make it tolerated. Just because a woman allowed sex to happen to her under the threat of being arrested or losing her job or being deported, it does not mean that she *wanted* it. It means a man exerted institutional power over her. Yet this is consensual sex according to the criminal law. MacKinnon explains that coercive submission can merge with consent because threatening conditions are a normal feature of gender relations under conditions of inequality so much so that they appear as sex.

MacKinnon proposes redefining rape laws by assessing the circumstances of inequality. This starts from a premise that rape is a crime of inequality that includes gender amongst other inequalities.³⁴ Consent as it's currently defined in law should be only one facet of analysis. The law should take into account inequality – such an analysis starts with the interactions and power base of the defendant in contrast to the complainant. This would involve an analysis of the hierarchal power relations of the complainant and defendant and consideration of whether the sex was welcomed, desired and based on mutuality. The larger structures of inequality in which accuser and accused are imbricated should be taken into account; men should not be able to ignore these broader power relations. Using one's power to put someone in a position where they agree to a sexual act should not be acceptable.

Universal childcare and paternity leave

Universal childcare is a policy championed by the Labour Party. At the party's annual conference in 2017, shadow Education Secretary Angela Raynor

committed to universal childcare for two to four year olds for up to 30 hours a week regardless of family income for 38 weeks of the year.³⁵ While this is a progressive policy, it does not go far enough to assist women, who largely remain responsible for the bulk of childcare and as a consequence often forgo career advancement. Labour should commit to funding childcare from birth to school age for up to 35 hours a week for 50 weeks of the year, and upon the child reaching school age, the party should commit to funding after school childcare.

Not enough fathers opt to take paternity leave. Currently the government ensures one or two weeks paid paternity leave for fathers, which frankly is appalling and certainly does little to encourage men to parent their children in the same way mothers are expected to. The UK is lagging behind countries that champion gender equality with innovative paternity policies.³⁶ In Sweden, fathers receive 90 days paid paternity leave, which cannot be transferred to the mother. In Iceland, parents can split their nine months post-birth parental leave in half. Mothers are allocated three months and fathers are allocated three months. It is left to the parents to decide how to divide the remaining three months. Neither parent can transfer their three months of leave. The Labour party can lead the way in advocating for gender equality amongst parents by offering mothers and fathers equal and well-paid childcare leave.

Labour must build on the work of feminist scholars to put gender, as well as economic inequality at the heart of its programme. But policies are not the whole story: culture is significant too.

The culture of the Labour Left

As the 'liberation' movements of the 1960s and 1970s insisted, oppressed groups like women and black people need to organise themselves to fight their own oppression. Women must have a platform at the top of the Labour party to enable them to speak for themselves. 45 per cent of Labour MPs are women, but they are not so well represented in leadership positions. In September 2015, there was a political and media furore over the appointment of Corbyn's first

shadow cabinet. During the leadership campaign Corbyn promised that half of his frontbench team would be women, in order to build ‘a society where women and men exist as equals and flourish’.³⁷ Yet the top five positions – Leader, Deputy Leader, shadow Chancellor, shadow Home Secretary and shadow Foreign Secretary – were held by white men. The majority of women were relegated to junior ministerial positions. Corbyn was accused of ‘bro-socialism’. Despite Corbyn’s later efforts to ensure gender parity, the party still has a male Leader, Deputy Leader, Chancellor of the Exchequer, London mayor and General Secretary. The Labour party has never had a female leader (excepting interim leaders), Chancellor of the Exchequer or London mayoral candidate. The under-representation of women in positions of power in the Labour party will impact on where feminism is positioned on the political agenda. Given the Labour party’s roots in socialism and labourism, with their masculine biases, more needs to be done.

A troublingly pervasive feature of left-wing Labour activist politics is misogynistic online abuse. It is true that abuse is a feature of politics right across the spectrum including in the Labour Party. When Yvette Cooper stood against Jeremy Corbyn in the Labour leadership election in 2015 she experienced a tirade of abuse, particularly from Jeremy Corbyn fans, including twitter messages like, ‘Labour leadership contest: Yvette Cooper appeals to family vote with childcare pledge. Stupid cow’.³⁸ Angela Eagle had a brick thrown through her constituency office window after challenging Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership in 2016. Eventually she stood aside to make way for Owen Smith, who came under fire for sexist ‘jokes’, reminding us that no one part of the political spectrum has a monopoly on sexism. Misogynistic online abuse could have the effect of discouraging women from participating in Labour politics. It should be alien to all parts of the Labour Party.

Following the Harvey Weinstein scandal, many women came forward to report incidents of sexual harassment, assault and rape in politics. Bex Bailey, former member of the Labour Party’s National Executive Committee, courageously told her story of being raped by another Labour party member and being dissuaded from bringing a complaint by another Labour Party member due to fears it could impact on her career prospects.³⁹ Allegations of sexually inappropriate conduct towards woman have been made against high profile Labour MPs,

some of whom were suspended. Corbyn rightly condemned Westminster's culture of 'warped and degrading' sexual harassment, but given the huge respect for Corbyn in the party, he needs to use the influence he has, reiterating the message that sexist abuse (indeed online abuse generally) is anathema to the Labour Party's values over and over until such a time as it has been stamped out.

Human rights barrister Karon Monaghan QC has been appointed to undertake an independent investigation into how the Labour has handled complaints of sexism, discrimination and abuse, and to assess the party's procedures. It is to be hoped the investigation and concluding report will provide a frank review of much needed procedures to encourage women to report incidences of abuse. For example, how can the Labour party ensure anonymity of complainants? It is necessary that a complainant's identity remains anonymous, otherwise the fear that a complainant's identity could be leaked to the media will discourage complainants from coming forward and ensure impunity for perpetrators.

Conclusions

While the left of the Labour Party still has a long way to go to achieve gender equality, there are feminist Labour MPs who have a record of successfully lobbying across the political spectrum. This year Stella Creasy MP organised a feminist cross-party voting bloc which forced the government to back down and allow Northern Irish women access to NHS-funded abortions in England and Wales. Jess Phillips MP is organising Labour women MPs to work together to scrutinise the domestic violence bill, and social security reform for women, putting women at the centre of Labour's industrial strategy and focusing on carers. A feminist voting bloc that supports women has the potential to create tangible policy change. But these feminist issues need to be at the heart of everything the party does.

Potential and challenges lie ahead for the left of the Labour Party. If a Corbyn-led Labour party reflects upon its historically male roots, as well as its gender policies and applies an intersectional approach to its politics, the Labour party

would be a force to be reckoned with. Intersectionality is a means of representing every cross section of society without excluding one group. The Labour Party has always been a party committed to eradicating inequality but inequality does not just relate to class, it encompasses gender, race, nationality, disability, religion and so much more. People want policies that relate to their experiences, and experiences of inequality are always intersectional.

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NARRATIVES AND VALUES Feminism and the Labour Left: a perfect political union?

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