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Stranger in our Midst: The Working Class Woman

Yvonne van der Klip Stam

The ideas of most women about their role and about women's liberation are a function of their class and education.

White middle class ideas about women's liberation come from a growing awareness of woman's innate equality with man and frustration with the denial of the exercise of that equality by male dominated power structures. The basis of this equality is essentially intellectual: men have no innate mental superiority over women and are therefore innately no better able than women to handle most of the professional and administrative jobs in our society. This fact, however, can only be demonstrated by developing a corps of suitably educated women who are then employed in a way rationally related to their education. It is when women are motivated to develop their abilities through education that equal ability becomes apparent. Then, when the opportunity to exercise this potential is denied, stifled, or short-circuited by rechanneling into positions in the society demanding less of the individual, frustration develops. It is this frustration which is the basis of the liberation movement among the educated middle class.

If, however, education is seen largely as something to put up with until one reaches the legal age to quit, or until one gets a high school diploma at the most, intellectual competitiveness and awareness is minimal and there is far less questioning of the rules of the game and the values of society. Therefore, in the blue collar working class where this view of education is far more common, there tends to be much less of the type of frustration caused by the denial of potential as described above, with a resultant lack of empathy with women's liberation ideas. This is not to suggest that there is no frustration in the blue collar class, rather that it is of a different origin, and is therefore not responsive to the same types of ideas and actions as that of the middle class.

It is largely middle class and some upwardly mobile working class women who reach for education and are thus frustrated by being denied use of their trained minds to capacity. The blue collar working class is more prone to put up with education, or more accurately, schooling.

“The time was, [wrote George Orwell] when I used to lament over quite imaginary pictures of lads of fourteen dragged protesting from their lessons and set to work at dismal jobs. It seemed to me dreadful that the doom of a “job” should descend upon anyone at fourteen. Of course I know now that there is not one working class boy in a thousand who does not pine for the day when he will leave school. He wants to be doing real work, not wasting his time on ridiculous rubbish like history and geography. To the working class, the notion of staying at school till you are nearly grown-up seems merely contemptible and unmanly.”¹

Although this was written almost forty years ago, the point is still valid. Education for its own sake has traditionally been a middle class value. Only in recent years has there been a substantial increase in interest in education by the working class.

In many ways the effects of class and education are indistinguishable, since education is not only a function of class, but also a causal factor in itself. The average middle class child receives far more motivation for education from his or her home than the average blue collar child.

One of the functions of class and education is the assimilation by the individual of the sex roles accepted by society. It was long accepted that men and women are basically different species, neither of which were designed to understand the other. As Carol Kennicott said in Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street*:

“There are two races of people, only two and they live side by side. His calls mine ‘neurotic’; mine calls his ‘stupid.’ We’ll never understand each other, never; and it’s madness for us to debate. . .”²

The acceptance of traditional roles by the working class is illustrated by *Blue Collar Marriage*,³ a sociological study by Mirra Komarovsky. Although now somewhat dated—the field data were compiled in 1958 and 1959—it may still reflect accurately the attitudes of the group studied. Remarks like “Men are different. They don’t feel the same as us,”⁴ and “The fellows got their interests and the girls got theirs and they each go their separate ways,”⁵ were frequently made by the women interviewed to explain the behavior of men. Furthermore, there seems to be little questioning of the individual’s role in society as based on sex: role assignment was accepted as natural. Both men and women of the working class expect to get married, but do not seem to give a great deal of thought to it. Comments like “It was time,” “We just did it,” or “We just drifted into it,”⁶ are typical. Rainwater and Weinstein in their study *And the Poor Get Children* state that these women get married to assure themselves of a

respectable place in society⁸ and that they feel very inferior to men.⁹ Furthermore, working class young people, having often fewer options than their middle class counterparts, are much more likely to marry to get away from the parental home.¹⁰

While it is not true that none of the above factors affect the middle class, it is probably fair to say that they are much less important. There is often more soul searching among the better educated, not only about marriage. The inferiority of women is also accepted far less among the middle than among the working class.

Working class women accept their role as housewives to a much greater degree than do middle class women.¹¹ Furthermore, the discontent they feel is of a different sort. They are not concerned with the low status of housewifery, for this seems to be a more middle class value. Their dissatisfaction stems rather from the amount of help they receive from the family, personal competence in performing household tasks, and the lack of material gratification they receive.

Although the working class woman may be indistinguishable in appearance from the middle class woman, the two are oceans apart in their ways of looking at almost everything. Their motivation is different, their education is different, and their perception of their own possibilities are different. While both may have an awareness that certain things happen to them because they are women, the working class woman is more likely to accept this as natural while the middle class woman is more likely to perceive it as unnatural, knowing herself to be equal to men in almost any situation.

Much of this difference comes from socialization and education as mentioned above; however, socialization has a direct effect on education as it influences the degree to which a person is motivated to participate actively in his or her own educational experience. Thus unless working class women become motivated to get and do receive a better education than is the case currently, it is unlikely they will be very active in the women's movement.

Although some of the concrete goals of women's liberation such as adequate available day care for children are important to women of both the blue collar and middle classes, the philosophy expressed by the movement is not calculated to attract the working class woman. Two incomes may be increasingly necessary to the middle class family, and an increasing number of middle class women are now supporting their children alone, but the movement speaks of freeing women from child care to pursue a career, an idea which does not speak to a blue collar woman concerned with getting a job to make ends meet. Thus the need may in many senses be the same, yet the rhetoric divides where the common interest should unite.

Thus unless and until both groups realize the degree to which their interests coincide and the rhetoric loses some of its very strong class bias, it is unlikely that the women of the blue collar working class will be a substantial part of the women's movement and it will continue to be largely middle class in its orientation and outlook.

FOOTNOTES

1. George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (Berkley Publishing Corporation, New York, 1961), p. 104.
2. Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street* (New American Library, New York, 1920), p. 284.
3. Mirra Komarovsky, *Blue-Collar Marriage* (Vintage Books, New York, 1967).
4. Komarovsky, p. 33.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
6. Rainwater and Weinstein, p. 71.
7. Lee Rainwater and Karol Weinstein, *And the Poor Get Children* (Quadrangle Books, Chicago, 1960).
8. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
10. Komarovsky, p. 25.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 49.