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USA

The new women's movement

- Features - Feminism -

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The eruption of resistance that first burst onto the scene in the US with the Women's Marches is part of a global women's rebellion. Cinzia Arruzza has argued that we are witnessing the birth of what she calls a "third feminist wave," one that "has posed issues such as gender violence, wage inequality, reproductive rights, and women's reproductive work, as well as sexual liberties, at the center of the political and cultural debate of every country hit by the mobilizations."

The movement in the US shares many elements in common with this global phenomenon but has its own trajectory. As other articles in this issue will take up the international context, this piece will focus on exploring the specific dynamics of the movement here, how to situate it within the historical development of US capitalism and the legacy of previous waves of feminist struggle, and the potential opened up by this new phase.

The women's marches that took place the weekend of Trump's inauguration were the largest in US history. Six hundred and eighty marches in cities across the country drew more than three million protestors. While commentators often focused on white women in pink pussy hats or holding signs with slogans like "If Hillary had won, I'd be at brunch," the marches encompassed a broad cross-section of women: urban and rural; white and of color; middle class and working class; more liberal and more radical. Moreover, the marches represented the crystallization of a deep, but previously subterranean, anger at the condition of women in our supposedly post-feminist society.

While neoliberal Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign was supposed to epitomize how far women had come since the women's liberation movement, the election of a man caught on tape bragging about his ability to "grab women by the pussy" showed just how illusory that progress was. This basic contradiction struck a deep chord. While the *New York Times* profiled suburban dads in New Jersey who replaced their soccer-mom wives for the weekend to attend the march, other women organized groups of friends to travel more than twenty hours—sometimes in open defiance of their more traditional husbands—to attend. For large numbers of them, it was the first protest they had ever attended.

The women's marches set the tone of protest that has since marked the Trump presidency. It also set in motion a process of politicization and raised consciousness around feminist issues on a mass scale—on a magnitude that we have not seen since the women's liberation movement. The seeds of this movement had been planted in the previous years. SlutWalks and movements against sexual assault on campuses had revived the issue of sexual violence and forged new networks of activists. The months following the women's marches witnessed a small but critical rebirth of clinic defense committees willing to wage a militant fight for abortion rights.

The women's marches were followed just six weeks later by protests (and in some places workplace actions) for "A Day Without a Woman" and rallies called by the newly formed International Women's Strike on International Women's Day. The latter was itself consciously inspired by the global call for women's strikes and put forward the idea of "Feminism for the 99%." But following this burst of activity, there was little to organizationally cohere and propel feminist organizing forward. Thus, the expression of the ideological shift taking place was muted.

But then came the *New York Times* and *New Yorker* revelations that Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein had committed serial acts of sexual harassment and assault. A few days later, the hashtag #MeToo went viral and became the slogan that defined a new moment of feminist awakening.

As many have noted, the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and assault were not an undiscovered phenomenon.

The new women's movement

A plethora of institutions, including state institutions, have extensively charted rates of harassment, assault, and other forms of abuse. But the sheer magnitude of the #MeToo stories, and the deeply personal nature of them, collectively shared with friends, family members, and even coworkers, often for the first time, was transformative.

Within weeks, dozens of high-profile men had lost their positions and their reputations and it was clear that the impact of #MeToo was going to be long lasting. There are two seemingly separate, but actually deeply intertwined, aspects of what this moment brought to the surface. One is the way in which women's oppression continues to pervade and distort the most intimate aspects of their lives. In a move that has prompted discomfort as well as a potential backlash, the conversation has expanded beyond clear acts of harassment and assault to a deeper reexamination of sexual relations. The many ways in which power imbalances and cultural scripts created by sexism, but also racism, LGBTQ oppression, class, and other hierarchies shape those relations was exposed to both personal and collective reckoning.

This examination of private life has gone hand in hand with an exposure of the place where most people spend their public lives: the workplace. The authoritarianism of the workplace has been revealed as inherently a site of violence and degradation. From NBC's "Today Show" host Matt Lauer's ability to lock women in his office with a button under his desk to reports of growers raping agricultural workers in the fields, the power of male bosses over the women who work for them is inescapable at an individual level.

This subjugation of women at work cannot be separated from their subjugation outside of it. The tyranny of the workplace is difficult to escape for women who are primary breadwinners for their families, as 42 percent of working mothers are. At the same time, the vulnerability to abuse that women face in their personal lives is directly impacted by their degree of economic stability.

These factors set the stage for a phenomenon that was largely ideological to find its way to the workplace. And in the last year, we have begun to see this develop. In some cases, women have led workplace actions and strikes that directly challenge harassment and assault. In September, McDonald's workers in ten cities went on strike against sexual harassment. And in October, 7,700 workers began two months of strikes at Marriott in seven different states. In addition to winning significant wage demands, protections against sexual assault were central and victorious demands raised by the largely female workforce. More broadly, women have been central to the strike wave that continues to unfold across the US.

The response to allegations of sexual assault brought by Christine Blasey Ford against Supreme Court-nominee Brett Kavanaugh brought the issues raised by #MeToo into sharp focus. Kavanaugh was the hand-picked nominee of the conservative Federalist Society. Far from an outsider, he had been carefully groomed for this position by the conservative right. His nomination would be a step toward fulfilling Trump's promise to overturn *Roe v. Wade*.

The Democrats, who have raised the threat of a repeal on abortion in every election in the last thirty years, were prepared to fold in the face of the most genuine threat to *Roe v. Wade* since 1989. Prior to Ford's allegation, Kavanaugh seemed prepared to sail through the confirmation process. Mainstream women's organizations that have been in retreat for the last three decades couldn't muster more than some press releases and fundraising letters.

But then Ford stepped forward. Like nothing else, her allegations of sexual assault crystallized an opposition to Kavanaugh and recast him in the public imagination as a threat to women's bodily autonomy.

Grassroots groups organized protests at the Capitol building, sit-in's of politicians offices, and street protests in cities around the country. In West Virginia, teacher strike leader Emily Comer and others organized a sit-in of survivors at Senator Joe Manchin's office. Women active in socialist groups in New York City called for a march that drew

thousands of protestors on just forty-eight hours notice. More than one hundred women flew from Alaska to personally share their stories of sexual assault with Senator Murkowski—the only Republican to vote against the confirmation. Many of these were Alaskan Native women who, like other Native women, suffer disproportionately high levels of sexual violence.

This wave of protest was not nationally coordinated or amplified widely enough to reach the millions of women who were following the news with a growing level of rage. But it was significant in that it represented a coherence and deepening of local work and the diverse expressions of the #MeToo movement.

If anything had the power to stop Kavanaugh's confirmation, it was this burgeoning movement. But the struggle around his confirmation also revealed the deep polarization around sexual assault and provided an opportunity for the right to organize a backlash against #MeToo. Kavanaugh himself made the decision to go on the offensive in his testimony before the Senate committee. Trump himself decided to mock Ford at a campaign rally in Mississippi.

In a hideous twist, the man who whipped up a racist hysteria about five Black teenagers falsely accused of rape in the late 1980's was now warning about the dangers of losing "due process". Kavanaugh, the very definition of wealthy prep-school entitlement, turned himself into a poster child for a feminist movement run amok—one in which anyone's husband, father, or son could have their life ruined by false allegations. Despite the obvious hypocrisy of white men with such wealth, privilege, and power claiming victimhood, Danny Katch correctly noted the power of this lie to fuel a backlash:

The right-wing lie that any man is now in danger of having his life ruined by one false accusation has the potential to resonate with the precarity and powerlessness experienced by millions of men who work in non-union jobs and can be fired at the whim of their supervisor. That's part of the urgency of building a movement that connects the fight against sexism to the vast anger at corporate greed and the One Percent.

It's a good sign that socialist groups were at the heart of organizing some of most vibrant protests against Kavanaugh. Far from being a "distraction" from populist "class" demands, as many Democrats alleged after Trump won the White House, anger at sexism and sexual assault is in fact at the cutting edge of working-class issues—and it always has been. From slave-owning rapists to creepy sweatshop foremen to today's epidemic of sexual harassment against McDonald's employees and farmworkers, gendered violence and threats have always been one of the most intensely personal forms of class power and violence."

To understand why this struggle is emerging now, and in the particular forms it has, it is important to examine the contradictory outcomes of feminism's second wave in the US and the ways in which neoliberalism and austerity have reorganized family and sexual relations as well as the lives of women themselves.

The women's liberation movement broke down real barriers faced by women. It won abortion rights and the cultural impact was far-reaching. Women entered the workforce in mass numbers. In 1950, 34 percent of women were active in the labor force; by its peak in 2000, that number had grown to 60 percent. In this same period, women grew as a share of the labor force from about one-third in 1950 to almost half by 2015.

But this movement also peaked at a time in which unions were highly bureaucratized and were about to enter a period of sharp decline. Similarly, while the women's movement emerged out of the broader wave of radicalization around the war in Vietnam and for Black liberation, most of the left failed to embrace the movement. And, like the unions, the left was about to enter a period of decline. As a result, while sections of the women's liberation movement spoke to the broad demands of working-class women, the organic links to the left and to organized labor were weak.

The new women's movement

The women's movement in the US has also always faced fundamental divisions over questions of racism. As Angela Davis documented so trenchantly in her book *Women, Race and Class*, the particular forms of oppression experienced by Black women have shaped their struggles in different ways than those of white women. And, in too many cases, the failure of predominantly white and middle-class liberal feminist groups to address the issue of racism has put these struggles in contradiction rather than in solidarity. Black feminism drew attention to the unique needs of women of color, organizing around issues like forced sterilization, the criminalization of sexual assault survivors (particularly those who physically defended themselves), the child-welfare system, and the scapegoating of poor women.

Many of these issues also affect working-class and poor women of all races, but the mainstream feminist movement, dominated by middle-class white women, tended to downplay these concerns. These specific dynamics meant that the gains for working-class women and women of color were sharply limited, even as the ability of growing numbers of women to crack the glass ceiling created the illusion of a post-feminist society. This meant that the needs and aspirations of a rapidly ascending layer of middle-class women quickly eclipsed the more radical aspects of the movement.

While the 1980's and 1990's saw the far right reorganize itself and advance a backlash against women (well documented in Susan Faludi's book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*), liberal feminism retreated from the fight. Naomi Wolf's "power feminism" of the 1990's gave way to Sheryl Sandberg's "lean-in feminism". Meanwhile, the Hyde Amendment restricted abortion funding for poor women and the right's siege on clinics turned abortion from a right into a highly restricted privilege. Demands that could have materially impacted the lives of millions of women such as universal childcare, paid family leave programs, and robust protections against economic insecurity were relegated to the margins.

This led to a near-terminal decline in the feminist movement. Feminism itself became re-branded as a personal choice and seemed increasingly remote to the real concerns of most women's lives. Politically, the feminist movement was increasingly tied to the Democratic Party and shrunk down its mission to appeals to vote for the perpetual lesser evil in hopes of preserving a pro-Roe majority on the Supreme Court.

Nonetheless, real changes in women's lives, sexual relations, and the structure of the nuclear family were creating profound contradictions that laid the basis for a revival of women's struggles. These were the result of cultural and social shifts as a result of the women's liberation movement and sexual revolution, as well as material changes in capitalism.

In 1950, married couples headed 93 percent of households with children; in 2017, that number had declined to 69 percent. Meanwhile, 21 percent of children are now living with a single mother, with an additional 4 percent live with a single father. The median age for marriage is reaching thirty and marriage rates on the whole are declining, particularly for working-class people.

In addition to the decline in the nuclear family, social changes have challenged the rigid gender relations and norms that existed prior to the women's and gay liberation movements. After mass protests on the heels of Proposition 8 in California (banning same-sex marriage) and a growing national movement for marriage equality, the Supreme Court legalized marriage in all fifty states in 2015. A growing number of children (2–4 million) are being raised by LGBTQ parents. The growing movement in support of trans rights is also challenging traditional gender roles.

At the same time that the traditional nuclear family has been undermined by these social shifts, its material base has also eroded. Men's wages have declined over the last forty years and are less able to support an entire family. In fact, much of the closing of the gender pay gap is attributable to this decline, rather than to real advances in pay equity.

The new women's movement

This means that women are playing a greater role as the breadwinners in their families. Forty-two percent of mothers are the sole or primary breadwinners for their family, while nearly another quarter are co-breadwinners—bringing in 25–49 percent of their family's income. At the same time, the growth in income inequality, attacks on the social safety net, increased employer power, and stagnating wages all mean that these families face much higher levels of economic insecurity and instability.

The racial segmentation of the female workforce is an important part of this picture as well. Black women have always participated in the workforce in greater numbers and borne a greater share of the breadwinning responsibilities. In 1970, Black women were sole or co-breadwinners in about 59 percent of families; the dramatic increase in white women as breadwinners has only now brought them to the level of Black women in 1970. Meanwhile, for Black women that share has risen to about 86 percent. Latina women are also breadwinners at substantially higher rates. Both groups are more likely to head single-parent households. Because of this history, Black women have often been at the forefront of struggles against sexual harassment and discrimination in the workplace. It is not an accident that it was a Black woman, Anita Hill, who created a national conversation about sexual harassment.

This undermining of the traditional family unit was something that the Moynihan Report had, in a distinctively liberal form of racism, described as a pathology of the Black family in 1965. But the changes of the last forty-five years means that this breakdown has occurred across all demographic groups in ways that would be impossible to reverse—even if it were desirable to do so, which of course it is not.

But the impact of these changes is contradictory. For all women, these changes mean a greater degree of potential independence and freedom. Women are able to play a greater role in public life, are free to explore different relationships, have greater access to higher education and have the ability to leave personally suffocating family situations. And a minority of women are able to achieve real power and economic security; these women are able to take their place in the middle class or even ruling class not as a consequence of marriage, but on their own terms.

However, for the vast majority of women, this formal freedom exists alongside a high degree of vulnerability, economic dependence, and subjugation to sexual- and gender-based violence both in the workplace and outside of it. It is the relationship between these two that creates such an intimate nexus of oppression. It is this particular character, along with the bitterly disappointed expectations of the women's liberation movement that creates such a long-simmering and explosive situation.

Women make up 75 percent of the ten lowest wage occupations and their growing position as breadwinners means that they are more dependent upon those jobs. Those jobs in turn offer the least in the way of benefits or allowances for time off to care for sick family members. In such a situation, the petty tyranny of a male manager who controls the scheduling is experienced as absolute. It is not a coincidence that these are the sectors in which women experience some of the highest levels of sexual harassment.

Women are also concentrated in social-service sectors that have borne the brunt of budget cuts since the last recession. This has brought working conditions in these largely "caring" professions to a breaking point—a fact evidenced by the wave of teachers' strikes, which have been overwhelmingly led by women.

Both inside and outside of the workplace, sexual harassment and gender-based violence remains a significant feature of women's lives. One of the breakthroughs of #MeToo has been to expose this violence as violence—something that disrupts women's lives and diminishes their opportunities. While this sexual violence is not a new issue, it is emerging in a particular context: it is one in which neoliberalism and austerity have uprooted previous social relations that, while oppressive, had provided some measure of economic security. Now that economic unit has disintegrated while the social safety net has come under sustained attack and working-class lives

have become increasingly difficult.

All of these trends have been developing for a long time, but have been accelerated by the aftermath of the 2008 recession. At the same time, a new generation of women has come of age—a generation that has been told that we are in a post-feminist world in which women can have it all. And yet, they look around and at their own lives and realize they've been sold a bill of goods. They are far enough from the initial aftermath of the women's movement to be struck not by how far we've come, but how far there is to go. There is no women's movement left to speak for them, and so they must build a new one on new ground.

The battle over Kavanaugh's confirmation revealed the fault lines of this struggle. As in other countries experiencing an insurgent women's movement, these feminist struggles have the potential to bring the demands of working-class women to the forefront and to constitute a new and vibrant factor in the reconstitution of the left. At the same time, the far right will continue to see the struggle over the rights of women and LGBTQ people to autonomy as a key battleground.

The same shifts in family structures, sexual relations, and women's role in society that laid the basis for this new movement also make the shoring up of traditional gender roles and family relations a key lynchpin for the right. Stephanie Coontz, a sociologist who studies the family, has noted that for large numbers of working-class men, the entry of women into the workforce has not been a threat, but a lifeline that has kept working-class families afloat in the midst of wage stagnation. Studies bear this out: women's increased wages no longer increase the risks of divorce. However, there are two groups of men who are threatened by this increased autonomy: upper-class men who feel their status threatened, and men in the bottom 25 percent of the income distribution.

Both groups have an interest in propping up traditional gender roles. But for those at the bottom of the income distribution, there is a material basis to this desire. These men have a harder time finding stable relationships because they are not in a position to offer economic security. But when they do marry, these are the families that struggle to stay afloat. They don't have enough earning power to pay for childcare, but they struggle to survive on one paycheck. According to Coontz, it is in these families where you see the most gendered division of labor and the most resentment of working women and two-earner families.

During the Kavanaugh hearings, Trump went on the campaign trail and told women they must be afraid for their husbands and sons who might be falsely accused of assault. This argument to think of your husbands and sons, but never your daughters or sisters, can gain traction with some women. Women in these families are far more dependent on their husbands for economic security and, thus, also most deeply invested in the ideology of the family. This also begins to get at the often-vexed question of why so many white women have continued to support Trump despite his obvious misogyny.

Black women have never been offered the protections (however oppressive) of the traditional nuclear family in the way that white women have. As referenced earlier, a majority of Black women have played significant breadwinning roles in their families historically and today 70 percent of them are the sole breadwinners. While there has been an expansion in women of all demographics in the workplace, this shift has been the most dramatic for white women—more than doubling the numbers who play a substantial breadwinning role. Simultaneously, more of these women are in married relationships and remain dependent on a male salary either partially or fully.

This means that Black women in particular, and women of color more generally, are a powerful and assertive force that has the potential to play a leading role in this new women's movement. It also means that struggles against racism, and the specific oppression faced by women of color, will need to be central to building a new feminist movement. At the same time, the dramatic expansion of white women in the workforce, and particularly of women playing key economic roles in supporting their families, provides a new opportunity for a larger number of working

class women to organize on the basis of common interests.

The focus on white women Trump voters can sometimes obscure this reality. It is true that these women, often along with the men in their families, constitute a real base for a white supremacist right in this country. This poses a challenge to movements fighting for social justice. This is a dynamic that has been central to the United States since the rise of slavery. But today there is a polarization, with a rise in the number of white women workers who have more in common with their Black and brown coworkers than they do with middle-class feminism. There are new possibilities presented by the expansion of a multiracial, working-class bloc of women who together constitute the basis for a powerful new feminist movement. Nothing about this potential is automatic, but the developments of the last two years provide a promising basis on which to build.

Early on in the #MeToo movement, 700,000 farmworkers wrote a letter to those women in Hollywood who had come forward about the abuse they suffered. It expressed both the solidarity and the working-class character of this new movement:

We do not work under bright stage lights or on the big screen. We work in the shadows of society in isolated fields and packinghouses that are out of sight and out of mind for most people in this country. Your job feeds souls, fills hearts, and spreads joy. Our job nourishes the nation with the fruits, vegetables, and other crops that we plant, pick and pack. . .

We understand the hurt, confusion, isolation, and betrayal that you might feel. We also carry shame and fear resulting from this violence. It sits on our backs like oppressive weights. But, deep in our hearts we know that it is not our fault. The only people at fault are the individuals who choose to abuse their power to harass, threaten and harm us, like they have harmed you.

In these moments of despair, and as you cope with scrutiny and criticism because you have bravely chosen to speak out against the harrowing acts that were committed against you, please know that you're not alone. We believe and stand with you."

This movement was a fire waiting to be lit and will not be extinguished easily. It marks the assertion of women's growing economic and social power alongside their continuing oppression. It is helping to reshape the terrain of class struggle in the US and it has the potential to strengthen the new socialist movement that is emerging. There is an urgent challenge for socialists to figure out how to connect with and organize this sentiment—and to translate it into demands and arenas of struggle that can make real the desires for autonomy, bodily and otherwise, that lie at its heart.

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