



A Materialist Feminist Perspective on Women's Rights **Speaker – Shereen Benjamin**

I'm going to look in a bit more detail at the thinking behind our declaration, and I want to start with our first point. We say:

“Women and girls are subject to discrimination and oppression on the basis of their sex”

This proposition is the cornerstone of the declaration – it's the basis for everything that follows, and it delineates our distinct position as socialists as well as feminists. So we need to be able to explain and defend it, and understand where it comes from.

But before I get that, I want to be very clear that what's often referred to in the press and social media as “the row about trans rights” is nothing of the sort. It's a row about women's rights – about who should hold them, and on what basis. We need to keep saying so. It's a row over how we answer the question, “Should women's rights pertain to biological sex, and be held by those who are born female? Or should women's rights be held by anyone who believes themselves to be a woman, or asserts that they are a woman?”

Our answer to that question is unequivocal, and it stems from our conceptual background in materialist feminism as well as our activism in the Labour and Trade Union movement. Much as I'd love to, I don't have time for a detailed discussion of all the many nuances and shades of materialist feminism, so I'm just going to address three points this evening:

- First, what do we mean when we say women and girls are oppressed on the basis of sex?
- Second, how do we understand gender as materialist feminists?
- And third, how do we understand the current attack on women's rights in the context of present-day neoliberal and corporate capitalism?

Let's start with oppression, and a fairly standard Marxist class analysis which has been the jumping-off point for the development of materialist feminism. Oppression's the most important means of maintaining relations of subordination and domination between the classes – and in capitalist societies that means maintaining the institutionalised imbalance of wealth and power between those who sell their labour for less than its material value on the one hand, and those who extract labour and other resources for profit on the other. Seen that way, oppression is both a function of class society and a product of it. Which is to say, a class society requires **structures, institutions and laws** that enable the subordination of those who sell their labour by those who exploit it and profit from it, and a class society also produces **dominant narratives and ways of understanding the world** that make such subordination seem normal, natural, inevitable and taken-for-granted. I'll come back to that last point in a bit.

Materialist feminists have argued variously that women are a sex class or that they're a distinct oppressed group. I don't have time to address that divergence of views today, but where there's agreement is that women's reproductive capacity has been systematically exploited, extracted and appropriated. Women's distinct oppression – the oppression we experience as women – stems from the fact that as a class (or distinct group if you'd rather) we belong to the half of the population that has the capacity to reproduce, irrespective of whether any individual woman actually bears children. It's our biological sex, determined at conception and traditionally observed and recorded at birth (or these days *in utero*), that determines whether we are members of the group that performs reproductive labour for less than the cost of that labour, known as women, or the group that materially benefits from the provision of reproductive labour for less than its cost, known as men. Sexism – the systematic oppression of women – is socially constructed, but it's the consequence of biological sex in a class society. And there's evidence everywhere – in workplaces, in pay packets, in the home, in politics and so on – that sexism is still all too real.

A moment ago I said that a class society needs and produces structures, institutions and laws that enable the oppression of one class by another. When it comes to women's oppression, many of us in this webinar today have been involved in the struggle to make changes to those things, campaigning

for instance for equal pay, for women's reproductive rights, for better political representation, for statutory single-sex spaces and so on.

I also said that a class society produces narratives that naturalise oppression, making it seem unremarkable and inevitable. Now it's important to understand that oppression is always a process, and it's a dynamic relationship that adapts to changes in any given society's structures, institutions and laws. It needs to be constantly reworked and re-legitimated. The collection of narratives that shapes how a society understands and constructs the relationship between women and men, which delineates acceptable and desirable ways of being male and female, and which maintains male privilege, is gender. Seen that way, we can call gender an ideology; it's a set of narratives and expectations constructed in and by a political context in which men as a group oppress women as a group on the basis of biological sex, and it's a means by which that ongoing oppression is legitimated, normalised and made to seem inevitable. Like any ideology, it changes over time to adapt to changing contexts, and it intersects with other indices of structural inequality including race and disability, but its function remains the same – to enable the reproduction of oppressive structures, and to divide the oppressed.

That's gender. Gender identity, on the other hand, is the much newer idea that every individual has an inner sense of maleness, femaleness, or something else. I agree that as individuals we develop a gendered sense of ourselves, as a result of being embedded in pervasive narratives about masculinity and femininity from the moment we're born. But although these narratives may appear to be enduring – for instance the association of boys and men with aggression and violence, and the association of girls and women with passivity and kindness – and although they're certainly powerful, they're not natural or inevitable but rather they're both the function and the product of sex-based oppression. And if the narratives themselves are socially located and socially produced, then it doesn't make sense to regard an individual's gendered sense of self as in some way innate, or hard-wired, or biologically inevitable.

The end goal for materialist feminists isn't to reify gender through the belief in an innate gender identity, **or** to accept that gender should impose limitations on how women and men should live their lives, **or** to create additional gender categories in the mistaken belief that creating new gender boxes will liberate anyone. Instead, the end goal is the abolition of gender and the oppressive structures and narratives it needs and produces – and in the meantime, while we work towards that abolition, our job as materialist feminists is to continue to challenge the limitations that gendered structures and expectations impose on individuals and groups, to demonstrate how gender is deployed to oppress women and girls, and to support those who live gender non-conforming lives.

Class societies have of course moved on since Marx first analysed their dynamics. So, too, have theories for understanding and organising against oppression, led by feminists, anti-racists, disabled activists, lesbian and gay activists and so on, all developing conceptual and practical tools for progressive change. But what we can't afford to lose sight of – and I'd argue we need now more than ever, for many reasons – is a class analysis.

For instance, in our neoliberal times, citizens have largely been redefined as individual consumers whose democratic rights and choices are exercised by buying and selling, and we see that individualisation reflected in the present crisis of women's rights. The view that gender identity should supersede biological sex as a way of determining who should access women's rights is antithetical to a class analysis because it's based on the belief that individuals can opt into or out of sex-based oppression, which is an impossibility: oppression just doesn't work that way, because it's located in the social and political structures through which people exist and experience the world.

We also need to pay attention to the corporate sleight-of-hand through which the struggle for equality has been redefined as "EDI" – equality, diversity and inclusion – and reduced to a bureaucratic compliance agenda that allows corporations to virtue-signal whilst maximising their profits from the extraction of labour. A materialist feminist analysis helps us understand what's happening, for example, when corporations fall over themselves to sign up to Stonewall's Diversity Champions scheme. It's a cheap way of scoring EDI points: it's easy to fly a rainbow flag and *distribute pronoun badges* while actual employment practices deteriorate in the pursuit of profit, with more and more workers on precarious and low-paid contracts, especially in the sectors where women are employed – and even more especially in those where black women and young women are employed. A class analysis also helps us understand how corporate interests are complicit in privatising and almost obliterating public discussion of women's rights.

To finish, a few weeks ago, someone asked me what could possibly be lost if women's rights were accessed on the basis of gender identity instead of sex, and why we couldn't just be kind and inclusive. Well here are three things for starters that matter to us as women on the political left.

- First, the disappearance of single-sex spaces and facilities is experienced most intensely by those girls and women who are disproportionately affected by the class system – those living in poverty, black and ethnic minority women, older and disabled women, and those in prisons and refuges. To take just one example, the Youth Hostels Association changing its policy to segregate dormitories according to gender identity instead of sex potentially affects all women, but has a much greater impact on women living in poverty who can't afford more expensive accommodation than it does on women who can pay for alternatives.
- Second, the inability to name sex-based oppression removes our ability to identify and change the structures, institutions and laws that oppress women, and removes our capacity to measure progress towards the eradication of sexism – in other words we become unable to work towards the core aims of feminism. It also removes our ability to organise as women – as a sex class or distinct group – against our oppression, developing theories and actions out of our lived experience, and often embodied experience, as women.
- And third, reconfiguring the rights of any oppressed group not only without public discussion but in a climate of intimidation and silencing of members of that group sets a very dangerous precedent. That's something that everyone in the Labour Party and trade union movement should be deeply concerned about.

In summary, materialist feminism helps us understand that women and girls are *still* oppressed on the basis of sex, meaning that we continue to require the sex-based rights and provisions that mitigate against our oppression, and enable us to fight for the equal society we all want to bring into being. And it's not bigoted or hateful to say so.