



THE FIRST DAY OF THE
REVOLUTION WAS WOMEN'S DAY

BY MEHRDAD KHAMENEH

Cover Photo: demonstration in support of Kurdish Iranian woman Mahsa Amini during a protest on October 2, 2022 on Place de la Republique in Paris
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On the occasion of March 8 - International Women's Day

Mehrdad Khameneh



In early 1844, Karl Marx, in his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, argued that the position of women in society could serve as a measure of the overall development of that society. For Marx, this statement was more than just a call directed at men to change the status of women. He presented a dialectical argument closely linked to his general theories about society.

For a society to progress beyond its capitalist form, new social relationships had to be established—ones not solely dependent on a crude and alienating formulation of "value." People needed to see each other as inherently valuable, rather than only possessing value based on what the "other" could provide. The position of women in society was particularly significant in this regard because, in most (if not all) societies, there remained a tendency to marginalize them. Therefore, both men and women needed to reach a level of growth and awareness where they perceived their social interests independently of gender.

Moreover, Marx viewed gender as a dynamic rather than a static category. In his 1844 manuscripts and *The German Ideology*, he provided a strong critique and an alternative to traditional dualist views of the nature/society dichotomy. Rather than analyzing nature and society as separate and distinct phenomena that interact without fundamentally altering each other, Marx argued that the two were dialectically interconnected. Just as humans interact with nature through labor, transforming both themselves and nature in the process, he maintained that humans exist as part of nature, and labor serves as a means of unity between them. Since neither nature nor society are static, Marx believed that no transhistorical concept of what is "natural" exists. Instead, the notion of "natural" can only be understood in relation to specific historical conditions. The dialectical thinking that Marx articulated can help realize the very categories we seek to transform.

Here, it is also necessary to critique Friedrich Engels' important work, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, and to highlight how Engels'

monistic and deterministic stance in this book diverged from Marx's more dialectical and nuanced understanding of gender. Some feminist scholars have criticized Marx and Engels for what they call economic determinism. However, in Rosa Luxemburg, *Women's Liberation, and Marx's Revolutionary Philosophy* (1981), Raya Dunayevskaya distinguished between Marx and Engels' views on gender. Additionally, studies by Georg Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (1923) and Terrell Carver in *Marx and Engels: The Intellectual Relationship* (1983) have revealed significant differences between Marx and Engels in their approaches to dialectics.

Marx's political writings show a clear evolution over time. His theoretical views were often reflected in his political activities. In the 1860s, he sought to integrate women into the First International on an equal footing with men. Recognizing this is especially important today, given the transformations and debates occurring in the modern world.

One hundred and eighty years after Marx's reflections on the role of women in society and the necessity of male participation in the fight for equal rights, the world remains entrenched in inequalities. Ironically, even the rhetoric of Marx is now echoed by leaders of global capitalist systems as they attempt to navigate their own crises.

On March 8, 2023, in honor of International Women's Day, the Council of Europe in Strasbourg issued a statement from Þórdís Kolbrún Reykfjörð Gylfadóttir, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Iceland and Chair of the Committee of Ministers, along with Parliamentary Assembly President Tiny Kox and Secretary General Marija Pejčinović Burić. They declared:

"Today, on International Women's Day, we reaffirm our unwavering commitment to ensuring gender equality and defending women's rights. Men and boys can and must play a greater role in advancing gender equality. They should be active agents of positive change, challenging sexism, and speaking out when they witness women being harassed or treated unfairly.

Gender equality benefits everyone, both women and men. No one should be confined to a rigid gender role. Gender stereotypes perpetuate harmful ideas about what is 'appropriate' behavior for both men and women and create obstacles to true gender equality.

Gender inequality can also lead to violence. The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (commonly known as the Istanbul Convention) is our primary tool for fighting gender-based violence and promoting gender equality. This convention calls on all members of society, especially men and boys, to actively engage in preventing all forms of gender-based violence.”

Despite the significant progress made over the past two centuries, large-scale violence against women remains deeply rooted in class-based inequalities, reactionary cultural and religious traditions, and societal norms that continue to serve the interests of the ruling classes. This systemic oppression makes identifying the true causes of violence more complex.

Many developed capitalist countries have enacted clear laws to defend gender equality, prohibit violence against women, close gender gaps, and protect LGBTQ+ rights. The Istanbul Convention is the most comprehensive international human rights treaty aimed at preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Germany signed the convention in May 2011 and ratified it in October 2017, with the treaty coming into force in February 2018.

However, annual statistics reveal the brutal reality of gender-based violence. For example, in Germany—the most powerful economy in Europe—a report from Deutsche Welle on November 6, 2023, indicated that one in three German men considered violence against women "acceptable." According to data from the Federal Police, over 115,000 women in Germany were victims of intimate partner violence in 2021—equivalent to 13 women per hour. In the same year, 301 women were murdered by their current or former partners.

Other alarming statistics include:

28% of trans women, 13% of lesbian women, and 10% of bisexual women were physically or sexually assaulted in the past five years due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

57% of women experienced harassment in the past five years, and 42% in the past year.

60% of women with disabilities experienced harassment in the past five years.

22% of women suffered cyber-harassment in the past five years, with rates rising to 33% among young women (16-29 years old).

An estimated 8-22% of 19,630 girls in Germany's immigrant communities were at risk of genital mutilation in 2015.

Across the European Union, one in three women (61 million out of 185 million) has experienced physical or sexual violence since the age of 15.

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hile the history of human societies contains many positive victories for equality and human dignity, the roots of these struggles can be traced back over a century and a half. The earliest glimpses of women's activism can be found in the 1871 Paris Commune, but the tangible impact of women's political and social power became clearer in the 1905 Russian Revolution.

The fight for gender equality was further propelled by socialist movements. Clara Zetkin in Germany recognized that working-class women had to fight for their rights independently. She stated at the 1907 Socialist Women's Conference in Stuttgart:

"Class divisions prevent working-class women from becoming allies of the bourgeois feminist movement. However, this does not mean they should reject cooperation where feminist bourgeois activists support the global struggle for women's suffrage."

This message resonated in Russia with Bolshevik activists like Konkordia Samoilova and Alexandra Kollontai, who in 1907 formed The Mutual Aid Center for Working Women to spread socialist ideals among working-class women.

By 1917, women played a major role in revolutionary movements. On February 23, 1917 (March 8 in the Gregorian calendar), a mass women's demonstration helped spark the Russian Revolution. The Bolshevik newspaper Pravda reported:

"The first day of the revolution was Women's Day... Women determined the fate of soldiers, speaking to them in the trenches, convincing them to join the revolution... Women, we salute you."

One of the main duties of the Soviet Union after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia was to take decisive steps toward equality and enable women to fully participate in society as part of advancing the revolution.

In a speech in 1919, Lenin stated:

"Soviet power, the power of the working people, in the first months of its existence, carried out a complete and decisive revolution in legislation concerning women. In the Soviet Republic, nothing remains of those laws that placed women in a subordinate position. I am specifically referring to those laws that took advantage of women's weaker position, placing them in an unequal and often even humiliating status... Now we can proudly and without exaggeration say that except for Soviet Russia, there is no country in the world where women enjoy full equality and are not placed in a humiliating position, especially in family life. This was one of our first and most important tasks."

In 1920, a decree was issued by the Soviet government, making Russia the first country in Europe to legalize abortion as part of promoting family support and women's health. Its goal was to organize services and government assistance to ensure that no woman seeking the procedure would become a victim.

"Since the remnants of past morals and current harsh economic conditions still force many women to resort to this practice, the People's Commissariat of Health and Justice, to protect women's health, has decided that such procedures will be

carried out freely and at no cost in Soviet hospitals under conditions that minimize harm.

Performing this procedure by anyone other than a doctor is strictly prohibited.”

This was part of a broader campaign to involve workers and farmers in advancing the full legal equality of women with men. Women's rights laws, established in 1921, guaranteed women the right to divorce, which under the Tsarist regime had been reserved only for men. Gender discrimination in employment was made illegal, and an eight-hour workday law was enforced. As more women entered the industrial workforce, state-run daycare centers were provided for free. Public healthcare, with special attention to women and children—especially for pregnant and nursing mothers—became freely available.

The positive achievements of the October Revolution in the women's movement, as well as in many other social fields, left a historical impact and served as a stepping stone toward more sustainable results in the future. Just as the experience of the Paris Commune paved the way for the advancement of the working class in later eras, the October Revolution did the same for gender equality and social justice.

Political failures and setbacks do not erase the lessons and experiences—both positive and negative—that human history has accumulated. On the contrary, they guarantee growth and progress. Trial and error shape the dynamic mind of humanity, and across all political, social, economic, philosophical, artistic, and cultural fields, these lessons have been essential for humanity's search for better ways to live on this planet.

These historical experiences, both past and present, also remind us that the termites of totalitarianism and opportunism can erode the foundations of political power and destroy even the highest human ideals from within. These lessons recognize no borders; they flow through history like a powerful current.

Just as in 1979, when the Iranian people's struggle overthrew the Shah's dictatorship, Iranian women were among the first groups—alongside a few other progressive forces—who recognized the looming threat and declared: "The revolution has failed! Long live the revolution!" They clearly heard the approaching boots of fascism.

On March 8, 1979—International Women's Day—less than a month after the collapse of the previous reactionary regime, Iranian women took to the streets to resist the new regime's first oppressive actions, including the abolition of the Family Protection Law and the imposition of mandatory hijab. The six-day protests of women across Iran and their powerful speeches were reminiscent of Emma Goldman's fiery orations decades earlier in America. Their banners read: "Women's freedom is society's freedom"—a slogan inspired by Charles Fourier, the 19th-century utopian socialist philosopher. Or another: "At the dawn of freedom, women's rights are missing," held by a woman whose worried eyes foresaw the coming catastrophe. Were these slogans anything other than the dialectic of Marx and his 1844 call: "The position of women in society can be taken as an exact measure of the level of development of society as a whole".

Through all these cries, one could see the specter whispering: "The freedom of each is the condition for the free development of all." The specter of the Communist Manifesto since 1848.

March 8, 1979, was 'the first day of the revolution—it was Women's Day,' the day of Iran's new revolution. And 44 years later, in September 2022, with the slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom," a new chapter in social awareness and collective consciousness was written.

But this time, many men stood alongside women, unlike in 1979 when they abandoned them. This time, diverse social groups recognized the political significance of the movement and united under the banner of "woman." This time, the termites of opportunism and totalitarianism were so insignificant that

they had no impact on the movement of the people. Political fatalists and sanctimonious reactionaries were paralyzed and erased from history.

The free people of this era have created such a profound shift in the culture of struggle that undoubtedly, brilliant victories will emerge from it.

Rosa Luxemburg, in her final article in *The Red Flag* on January 14, 1919, wrote:

"Foolish servants! Your 'order' is built on shifting sands. Tomorrow, the revolution will rise again, brandishing its weapons, and in your horror, you will hear its trumpets declare:

I was, I am, I shall be!"

International Women's Day - 2025

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