

The Contemporary Women's Movement in Greece

By Eleni Stamiris

Although feminism, like democracy or socialism, appeals to a universalistic solidarity — born, in this case, of resistance to common experiences of patriarchal and capitalist inequality — the character of particular women's movements is still shaped by profoundly national contexts of history and socio-economic progress. The uneven trajectories of contemporary capitalist development, of under-development, have imparted to the national contingents of the international women's movement similar yet different demands, priorities, structures and orientations. In most cases the form of the emergence of modern feminism has been directly influenced by changes in the role of women in the national productive system. Thus, to invoke a principal North-South differential, the nature of the women's movements in the advanced industrial countries has been influenced by the increasing integration of women into the wage economy and by the partial socialization of reproduction to meet the demand for female labour-power. The immense productive capacity of the capitalist Centre to transform basic needs and to extend the sphere of commodity relations creates, in turn, the conditions for an expanded female working class to raise new demands for equality. In contrast, the economic position of women in many developing countries has greatly deteriorated over the recent period. The education gap between the sexes has widened,

domestic activities have been devalued, and frequently women have become more marginalized within the wage economy.

Greece is an intriguing case because the national social formation displays many of the features and contradictions of both advanced and less developed countries. The classical 'semi-peripheral' economy, Greece combines a significant 'off-shore' commercial and shipping complex with a patriarchal agricultural economy and a weak manufacturing base. Although women's role in the Greek economy has been greatly transformed over the last thirty years, women have not, as in Northern Europe, increased their presence within the wage sector. At the same time post-war Greek history has been dominated by civil war, counter-revolution and the struggle against military dictatorship. Thus the contemporary women's movement has been particularly influenced by the antecedent or simultaneous roles of women within democratic and class struggles. Most recently the efforts of the PASOK government to implement gender equality from the 'top down' have raised important questions about the relationship between the 'autonomous' mobilization of women and the parties of the Left. In the survey which follows, beginning with a brief evocation of the origins of contemporary feminism in Greece, I have tried to elicit the peculiarities of historical and social development insofar as they have influenced a distinctive women's movement.

THE NEW WAVE OF GREEK FEMINISM

By the end of the Civil War in 1949 all progressive movements in Greece had been crushed. The women's mass organizations that had developed at the end of the German occupation, addressing for the first time the needs and problems of all women, were dissolved.¹ Their records were confiscated and destroyed, and many of their members took the road to exile or were locked up for years in concentration camps. (The camp at Trikeri alone held five thousand women). The few organizations that did survive, such as the Panhellenic Union of Housewives, the YWCA or the League of Business and Professional Women, developed by inclination or force of circumstance in a fundamentally conservative direction. It was not until the 1960s, in the period before the Colonels' coup, that a militant women's movement re-emerged as a wing of the popular struggle for radical social change. Of the new groups formed in this period, the most important was the reconstituted Panhellenic Union of Greek Women. After its foundation in 1964, the PEG displayed a remarkable dynamism but was suppressed by the dictatorship in 1967.² Again all progressive organizations were liquidated, and many feminists were sent to prison or interned. Large numbers were subsequently arrested, tortured and condemned to lengthy imprisonment for activities against the dictator-

ship. As in the past, women were asked to put aside their own special demands in order to support a fresh struggle for freedom and democracy.

Thus while Western feminism was undergoing a great renaissance in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with vigorous debates over ideologies and goals, the discussion of feminist theory in Greece was almost entirely stifled by a dictatorship resting on the cult of the family. When the colonels finally fell in 1974, the women's movement which re-emerged was integrally connected with the wider context of progressive politics. Indeed, the first women's groups were initiated by political women belonging to parties of the Left, who simultaneously held in view strong political, social and feminist goals. "There can be no women's liberation without social liberation, no social liberation without women's liberation" — became the slogan of an increasing number of feminists.

The primacy of safeguarding democracy underpinned all feminist concerns in this early period of transition back to a parliamentary system. Greek feminists not only demanded equal rights with men (which meant sharing equally the economic crisis) and greater participation in development (which was underdevelopment for the many), but also protested against the capitalist structures and alienating productive processes into which they were by no means eager to be integrated. Their challenge was to the very class structure of a society that exploited and oppressed them.

One of the first major collaborative efforts of the new women's groups was the campaign against the epitome of patriarchy, the Greek Family Law, itself based on Byzantine tradition. A Co-ordinating Committee of Representatives of Women's Organizations (SEGES), formed in 1976, helped to organize extensive mobilization against the Law, and an expert committee appointed by the government incorporated some of the women's demands in the so-called Ghazis reform bill. When the bill failed to pass through parliament, however, it became clear to feminists that the Conservative government was only paying lip-service to equality and had no intention of rectifying even the most blatant forms of discrimination. Despite this temporary defeat, feminists extended their struggle to other areas of women's oppression — above all, their general marginalization in wage employment. As women's dependence and 'domestication' were at the heart of their inferior position, feminists de-

manded equal access to employment and affirmative action until this was achieved. A correlative and equally important demand concerned the abolition of occupational sex segregation: equal wages for work of equal value, full access to all occupations, equal opportunities for promotion, and extensive social protection, including for 'unpaid family helpers', piece-workers in cottage industry, and the informal sector of the economy. Pensions, medical care and maternity allowances were particularly vital for rural women, the most exploited sector of the Greek labour force.

At the same time, women's groups presented a compelling analysis of the state's failure to socialize the costs of reproduction. Pointing to the necessity of sharing domestic work between men and women, and to the state's obligation to undertake the social function of caring for the workforce, they demanded the provision of such services as day care, paid parental leave, extended school hours for working parents, inexpensive public cafeterias, public washing and ironing facilities, and so on. They further addressed the underlying problem of children's socialization into traditional gender roles, proposing the democratization of the school system and the rewriting of sexist text-books. They also demanded free and legal abortion on demand, the establishment of family planning centres, and an effective government department to promote policies for women. Only after eight years of struggle was the old Family Law finally reformed and a series of other major legal and administrative changes introduced to upgrade women's position. During this time, however, the women's movement helped to reshape the agenda of Greek politics. As we shall see, the principal fruit of this agitation was the platform of women's 'emancipation' that the new Socialist government brought with it in 1981.

BUILDING A GRASSROOTS MOVEMENT

After the fall of the Colonels, the politically astute new women's movement modelled itself on more familiar forms of organization: a constitution, centralized and hierarchical leadership, work in committees, an electoral system and a spreading network of branches. In the initial stages, some of the budding women's groups also leaned heavily on the established parties of the Left. The first important umbrella organization,

formed immediately after the collapse of the junta in 1974, was the Democratic Women's Movement (KDG), which rallied around it many of the progressive women of the Left. In 1976, with the establishment of the party of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) and the consolidation of the communist split between the KKE and KKE-Interior, two other major organizations developed: the Union of Greek Women and the Federation of Greek Women, ideologically oriented to PASOK and the KKE respectively. These organizations drew some of their membership from the KDG, which subsequently aligned itself with the KKE-Interior. In 1976 Women in Resistance was also formed, with the aim of bringing to light the struggles of women resistance fighters in the fascist period from 1941 to 1944, and of offering solidarity to the women of the world living under colonial or fascist regimes. Party affiliation thus often provided the broader male legitimation needed for the women to mobilize throughout the country, since male party members or sympathizers found it difficult to oppose the recruitment of their wives and daughters into what they considered as the party's women's group. Given the still marginal position of most Greek women in production and the difficulties of organizing them, the support of popular political movements was an effective means of spreading feminist ideas.

Of course, dual allegiance to a party and a women's organization did not come without problems for most female activists, particularly since the different instances competed for time and energy. Moreover, feminists within the parties of the Left inevitably came into conflict with persistent male biases and androcentric thinking. From the very beginning, some party members had resented the autonomy and exclusiveness of the women's groups, which seemed a *terra incognita* beyond the reach of the party. Others would not accept in their theoretical framework any rationale for the separate organization of women since the party was supposed to espouse uniform goals.³ The primacy given to women's questions by the more militant women's groups was infrequently shared by party comrades, who often accused women of 'unreasonable extremism', so that the initial system of mutually reinforcing relationships gave way to uneasy alliances. Other women's groups that emerged during this period enjoyed a considerably smaller membership, many of whom were women who had been devoted to the

feminist cause for years. Western radical feminism then appealed only to a small number of young middle-class students and intellectuals, often educated abroad, and was generally perceived by both women and men as yet another import of 'decadent' cultural imperialism.

By the end of the 1970s a full spectrum of feminist responses to women's oppression had been elaborated. The older, liberal tradition changed little in its basically individualist and egalitarian approach. The women's struggle was still conceived as focused on 'equal rights, equal obligations' and against open discrimination in economic and public life. As a principal strategy, liberal feminists continued to lobby the government and bureaucracy to adopt progressive policies towards women and to lead public opinion in support of equality. Women's full integration in society on an equal basis with men was considered the final goal. On the other side, the traditional socialist position submerged the whole women's question within a larger critique of capitalist society, claiming that Greek women's low status derived from their position in the structure of production as a reserve army of labour. In this view, women's struggle was an integral part of the broader working-class struggle against imperialism, and women's employment conditions became the main practical focus. The solution to the woman question was the transition to socialism and peace. As the struggle for socialism had primacy for women, both women and men operated from an identical paradigm that did not create antithetical interests or conflict between women's organization and the party.

The socialist-feminist orientation was also strongly represented in the women's movement by such organizations and centres as the Union of Greek Women (EGE), the Democratic Women's Movement (KDG), the Mediterranean Women's Studies Institute (KEGME) and others. The EGE (claiming a membership of over 15,000) and the KDG both had an important grassroots organization spread over Greece, in towns, villages and islands. The socialist-feminists were in partial agreement with the traditional equation of women's oppression with capitalism, but they argued that, since it also derived from patriarchy, it would not magically disappear with socialist transformation, as the actually existing socialist societies demonstrated. The feminist struggle was thus a difficult and profoundly revolutionary challenge to the very fabric of society, from the micro-

level of the family to the macro-level of world male culture.

As socialist-feminists tried to maintain a balance between the commitments to socialism and feminism, the more radical fringes of the movement began dropping out of the 'formal' women's organizations to create their own autonomous network. Like the radical feminists of Western Europe, they rejected all existing authoritarian structures, relationships and processes, including participation in the political parties that were seen as absorbing and colonizing the women's movement. Their main target was not capitalism but male power and supremacy per se, against which they counterposed feminism as a new humanist ideology and practice that would create the foundations of a new society. However, the fluid and unstable enclaves of radical feminism in Athens and Salonika had little success in proselytising among women in general — the price to be paid for feminist autonomy in a still highly patriarchal society.

THE PASOK EXPERIENCE

In October 1981 the Socialist government came to power bearing gifts to Greek women. Leaping out of the dark ages of cultural conservatism, Greece suddenly became the international forerunner in progressive public policy for women. In this transformation the Union of Greek Women, led by Margaret Papan-dreou, played a key role in formulating policies and pressuring the government for their adoption. The PASOK government eventually took up most of the suggestions of the EGE and other women's groups, albeit in a usually diluted form. First the perennial demand for a reform of the infamous Family Law was granted as a goodwill gesture towards women, who had been highly instrumental in PASOK's margin of victory. The new family provisions abolished the old patriarchal categories and replaced them with the family 'founded on equality'. The husband was no longer the 'head' and arbiter of children's destiny, and family decisions were made the joint responsibility of both spouses. Children's upbringing had to be conducted without gender discrimination, and children born out of wedlock became equal before the law. In the civil code, divorce by mutual consent — another traditional demand of the women's movement — was legalized and the humiliating dowry institution was formally abolished.

Female equality was institutionalized by an official decree that established special national machinery to promote much-needed legislation and to monitor its implementation. A Prime Minister's Council for Sex Equality, upgraded in 1985 to a General Secretariat, became a dynamic body through which policy was instigated or carried out by a small, dedicated staff of women, many of whom had come out of the women's movement. At the same time, a network of Equality Bureaux in every prefecture of the country assured the decentralization of the drive to advance the position of women. A specific government programme for women was incorporated in the national and sectoral plans. Following suit after 1981 was the barrage of new legislative reforms, bringing all national legislation into line with the principles of equality and ratifying Greece's adherence to the UN convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and International Convention No. 103 for the protection of maternity. To ensure equality in all areas of life, reforms were introduced by every major ministry as well as the Manpower Employment Agency. Pensions and medical coverage were extended to uninsured working women and equality bureaux set up in each labour inspectorate. Assistance to working parents with children was provided through 'parental leave' which established the father's right to share in the raising of children. Rural women's backward social position was partially ameliorated through abolition of the law which prohibited their participation in agricultural cooperatives and, more substantively, through the extension of maternity allowances and medical and pharmaceutical benefits.

Within a few years this reform programme had revolutionized the statutory framework of Greek society. In addition, school books were rewritten with the help of women's organizations to express the principle of equality, and family planning services were introduced for the first time in both town and countryside. A rudimentary social infrastructure came into being, including hundreds of new day-care centres. Innovative programmes and job cooperatives were initiated to increase women's employment, and affirmative-action measures opened up opportunities in non-traditional occupations such as bus-driving. In effect the PASOK government succeeded in actually implementing much of the reform agenda that the mass women's organizations had been demanding since the fall of the junta.

WHAT REMAINS TO BE DONE

In the middle of the 1980s, despite the Socialist government's top-down efforts to alter women's legal and civil status, equality was still nowhere near to being achieved, and the old patriarchal assumptions were still firmly rooted in Greek society. Legal changes and government programmes were like drops in a sea of discrimination. Opportunities for wage employment continued to be scarce in almost zero-growth conditions, and unemployment was hitting women twice as hard as men, especially in the younger age brackets. Those women employed outside the home were still situated at the bottom of the occupational and salary scale, as a largely unskilled, underemployed and underpaid labour force. Women with higher education and skills faced gender hierarchies that still concentrated men at the top, especially in the fields of science and technology. It was becoming apparent to feminists that reforms of a mainly statutory nature, and the few affirmative-action government programmes, were only the first step in a long process in which only major restructuring could create the conditions for equality between women and men.

Since women's struggles had for so long been waged at the level of equal rights and opportunities, the government's thorough reformulation of laws and policies based on the principle of equality eliminated for a while the militant cutting-edge once characteristic of the movement. Women's organizations took a back seat to the government drive for equality. Abandoning its vigorous confrontation tactics, the movement was now pushing into other areas and levels of activity, as well as attempting to expand its grassroots base. Small consciousness-raising groups of the 'autonomous' kind proliferated in the cities, going in and out of existence according to their more or less temporary goals.⁴ Alongside members' homes or special meeting-places, women's bookshops served as new centres of information and theoretical development. Research and documentation centres, such as the Mediterranean Women's Studies Institute and the Centre for Documentation and Study of Women's Problems, also provided library facilities and an elementary information base on the international movement. Women anthropologists, sociologists, agronomists, economists, psychologists and political scientists opened up new areas to investigation — field work in village communities being of

particular importance in the Greek context. Women's studies programmes were informally introduced at Salonika University by feminist teachers and students, as well as on the island of Spetses through a two-week KEGME summer programme for women from the whole Mediterranean region. Distinctive women's art, film and theatre began to make its appearance, and a whole range of magazines circulated in Athens and the provinces — from commercial weeklies, through magazines primarily addressed to the membership of women's organizations, to theoretical journals attuned to the latest debates of Western feminism.⁵

By the mid-1980s the women's movement was reopening with new fervour the old controversy about abortion, birth control and sexuality, declaring women's basic right to control their own bodies and functions as the fundamental goal in the struggle for equality. For years Greek feminists had been campaigning for free and legal abortion, as women were daily risking their lives and health in the estimated 250,000 to 300,000 abortions performed on them annually — terminations which, though illegal, were widely tolerated in an Orthodox culture markedly different from Mediterranean Catholicism. By the end of 1985 a Bill was before Parliament that would leave women free to decide on abortion up to the twelfth week of pregnancy or the twenty-fourth week in the case of fetal abnormality, after which individual cases would be examined by a special committee. No restrictions whatever would apply in cases of rape or incest, or of danger to the mother's health. The cost of the operation would be covered by the national health insurance scheme. In addition, feminists continued to argue for sex and contraceptive education in schools, for a nation-wide system of child care, family planning and public health, and the provision of strong incentives for families having children.

Another major issue in the agenda referred to the tenacity of traditional values and perceptions of women's roles, and the stereotypical image of women portrayed in the mass media. Women's organizations were pressing for the clean-up to begin with the state-controlled radio and television. With regard to the exploitation of the female body in advertising, the government was preparing a Bill that would partly meet the demands of women. Feminists were again taking up the issue of violence against women, urging that refuges for battered wives should be set up in the large cities. For the first time the government itself was taking

some steps, as the General Secretariat for Equality launched a training programme for professionals involved with battered women and drew up plans for a protection centre in Athens.

It remained obvious that political marginalization was a powerful factor in keeping women powerless and perpetuating their inferior social and economic status. Trade unions, political parties, parliamentary bodies and government itself had a sorry record of failing to integrate women not only in executive office but even within their rank and file. The Socialist government's move towards some decentralization had benefited a few women who were elected to prefectural or local councils. By and large, however, only a few 'token' women were to be found in central and higher instances, with little power or voice to make a notable impact on women's behalf. In 1985 the Greek Parliament had 13 women among a total of 300 deputies (8 from PASOK, 3 from New Democracy and 2 from the KKE). This marked a significant but very small increase since 1956, when two women occupied seats in Parliament. Women accounted for 9 out of 55 nomarchs, 4 out of 276 mayors, 22 out of 5,751 community presidents. There were two women presidents of public organizations, one minister (of culture and science), three deputy ministers (of health and welfare, social security and industry), and three heads of general secretariats (health and welfare, Greeks Abroad, equality).

Greek women's organizations were also seriously engaged in forging links of international solidarity, especially with the Third World. Through the workshops they organized and the interventions they made in Nairobi, Greek feminists had a strong presence at the United Nations World Conference on Women in July 1985. International political issues, such as the struggle for disarmament and demilitarized zones in the Mediterranean and elsewhere, were being actively taken up by feminists, who countered male aggression by raising their own voices loud and clear: "No to military bases and nuclear weapons in Greece!"; "No to poverty and starvation in the Third World!"; "No to Star Wars!"; "Yes to Peace, Friendship and Solidarity with all women and peoples of the world!"

In conclusion, the first years of PASOK government did succeed in opening for women a window to reform, which established the framework through which other changes could occur on the basis of a vigorous economy. But it is precisely

there that the problem lies — in the stagnant, debt-ridden nature of the economy. Feminists all over the world are already posing alternative development strategies for the benefit of women, men, families and societies as a whole. In this respect, they stand in the vanguard of national and international struggles for 'real' development for all. Moreover, recent interest in women's studies and the critique of traditional knowledge and science is helping to bring about a conceptual reassessment of work and non-work, power, development, and so on — a process that will soon begin to inform and empower the Greek women's movement. At the end of the UN Decade of Women, there is an imperative need for a broader feminist alliance in Greece, a 'bloc' that will be able to accelerate the struggle for an alternative development in which 'people matter' and to advance its own radical vision of a new humanist society. The future of the Greek women's movement itself is wide open.

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¹ Some of the best known were the 'Women's Rights Organization' of Piraeus and the Athens-based Panhellenic Union of Women (PEG), which became a founding member of the International Democratic Federation of Women, formed in Paris in 1945, and went on to publish a journal *Greek Women*. In 1946 the PEG organized a national conference at which a permanent co-ordinating body — the Panhellenic Federation of Women (IPOG) — was constituted. The Women's Union of Salonika was just one of the quite dense network of urban women's groups that was set up in the same period.

² In the next few years SEGES brought under its umbrella the Democratic Union of Young Women, the Union of Greek Women Lawyers, the Union of Greek Women, the Democratic Women's Movement, the Movement of Women in the Resistance, the Federation of Greek Women, the Panhellenic Union of Housewives, the Progressive Union of Greek Mothers, the Association of Greek Secretaries, the Association of Greek Housewives, the Association of Women University Graduates, and the Coordinating Committee of Working Women.

³ In terms of official party policy, the exception in this regard is the KKE-Interior, which recently recognized the need for an 'autonomous' movement on the grounds that women are best suited to express their own problems and to direct their own struggle for liberation.

⁴ The 'autonomous' movement included such groups as the Anarchofeminist Women's Group, various self-help and self-awareness collectives, the Autonomous Movement of Women, and many others. See *Women's Agenda* (Athens: Utopia Publishers, 1980).

⁵ Among the major periodicals are: *Woman's Struggle* (published by the League for Women's Rights), *Open Window* (EGE), *Contemporary Woman* (OGE), *The Bulletin* (KDG), *New Horizons* (YWCA), *Women of Europe* (Commission of European Communities), *Earth* (Salonika Women's Group), *Women's Whispers* (newsletter of the Greek-Housewives), *Mousidora* (Women and Film), 'Ouv' (Multicultural Women's Liberation Group), *City of Women and Hypatia*.

Rain

It always rained
in Istedgade.
Lamplight
spread itself
like large sunflowers
in the falling
darkness.

Near the railway station
the whores came out
they looked like rich ladies
with umbrellas
and high heels.
You had imagined them
entirely different
and were disappointed.

The stench from
the slaughterhouse
was not so bad
as during the day.
Drunk men
are not dangerous
said my
girlfriend
child molesters
are always sober.

Policemen walked
two by two
their white
clubs hung loose
on their belts. Their helmets
flashed bright and wet.
They all looked
alike they
knew that
you stole and sold
bottles from the lumberyard.

A fierce smell came
from all the sidestreets.
The unemployed
walked home with
steady steps
and closing-time looks.
Near the cinema
stood a queue of
noisy young apprentices.

Now all the other
children sat at dinner
you had told
a lie you were
a little scared
and in a festive mood because
nothing happened

when you were two and
avoided sober men.

If you went into
Cafe Charles
you would be killed.
Many went in
but no one ever came
out alive.
The big children in the
seventh class said that
and everything they said
was true.

It still rains
in Istedgade.
Nothing has changed
shivering you go
past Cafe Charles and know
that the big children speak more
truth than the grownups.

By Tove Ditlevsen
Translated from the Danish by
Cynthia Norris Graae