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Lucía Sánchez Saornil
The Woman Question in Our Circles
[La cuestión femenina en nuestros medios]
1935

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These are the first three in a series of five articles published by L.S. Saornil in the CNT newspaper "Solidaridad Obrera" (Sept/Oct 1935), under the title "La cuestión femenina en nuestros medios". The remaining articles in the series are coming soon. Translation by J.B. from here (pg. 29). All notes by the translator. Translated into English by João Black.

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The Woman Question in Our Circles

[La cuestión femenina en nuestros medios]

Lucía Sánchez Saornil

1935

Being a machine operator was well suited[6] to the simplistic conformation of the female brain at that time, and, for this purpose, women began to be employed who, accustomed for centuries to the idea of their inferiority, did not intend to impose conditions on capitalist abuses. Men were relegated to the toughest jobs and to specializations.

If the workers, instead of taking this course, had given quarter to the woman,[7] awakening the stimulus in her, elevating her to their own level, attracting her from the first moment to class organizations, imposing on bosses equal conditions for both sexes, the consequences would have been very different. For the time being, physical superiority would have given them supremacy in the employer's choice, since the strong would cost him the same as the weak; and as for the woman, the desire for self-improvement would have been awakened in her and, united with men in class organizations, they would have advanced together more rapidly along the path of liberation.

I'm already hearing a number of objections. I will be told that the worker of forty or fifty years ago could not be asked for this insight, when he had barely emerged from a state of semi-consciousness; but let us bear in mind that when I refer to the workers, I am not referring so much to the totality as to those who had taken on their shoulders the task of guiding them, and that my purpose is not so much to criticize those times as to reproach the comrades who still persist in the same errors, dismissing the lessons of experience.

Perhaps I will also be told that, indeed, female nature imposes on women other activities, equally important and valuable as social work. To these… I will reply the next day.

[Solidaridad Obrera, Barcelona, 09/10/1935]

[6] "La auxiliaria de la máquina se compadecía bien con…"

[7] "Si … hubieran dado cuartel a la mujer"

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and precisely the brutal statement of [Lorenz] Oken — whom he surely did not know but to whom he was united by the invisible line of atavism —: "Woman is only the means, not the end of nature. Nature has only one end and object: man"

The words of that comrade highlight what I have been saying since the beginning of this campaign: that due to the lack of preparation of the comrades, the little that has been done on this matter has been negative. First of all, the unity of criteria is missing. And from there have followed not a few evils for our movement.

He lamented what for me was the main source of satisfaction: that women had broken with the tradition that made them dependent on men, and had gone out into the job market in search of economic independence. It hurt him, but I rejoiced, because I knew that the contact with the street, with social activity, would be a stimulus that would end up awakening in women the consciousness of individuality.

His lament had been the universal lament some years earlier, when we saw the first women to leave the home for the factory and the workshop. Was an evil for the proletarian cause to be deduced from this fact? The incorporation of women into the workplace, coinciding with the introduction of machinery in the industry, made the competition among workers more fierce, causing, as a consequence, a significant drop in wages.

Looking at it like this, superficially, we would say that the workers were right; but if, we delve into the bottom of the problem, always willing to find the truth, we will discover that the results would have been different if the workers had not allowed themselves to be carried away by their hostility to women, based on the prejudice of the supposed female inferiority.

The battle was presented to women on the pretext of this alleged inferiority, and it was tolerated that they were given lower wages, alienating them from class organizations, under the watchword that social work was not the mission of women; and from here a disgraceful [ilícita] inter-sexual competition was established.

kind, it is not the best pathway to reproach women for a crime of which they are only victims.

[Solidaridad Obrera, Barcelona, 02/10/1935]

III

I keep in my memory a certain act of union propaganda in which I took part. It was in a small provincial capital. Before the event began, a comrade, member of the most important Local Committee, approached me: "We have managed, with the lure of your intervention — he told me —, to get a good number of women to attend; it is necessary that you reproach them because they have a very wrong idea here of what their mission should be; for some time now they have begun to invade factories and workshops, and today they compete with us, creating a real unemployment problem. On the other hand, and conceited in their economic independence, they are reluctant to marry. You have to tell them that their mission is elsewhere, that the woman is born for higher destinies, more in harmony with her nature; that she is the cornerstone of the family; that she is, first and foremost, the mother, etc., etc." And with this fear [a este temor], the comrade landed me with a nuisance of more than half an hour.[5]

Not knowing what to do, whether to laugh or be indignant, I let him speak, and when the time came I told the women what I thought was convenient; something that, if not opposed to his opinions, was far from what he wanted.

Today, after a long time, I still wonder if that comrade was absolutely sincere, if at the bottom of his arguments there wasn't a terrible amount of masculine egoism.

Because it is not worth to sweeten the pill. Through his fiery ardor for the "sublime mission" of the woman, there emerged clearly

[5] "Y a este temor, el camarada me endilgó una monserga de más de media hora."

I

I am grateful to M. R. Vázquez who, with his article published in these same columns, "Woman, a revolutionary factor"[1] — very well focused, by the way — has given me the opportunity to deal with this subject again.

In other newspapers — "El Libertario", "C. N. T." — and on different occasions, I have said something about how much there is to say about the importance that the recruitment of women would have for our movement.

But in this matter we have to speak clearly, very clearly; among us there is no room for circumlocution, we must be sincere even if this sincerity makes us bitter; let us hold our hands out for the cane even if we tear our knuckles;[2] only at the cost of this will we enter the path of truth.

Vázquez complains, as I have repeatedly complained, that there is not enough propaganda of our ideas among women; and after observing the facts, after having analyzed them, I have come to draw this conclusion: the anarcho-syndicalist comrades — not anarcho-syndicalism, be careful — have little interest in women's participation.

I seem to hear a series of angry voices rising up against me. Calm down, friends; I haven't started yet. When I affirm something I am always ready to demonstrate it, and here I go.

Nothing is easier than propaganda among women — I wish all our goals were as simple! Propaganda in the unions? Propaganda in the athenaeums? [Why not] Propaganda at home! It is the simplest and the most effective. In what home is there not a woman — partner, daughter, sister? Well, here lies the crux of the matter. Let us suppose that the National Confederation of Labor [CNT] has one million members. Shouldn't it have at least another mil-

[1] "La mujer, factor revolucionario", in the original Spanish.

[2] "enarbolemos nosotros mismos la palmeta aunque nos desgarremos los nudillos"

lion sympathizers among women? What work would then cost to organize them, when their organization is deemed necessary? As we can see, the difficulty is not here, the difficulty is elsewhere: in the lack of will of the comrades themselves.

I have seen many homes, not of simple members of the Confederation, but of anarchists, governed by the purest feudal norms. What's the use, then, of the meetings, conferences, rallies and the whole range of propaganda, if it is not your partners, the women who live in your houses, who are to attend them? What women are you talking about then?

For this reason, it is not worth saying: "We must make propaganda among women, we must attract women to our milieu", but we must take the issue further, much further. The vast majority of the comrades, with the exception of a dozen well-oriented ones, have a mentality contaminated with the most characteristic bourgeois aberrations. While they clamor against property, they are the most furious owners. While they stand up against slavery, they are the cruelest "masters". While they rant against monopoly, they are the fiercest monopolists. And all of this stems from the most false concept that humanity could have created: the supposed "female inferiority". An error which perhaps has delayed centuries of civilization.

The last slave, once he has crossed the threshold of his home, becomes sovereign and lord. A wish of his, barely outlined, is a strict order for the women of his house. The one who ten minutes before swallowed the bitter pill of bourgeois humiliation, rises up as a tyrant making those unfortunate women feel all the bitterness of their alleged inferiority.

Don't tell me I'm exaggerating. I could offer handfuls of examples.

The comrades are not interested in the women's participation. I will cite true cases.

Several times I had had the opportunity to talk with a comrade who seemed to me quite sensible, and I had always heard him em-

of pleasure, but I assure you that she was not even that, but a tormented and passive witness to the pleasure of others.

Does R. P. know what the woman has been raised to, what she has been educated to for thousands of years? Exclusively to excite the senses of the male; for this she was told that she was born, and for this she was guided all her life. Her only horizon was, and has not yet ceased to be, the brothel or the marriage, either way. So Charles Albert could say in his "Free Love":[4] "Suppose that a courtesan, instead of carrying out her trade in the street, is sure of finding the same client every day, at the proper time, and you will have the so frequent type of woman forced to marry by the need to participate in a man's salary." All her activities revolved around this unique solution. When did anyone take care to awaken her conscience? When did anyone tell her that an individual with duties but also with rights resided in her? To be born, to suffer, to die — that was all her destiny and all her rights.

No, an emancipated woman cannot judge her sisters like that; looking back at that immense multitude of slaves who are still generally the women of the people, she can only feel anguish, indignation, urge to cry, and then a vehement desire to unite her own effort, her own individuality to that of all those who have sincerely glimpsed the possibility of a better world — unite her will to the vast movement of integral emancipation that will implant on the face of the earth a more just and more humane system of coexistence, the only one in which women can find their definitive liberation.

But let our propagandists not forget that only the woman who has reached a certain degree of moral emancipation arrives at these conclusions; and providing this emancipation must be our most immediate goal; and let us not forget that, besides being not very

[4] "Amor libre". Spanish title to Charles Albert's book on Free Love, whose original French title is "L'Amour libre".

all social systems existing up to now, intending to take the effects for causes.

One paragraph of the aforementioned writing said: "Not only men, but society in general, has a poor concept of women. Do you know why? Because many [women], at that happy age in which the heart and the brain are formed, do not take care of anything; on the contrary, they soon get tired of all that is about reflection and quietness. What do they want? They want everything that flatters the imagination and their self-love." And further on: "The woman, by dint of looking at her body in the mirror, forgets to look at her heart in the mirror of her conscience."

What an infinite shame to read this! Who said that it could have been written by a female hand?

It is necessary that the woman's brain harbors a vast potential for intelligence, so that she has not definitively sunk into the shadows of the most absolute animality. For thousands of years her life was confined within the four walls of the gynecium. The lack of horizons perhaps created in her a beginning of spiritual myopia. She couldn't even learn to look inside herself because she was assured that she had nothing inside her; and now, when she shows herself to you not as she is, but as you have created her, you throw in her face what is simply the result of your own work.

The woman was in society, until yesterday, the object of the most humiliating contempt. In the 8th century, when the ideal of humanity was the religious ideal, at a Council convened in Flanders, an attempt was made to discuss whether the woman had a soul. In the first third of the 18th century, when the roots of the rights of man were beginning to germinate, a series of dissertations came to light — in a humorous tone, for greater derision — in which the problem was raised of whether the woman was a human being. And so, throughout the centuries, societies founded by men and made up of men relegated the woman to the last ranks on the zoological scale. She has sometimes been called an animal

phasize the need that was felt in our movement for the women's attendance. One day when a conference was being held at the Center [Centro], I asked him:

— And your partner, why hasn't she come to listen to the conference?

The answer chilled me:[3]

— My partner has a lot to do with taking care of me and her children.

Another day, it was in the corridors of the Court [Audiencia]. I was in the company of a comrade who held a representative position. A [woman] lawyer was leaving one of the rooms, perhaps a defender of the cause of some proletarian. My comrade looked at her sideways and murmured while outlining a spiteful smile:

— To wash, that's what I would send these to do.

These two episodes, so banal at first glance, how many sad things do they not say? They say, first of all, that we have forgotten something very important: that while we were concentrating all our energies on the work of agitation, we relegated the educational work; that it is not among women that we ought to do the propaganda to attract them, but among the comrades themselves; that we must begin by uprooting the idea of superiority from their brains; that when they are told that all humans are equal, the woman is included among human beings, even if she vegetates among household items confused with the pans and the pets. We must tell them that in women there is an intelligence like theirs, an acute sensitivity and a need for self-improvement [superación]; that before reforming society they need to reform their houses; that what they dream of for the future — equality and justice — they must implement from today among their loved ones; that it is absurd to ask a woman for understanding for the problems of humanity if one does not first enlighten her so that she can see inside herself, if one does not try to awaken in the woman who

[3] "La respuesta me dejó helada"

shares one's life the consciousness of personality, if one does not first elevate her to the category of individual.

This, and no other, is the propaganda that can attract women to our circles. Which of them will not embrace the cause that has worked the "miracle" of revealing her being to her?

To the task, then, comrades.

And if we consider this to be an interesting problem for the revolutionary movement, let's not hide it as a shame among the narrow columns of the telegraphic information pages of our newspapers; let's give it some air, let's put it within everyone's sight (this goes for you, comrade editor).

As for the comrades, they will forgive me the harshness; but it is necessary if we do not want to deceive ourselves.

And since I haven't finished, all I say is see you soon [hasta luego].

[Solidaridad Obrera, Barcelona, 26/09/1935]

II

Do not think — because you would be absolutely wrong — that by entrusting the recruitment of women to individual propaganda I have neglected the work that can be done by other broader means: the conference, the meeting, the newspaper. But before any comrade decides to employ them, it is necessary to take into account that extreme tact and skill are required to avoid doing negative work. Such means should only be handled by those who, in the privacy of their conscience, have recognized in advance the necessity and value of the acquisition that we are proposing.

I would like each one to meditate deeply and, before opening his lips, enter into himself, go down to his deepest intimacies and as far as his knowledge can reach, but with absolute sincerity, willing to find the truth above all environmental constraints, and seek to discover in himself and in society the subtle imprint that the woman

has been allowed to leave; and only when he has discovered that the woman, even from the distance where she was relegated, and above the morbid sexual legend in which she was wrapped, has operated as a vital element propelling the development of the male individuality as well as of humanity — then, and only then, once having deduced the benefits that the full incorporation of this vital element would bring to the future society, should he proclaim to the four winds the newly discovered truth. As for those who have not reached this conclusion, it is preferable that they remain silent and do not disturb with negative work the results that we promise ourselves from this campaign.

There are many comrades who sincerely want the participation of women in the struggle; but this desire does not correspond to a change in their concept of the woman; they want their participation as an element that can facilitate victory, as a strategic contribution we could say, without this making them think for a moment about women's autonomy, without them ceasing to consider themselves the navel of the world. They are the ones who in moments of agitation say: "Why don't we organize women's demonstrations? A demonstration of women is sometimes more effective, and the public force stops a little before them." They are also the ones who, in order to attract them, write articles like one that we had the pain of reading in the issue 1,053 of our newspaper, which was signed with the initials R.P. followed by the location Vilassar de Mar.

That article claimed to be written by a woman, but I allow myself to doubt it. A woman who gives a writing to the Press, demonstrates by this very fact to have reached a certain degree of moral emancipation; and a morally emancipated woman, who has gone through all the pain, all the bitterness, who has had to face the fiercest struggle among her relatives and among strangers: mockery, irony and ridicule — ridicule, the most bitter and difficult thing to face —, [all this] to achieve that goal [of moral emancipation], she cannot write like that. She cannot lay on women the blame for