

To undermine for good the sexual division of labour, women and men must begin with children

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A century ago International Women's Day was associated with peace, and women's and girls' sweated labour – which votes for women were to deal with. Not a celebration, but a mobilisation. And because it was born among factory workers, it had class, real class. Later it came to celebrate women's autonomy, but changed its class base and lost its edge. This centenary must mark a new beginning.

We live in revolutionary times. We don't need to be in North Africa or the Middle East to be infected by the hope of change. Enough to witness on TV the woman who, veiled in black from head to foot, led chants in Cairo's Tahrir Square, routing sexism and Islamophobia in one unexpected blow. She and the millions moving together have shaken us from our provincialism, and shown us how rapidly things can change. Women in Egypt have called for a million women to occupy Tahrir Square today. Who would have predicted that a month ago?

Feminism has tended to narrow its concerns to what is unquestionably about women: abortion, childcare, rape, prostitution, pay equity. But that can separate us from a wider and deeper women's movement. In Bahrain, for example, women lead the struggle for "jobs, housing, clean water, peace and justice" – as well as every demand we share.

The revolution is spreading. Scott Walker, the Tea Party's state governor in Wisconsin, aims to destroy state workers' collective bargaining rights. As in Britain, most employees and service users attacked by the cuts are women. A male colleague told demonstrators who had occupied the state capitol: "The administration made a calculation that the men would not support the women. Now they know otherwise." He ended his speech with the phrase on everyone's lips: "Fight like an Egyptian!"

Now we know the Tea Party is after women, what will women's organisations do about it? The only one anywhere near is a long-time fighting network of welfare mothers. Wisconsin in the 90s led on "welfare reform" – the blueprint for UK cuts. Welfare mothers remember that few stood with them then.

It has not always been easy to pull up women's neglected interests from beneath the "general cause". The best way is to ask the women who often shout unheard: the single mothers, the teachers, the nurses, the sex workers, the care workers, the asylum seekers, the pensioners. But as feminists, our hearing and our focus are corrupted when we concentrate on getting women into the corridors of power. Recently the UK government warned big companies that they must "double the number of women in boardrooms" – while it increases the poverty of women and of children. Will we allow that? Or can we turn this around and demand the money from corporations and banks for women, children and all who need it?

Such a turnaround presumes a return of feminism to class. Not the restricted concepts of the 70s, but a new definition that begins with women internationally – from Bahrain to Palestine, from Haiti to Pakistan, where women fight for survival and justice after earthquakes, floods, coups and occupations.

How do we deal with the fact that our biology is an encumbrance for Alan Sugar, who wants to question women job applicants about their parental intentions? It's even an embarrassment for some paid to represent us. When a trade union equality worker was asked to endorse our IWD event, she wrote back: "Is it just me – or [is] the 'Mothers march' banner ... disturb[ing]?"

Many feminists have become convinced that we can only escape romanticised visions of maternal slavery by denying we are mothers at all. To be a financially independent individual as well as (or instead of) a mother, we have traded away the social power that comes from recognition of the contribution of motherhood – the making of the human race, the creation of the labour force. Marching as mothers we transform the attitude to that work: from a social liability to the social contribution that it is. In this way, we help put all women in a stronger position to demand wages and working conditions that take account of the caring work most of us are already doing, whether we're mothers or not.

New boldness allows us to face what Marx and Engels called "our real conditions of life and our relations with our kind". Women refusing to be trapped at home, and demanding that men not be trapped out of home, takes us immediately beyond

the market, which only considers work that leads to profit for others, not to equity nor to happiness nor even to survival.

To undermine once and for all the sexual division of labour, we – women and men – must aim to work less. We can then begin where we all began, with children.

What do they need? First of all, adults (not just parents) who love them and work to make a relationship with them. That is after all what caring is. We need time for this. Prime time.

We cannot be punished for our involvement in this civilising life process. Nor can we allow men to be excluded from it. So this International Women's Day, we must at least consider claiming the money from banks and wars to pay for the society of carers that only we together can devise. Taking the lead of the women in Tahrir Square, we can change the world.

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