CHAPTER 1

ON THE RELEVANCE AND NECESSITY OF SOCIALIST FEMINISM

INTRODUCTION

After the 2016 election, there has been a dramatic increase in mass organizing around women’s issues and gender equality not seen since the activism of the early feminist movement. This activism has also been able to harness the power and reach of social media to rapidly coordinate participants both online and on the street with unprecedented results. On inauguration weekend, January 21, 2017, close to four million people from 680 locations joined the Women’s March, in the United states and across the globe (Smith, S., 2017, p. 12; Roesch, 2019, p. 8). In what started as a Facebook announcement after the 2016 election, this march surpassed the size of the demonstrations of the 1960s, making it the largest US protest turnout to date (Sefla, 2017; Roesch, 2019). In major cities, one out of every 100 US citizens marched, many of them never having attended a protest before (Sefla, 2017, p. 2). Not only were the numbers boundary-breaking, but the marchers themselves represented a “broad cross-section of women: urban and rural; white and of color; middle class and working class; more liberal and more radical” (Roesch, 2019, p. 9). Further, many of the leadership roles were occupied by women of color.

The march, considered the opening salvo of a “global woman’s rebellion” was not only a direct repudiation of Trump and the right-wing he represents, it extended much further, to bring to the forefront “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” (Roesch, 2019, p. 8). Just one week after the march, protestors occupied major airports, in support of people from Muslim-majority countries who had been included in Trump’s executive order banning refugees and citizens from entering the US (Sefla, 2017). Six weeks later, the globally planned “A Day Without A Woman” resulted in street and workplace demonstrations as part of the International Women’s Strike, held on International Woman’s Day (Roesch, 2019; Kumar et al., 2019; Fierro & Vasco, 2019). As with the Women’s March, these actions were coordinated by minority women and “added demands for legal abortion, gender wage inequality, and the recognition of unpaid domestic work to the established demands against gender violence” (Fierro & Vasco, 2019, p. 35).

What these mobilizations have revealed is that what often starts out as a single-issue campaign quickly widens into larger, intersectional social demands regarding
CHAPTER 1

gender, sexuality, and the economy, providing the potential for on-the-ground, radical analysis. This is exemplified in the growth of the testimonial-based #MeToo and #TimesUp campaigns, which draw together diverse coalitions of women and men. As Schulte (2018) points out, while the awareness of #MeToo may have been due to celebrities and other prominent people with media access, “it had the potential to provide a platform for other women to tell their stories—including working-class and poor women who face harassment and assault on the job at alarming rates” (p. 17).

#MeToo quickly had reverberating effects within Congress, when California Representative Jackie Speier first released a video on social media which recounted her own experiences with sexual harassment at the hands of a chief of staff. Then, other female politicians added their own accounts. Within a few months, six Democrats and Republicans had been pressured to resign because of these sexual assault allegations (Schulte, 2018, p. 18). This is in addition to more than 20 women who have accused Trump himself of sexual assault, resulting in the Democratic Women’s Working Group in the House drafting a letter calling for an investigation into the allegations. Eventually the letter garnered over 100 signatures, including from male signatories (p. 19).

However, these significant actions have not just been the result of the 2016 election, and have been building for some time. Actions such as the Ni Una Menos mobilizations in Mexico around femicide and sexual harassment, Women United Against Bolsonaro’s street actions and Facebook Page with 4 million followers; Poland’s mass protests of the country’s abortion ban, Argentinian activism around femicide and abortion, and Ireland’s mobilizations concerning the repeal of the Eighth Amendment which prohibits abortion are all the result of organizing over time and across different coalitions (Brum, 2018; Fierro & Vasco, 2019; Roesch, 2019). Most of these have built onto earlier mass actions from the 60s, 70s, and 80s.

In 2015, Argentina’s Green Handkerchief mobilizations around abortion rights “spread like wildfire throughout the country” with supporters showing their solidarity by wearing green scarves featuring the movement’s logo (Fierro & Vasco, 2019, p. 34). The handkerchief was an accessible and effective way to show strength in numbers, with even older rural men seen wearing them. Demonstrations in the hundreds of thousands stretched across 80 cities, putting pressure on Latin American governments to do something about femicide, gender violence, and reproductive rights (p. 35). In the US, McDonalds employees coordinated a mass strike across 10 cities, and Marriott workers participated in a two-month strike in seven states, both connecting the issue of sexual harassment, gender, and low-wage labor (Roesch, 2019, p. 10). The two things that all of these actions have in common are (a) they involve both social media and street action and (b) they are led by working-class women of color, contradicting the myth that feminism is only relevant for white, older, middle-class women.

This chapter is designed as an opening for the rest of the book, by making the case that socialist feminism is both relevant and necessary for confronting the growth of
auritarian populism and fascism. Neither feminism nor Marxism in isolation are sufficient for conceptualizing the current situation we find ourselves in, because the global spread of authoritarianism also harnesses economic, racial, and gendered factors under capitalism. The chapter, organized in three major sections, first opens with a presentation of broad forms of feminism, asserting that there is no single version of feminism and that it is shaped by different coalitions. This is followed by an overview of key issues impacting women and LGBTQ people, which are taken up throughout the rest of the book in more detail. Finally, a critical examination of brocialism, or sexism within leftist spaces, is framed as a unique challenge and a primary threat to solidarity within activist movements.

FEMINISMS

One of the primary challenges (as well as the exciting features) of feminism is that it can represent a variety of concepts, identities, philosophies, and interests, especially in media contexts. This section posits that there are several forms of feminism, which can be broadly organized into liberal feminism (within which there are different strands, beyond the scope of this section), postmodern theorizations (including Third Wave), conservative forms (neoliberal/imperialist and right-wing), and Marxist/socialist alternatives, which are the most appropriate for confronting and fighting authoritarian populism and fascism.

These forms can often be distinguished by how proponents view origins and sources of oppression along with strategies for fighting it, with liberal feminists often locating oppression in sexist politicians and laws, postmodern feminists pointing to modernist constructions of identity and movement activism as problematic, conservative feminists rejecting collectivism in favor of individualism and the market, and Marxist feminists’ location of oppression within capitalism (Goodman, 2016). Leavy and Harris’ (2019) apt definition of feminism prioritizes its broad coalition building while also remaining clearly anchored to liberation and justice:

Beginning with the status of girls and women, but not ending there, feminism is an engaged human rights position that seeks to expose and remedy gender inequities. The study of gender, as a starting point for approaching feminist research, cannot be understood without consideration of other aspects of human existence that influence the ways in which human beings interact socially, including race, physical ability, class, geolocations, and sexuality. We are not bodies that are only gendered, but rather, we simultaneously occupy race, ethnicity, social class, sexuality, and other positionalities. (p. 4)

This definition is inclusive of liberal, postmodern, and Marxist feminism but not neoliberal or right-wing conservative forms, which illustrates why one size does not fit all when it comes to feminism.

When examining media forms, one quickly sees that feminism has been coopted to serve a range of political purposes, not all of them centered on humanism, anti-
CHAPTER 1

racism, or liberation. For example, the history of the women’s movement in the US is inextricably tied to that nation’s colonial status as a white settler state, genocide and forcible displacement of indigenous groups, along with slavery and immigration controls, all occurring alongside the patriarchal domination of women’s bodies (Tax, 2017; Theweleit, 2010a). Capitalism itself would not have been possible without accompanying colonization (Bohrer, n.d.). Feminism has been used by Europeans and Americans since the 1800s to buttress imperialism, the notion being that women in regions such as the Middle East, Africa and Asia needed (and still need) to be rescued from backward practices (Aftab, 2017; Kumar et al., 2019). Acknowledging this history along with current incidents is critical for conceptualizing the field of feminism as whole, along with understanding why there are conservative forms that coopt the superficial trappings of empowerment, only to further entrench white supremacy.

Conservative forms of feminism often emerge from cynicism and backlash, including among younger people, as Richards (2017) found:

The fact of the matter is; feminism is not the majority worldview. When talking to young university students about feminism there is an overwhelming discomfort with a movement that should inspire enthusiasm. Both boys and girls do not want to be associated with it, do not want to hear about it, and do not have any legitimate understanding of what feminism is or does. (para. 4)

This reaction can be partly attributed to liberal feminism’s initial failure to include the perspectives and interests of minority women and women from working-class backgrounds (Roesch, 2019). Many of the younger women, lesbians and transgender people who make up feminism’s Third Wave have also found mainstream feminism to be limiting, exclusionary, or irrelevant to their needs, while still rejecting conservative feminism (Goodman, 2016). These feminists often draw on postmodernism for “reframing the theoretical framework of feminism” when addressing key issues like reproductive rights, rape, domestic violence, the environment and inequality (p. 219).

Neoliberal feminism represents the outer boundary that demarcates the separation between mainstream liberal feminism and conservative forms of feminism. What makes neoliberal feminism distinct is that it uses progressive sounding discourse to shift activism away from larger collective solutions like changing laws and policies—which liberal feminism advocates for, albeit in limited fashion—and instead moves this to the individualistic realm in the form of self-improvement (Rottenberg, 2018). This would include the growth of concepts like “leaning in,” “achieving work-life balance,” mindfulness, decluttering/simplicity movements, and changing one’s attitude or outlook rather than insisting on significant social change. The message is to adapt to one’s existing conditions as a way to foster one’s liberation. Climate change represents the limits of neoliberal thinking, where capitalists can visualize a dystopian end to the world as we know it, but they simply can’t comprehend that capitalism will end. Therefore, any solutions they attempt to craft has to be contained
within the market, like changing personal consumption habits or recycling (Terzakis, 2018).

Imperial feminism, essentially neoliberal feminism on an international scale, incorporates three characteristics. The first is it being market-centered, with the market promoted as the primary means to liberate women. This relates closely to the second characteristic of the appropriation of feminism used to offset domestic labor onto non-Western women in the wake of massive privatization. Finally, imperial feminism emphasizes the role of corporate-sponsored NGOs in tamping down activism. As with all forms of conservative feminism, the neoliberal form also accelerates the “insourcing” of labor to minority and immigrant women so as to free the professional (often white) woman from the constraints of unpaid labor (Rottenberg, 2018). Aftab (2017) presents the example of Nike’s social media marketing of their Pro Hijab as a form of feminist messaging in support of empire:

Why did an image of a woman in a headscarf appeal to the American masses so much? Perhaps what made it so palatable was that it turned protests and marches into feel-good events for white people. Perhaps it circulated so widely because it helped to deflect attention from the atrocities that the United States is actively committing abroad, allowing Americans to revel only in the benevolence of US liberalism. At times, visibility or diversity projects do the opposite of what they claim to be doing—in this case, demonstrate how they can include the faces of hijab-clad Muslims while remaining actively complicit in structures that harm this very community. (p. 35)

Another powerful form of conservative feminism incorporates right-wing ideologies. It is important to note that this form does not fit the definition of feminism presented at the start of this chapter—which necessitates centering on human rights and liberation. Yet enough women utilize feminist-sounding discourse or even identify as feminist to make this its own category. Traister (2018) notes the historical continuity between the involvement of white women in maintaining segregation during the Jim Crow era and those who regularly call the police to report black people doing innocuous things like eating or walking, providing an apt reminder that “women’s anger certainly isn’t always progressive” (para. 27). Because of their association with white men, white women occupy a social position that simultaneously allows them to participate in regressive movements, while being framed as feminist. As such, women like Phyllis Schlafly have been active in pushing against the Equal Rights Amendment and LGBTQI rights during the 1970s, utilizing “protecting the children” and “family values” discourse, and participating in anti-choice movements, all claiming to promote traditional values that are under threat (Goodman, 2016). Kimmel (2017) addresses the irony of conservative Tea Party women who work outside the home, often as the lone breadwinner, while vocally rejecting the working mother role. He views their position as the parallel to white men’s sense of aggrieved entitlement:
These working women do not—cannot—embrace the traditional roles that the party might have envisioned for them...they want to. The women of the Tea Party believe themselves entitled to live in a traditional, conservative household. Their sense of aggrieved entitlement runs parallel to the men’s: they want their men to be the traditional heads of households, able to support their families. They want to be moms, not ‘women.’ (p. 65)

Similarly, during the Kavanaugh hearing, women who supported the Supreme Court nominee created social media groups centered around prioritizing how husbands and sons could be victimized by rape accusations, totally overlooking their own, their daughters’, or their sisters’ greater potential for victimization (Roesch, 2019).

Indeed, the 2016 election revealed that 45% of women holding college degrees voted for Trump (McClaren, 2016, para. 13). Even though most women ended up voting for Clinton, 61% of white women who did not have a college degree voted for Trump, “a man who bragged about grabbing women’s genitals without consent” (Windham, 2017, p. 10). In some cases, conservative feminism can extend beyond the electoral sphere into white supremacist organizations, where women regularly coordinate picnics, camping trips, parties, children’s events and other activities to create a sense of community cohesion around whiteness. For Kimmel (2017), conservative feminism represents an additional way to reinforce nostalgia and a restoration of white rule:

Feminist in practice, antifeminist in theory, conservative feminism hopes to secure the economy so that women can return to their families and their homes and leave the labor force...the Tea Party mobilizes angry white women alongside angry white men, wannabe stay-at-home moms alongside wannabe domestic patriarchs, looking back to a long-gone era in which white men went to work, supported their wives and families, and all the government programs that enabled and supported that...were paid for invisibly, so it appeared that they had built it all by themselves. (pp. 66–67)

An alternative to liberal, postmodern and conservative feminism is Marxist or socialist feminism. For the purposes of this chapter and book, the terms are used interchangeably, as they address the same questions: “how is the political economy gendered in late capitalism? And, how does the social reproduction of people and communities renew capitalism, rather than support anti-capitalist praxis?” (Armstrong, 2020, p. 7). However, this form of feminism is often overlooked or dismissed as being irrelevant or consigned to history. For example, a common misunderstanding about socialist feminism is that its association with Marxism means that it automatically employs a colorblind class analysis when the growth of this form of feminism was itself in response to more reductionist approaches to class being used among the male-dominated left (Bohrer, n.d.; Goodman, 2016). Enough time has passed to allow a mixture of corporate cooptation of and forgetting that International Women’s Day was first held in 1909 by the Socialist Party of America.
to commemorate garment workers striking in New York. Not long after, the Russian Revolution had women on the front lines. Therefore, “it is not novel to tie socialism and feminism together; they are inextricably linked as movements and always have been” (O’Hagen, 2019, para. 5).

Likewise, a common critique of Marxism is that it rejects intersectionality, itself a concept claimed by postmodernists but that originated from a socialist feminist perspective of women of color dating back to Sojourner Truth and Anna Julia Cooper, along with the later Combahee River Collective:

In its most basic form, then, intersectionality is the theory that both structurally and experientially, social systems of domination are linked to one another and that, in order both to understand and to change these systems, they must be considered together. Intersectionality thus critiques theories that treat forms of oppression separately, as well as attempts to locate one axis of oppression as primary. (Bohrer, n.d., para. 3)

As Bohrer reminds us, the “call to extend Marx’s analysis beyond its original scope is precisely the project that all Marxism since the nineteenth century has taken up,” even if some leftist men refuse to recognize this (para. 35). In other words, socialist feminism advocates for an extension of Marx’s ideas, not a rejection of them. Both intersectionality and socialist feminism are compatible (Camfield, 2013).

 Debates around the positioning of identity have long surrounded feminism as a whole, particularly the relationship of identity to the capitalist system (Bohrer, n.d.; Goodman, 2016). Marxist feminists, while supporting the aims of liberal feminism, disagree with mainstream feminism in terms of how to most effectively address oppression. Liberal feminists, to varying degrees, approach equality as achievable within the existing system, whereas leftist feminists assert that due to the relationship of gender with other aspects of identity such as race, a fundamental restructuring of the economy is essential in order to achieve full liberation (Burns, B., 2017; Tax, 2017). For that reason, one cannot solely use class analysis to account for the historically interconnected role of race and gender:

Economic class structure is merely one part of a complex and multifaceted system of domination in which patriarchy, white supremacy, colonization (both direct and indirect) and heterosexualism are fundamental…This approach does not de-emphasize more traditional class analysis but follows the key insights of intersectionality in arguing that class, race, gender, sexuality, colonization and imperialism are constituted in and through one another in such a way that class cannot be considered the master-term of capitalist accumulation and antagonism. A truly adequate analysis of capitalism, both theoretically and historically…treats capitalism as the original synthesis of these systems of dispossession. (Bohrer, n.d., para. 39)

Socialist feminism therefore opposes the concept of class reductionism, especially when it comes to issues of gender and social relations under capitalism, known as
social reproduction and including the concept of unwaged labor (Bohrer, n.d.). A more nuanced way of looking at gender in capitalism is that gender, along with race, just so happens to be one of several ways through which capitalism manifests itself as a totalizing system, in its process of constantly adapting (Theweleit, 2010a). An example of this is the patriarchal family form since the emergence of class-based societies, which underwent a massive restructuring from centuries of the extended family model, to the nuclear family. Changes we are now seeing regarding the eroding centrality of marriage to family formation represents a more recent manifestation of the interconnectedness of sociological factors under capitalism. As with other feminisms (except for conservative forms), socialist feminism has significantly revised its 1960s-1980s conceptualizations of the family from assuming a default white, heteronormative, and two-parent forms to an expansion of the notion of family itself (Bohrer, n.d.).

What socialist feminism does is add the dimension of economics to liberal feminist issues such as sexual harassment, which are often framed within patriarchy. O’Hagen (2019) provides the example of how sexual assault is typically connected to power and patriarchy, encapsulated in the statement, “rape isn’t about sex, it’s about power.” However, often there is not much analysis of what structural societal features comprise such power, that leads to women being targeted for violence, such as being overrepresented in low-wage, non-unionized work, which is further tied to bosses controlling multiple aspects of their lives. Additionally, the lack of affordable housing, universal childcare, parental leave, a strong social safety net and limited access to health care often create situations where women are afraid to speak out against harassment and domestic violence. This also acknowledges that while more affluent professional women do experience sexual harassment, the brunt of the economic consequences fall on poor and minority women. Taken to a global scale, climate change hits those who have the fewest resources the hardest, because of women’s historical exclusion from land ownership and ability to shape policy (Burns, B., 2017).

In addition to postmodern critiques, the concept of fusing intersectionality within socialist feminist analysis has often been rejected by the Marxian left itself, in a form of calling for “socialist, not feminist” politics (not unlike the calls for the Democratic Party to reject identity politics in order to win over the white working class) (Bohrer, n.d.). This significantly underestimates the distinct connections that patriarchy has with capitalism that would result in thin analyses if this were not taken into account (Camfield, 2013). As O’Hagen (2019) asserts, “it’s complacent for any socialist to argue that ending capitalism will simply erase sexism from existence…Sexism persists because it is propped up by a deep-rooted set of beliefs and stereotypes that imagine women as inferior” (para. 6). At the same time, the necessity of understanding the need for feminist analysis within Marxism also underscores the necessity of socialism, “because women can’t fight against sexism as a whole if they’re too busy trying to keep their heads above water in an economic system that exploits them” (para. 6). For this reason, women’s-only spaces—such
as the Zapatistas—can be an essential component of organizing and need to be respected (Camfield, 2013).

Socialist feminism also provides one of the best ways to read the recent exciting rise in global activism, which shares the five traits of more radicalized demonstrations with the participation of young people; international cooperation; multi-movement coalitions; critiques of capitalism and patriarchy and a growing class consciousness happening within different demographics (Fierro & Vasco, 2019). These traits are critical because, “class struggle is how workers change themselves, realize their own social power, dramatically raise their class consciousness, and recognize the commonality of interests across divisions and the solidarity needed to win” (Blanchard, 2018, p. 25). Indeed, in looking historically at periods of leftist growth and radicalization of the working class, a common denominator has been feminists and leftists recognizing their shared experiences and priorities (Tax, 2017). More powerfully, many of the most successful movements incorporate intersectional leadership (Burns, B., 2017):

*Actually-existing* socialist organizing and politics aren’t the ideal that these socialists talk about. They exist within patriarchal societies. As a result, the actions and thinking of socialists will inevitably be limited and deformed by the patriarchal gender relations that we’re committed to uprooting. So, socialists need to develop our politics by learning from the *actually-existing* struggle against patriarchy (as well as learning from history). To do this we need feminism. (Camfield, 2013, para. 7)

Marxist feminism offers one of the most effective means to address the various ways that women in particular experience alienation, in the form of their labor being produced for others’ needs; being alienated from labor processes via automation—again for the benefit of profit and not people; alienation from others via competing in a framework of scarcity, and alienation from the environment (Terzakis, 2018). Capitalism can often feel overwhelming because it not only determines our experiences of the present, but it reconstructs history itself: “no past class conflict or gender relation will ever be wholly dead...as long as the capitalist mode of production remains able to create the conditions for reintroducing it within the diverse territories of its own domain of power” (Theweleit, 2010a, p. 359). This creates a feeling of hopelessness, where “the present stretches on into infinity,” that change will not ever happen, or that it is futile to try (Nowak & Prashad, 2016, para. 35). A revolutionary response therefore becomes necessary, with wider—not narrowed—demands as socialist feminists in Argentina demand:

We are antipatriarchal, anticlerical, anti-capitalist and internationalist feminists and dissidents. We want legal abortion, a completely secular state, comprehensive sexual education with a gender and dissidence perspective, a dissolution of the Senate, and much, much more. We want everything and will
CHAPTER 1

go for everything. And, as our young activists sing during every mobilization, “We will overthrow patriarchy, and with it, capitalism!” (Fierro & Vasco, 2019, p. 45)

KEY ISSUES

As Goodman (2016) notes, “the election of the misogynist, racist, xenophobic billionaire Donald J. Trump handed women’s liberation its most direct and malicious challenges in more than 100 years” (p. 258). In particular, people in the US are realizing that rights that were once thought of as guaranteed by law, such as access to legal abortion, are now under threat. Those in Western democracies are also becoming aware of the fact that the political oppression they have only begun to see has been the reality for the majority of the world’s population. At the same time, events like the Kavanaugh Supreme Court hearing and the backlash against sexual harassment awareness remind us that we have never been in a post-feminist era. We are now confronting the fact that people hold contradictory perspectives on issues they filter through their “common sense,” but this is not the Gramscian form of common sense that works toward liberation (Nowak & Prashad, 2016). Instead, it is an aggressive and regressive common sense that seeks to entrench the status quo with a vengeance.

While it can be profoundly demoralizing come to grips with the fact that a significant minority of the population never ceases in their attempts to roll things back at least 100 years, our collective awakening to the interconnected nature of key issues provides the foundation for lasting resistance. Traditional conceptualizations of key feminist issues have only alluded to the intersection of gender with class, race, age, ability and other identities whereas now we are seeing a widening, more nuanced dialectical analysis of how these issues connect to each other under capitalism:

The profit-logic of capitalism, with its necessarily consequent ideas about reason, labour, race, gender and sexuality created both the metropole and the colonies simultaneously, and subjects on both sides of this divide were constructed, through systems of domination and exploitation, in the image of what capitalism needed to survive. That capitalism requires multiple kinds of exploitation, multiple forms of dispossession, and multiple kinds of subjects in order to gain global hegemony is corroborative evidence for Marx’s fundamental diagnosis of the system’s simultaneous resilience and its ultimate fragility. (Bohrer, n.d., para. 50)

Through this emerging understanding we can see how power operates through capitalism in relational ways, creating different experiences depending on one’s position in society. For example, while poor and minority women bear the brunt of sexism under capitalism, even more privileged women are not immune from its effects as we saw with the media’s treatment of Hillary Clinton during the 2016 election.
This section examines key issues that require both a Marxian and a feminist approach in order to comprehend what is happening. These include rape and assault, which also encompasses domestic violence; issues related to labor; the double standard in terms of media representation of female politicians; and the objectification of women within the media. It is important to note that while these issues are discussed in turn, they also overlap, as in the example of sexual harassment being a regular aspect of labor for many women in the workforce or how violent discourse and imagery impact how women are represented as sexual objects.

Rape and Assault

According to Carter (2014), over one third of women across the globe have been documented victims of violence, whether physical or sexual and most of those incidents are at the hands of intimate partners (p. 143). When considering unreported cases, this number is likely much higher, with a majority of women having been the victim of some sort of sexual harassment, rape, or domestic violence. The workplace in particular represents a space where women are likely to experience sexual harassment along with assessments of their abilities routinely based on their appearance and age (Paquette, 2017). This manifestation of sexism only adds to the climate where harassment is fostered. Recent activism around sexual harassment and rape have brought things like this to light, as Roesch (2019) notes:

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. (p. 10)

Socialist feminism is especially relevant for framing rape and assault because of its intersectional dimensions. For the most vulnerable, including poor, working-class women and transgender women, rejecting a man’s sexual demands can mean violence or death. As an example, the primary cause of non-accidental death for Black women is murder, the majority of which is committed by intimate partners (Gallant, 2018, p. 39). After Hurricane Katrina, displaced women, who were already facing barriers to childcare and housing, had to contend with increased vulnerability to sexual assault—an important impact of the effects of climate change which makes this an environmental issue as well (Sanders, 2017).

Activism around rape and sexual harassment have also revealed that women who work in public and low-wage sectors are far more vulnerable. For example, close to 80% of women agricultural workers have experienced harassment, abuse and rape (Schulte, 2018, p. 17). Because the majority of these workers are undocumented, they fear the consequences of deportation and loss of income that their families depend upon. In the US military, of the estimated 26,000 incidents of sexual harassment, fewer than 3,200 were reported and 300 prosecuted, representing just
over 1% of cases (Carter, 2014, p. 48). Roughly one third of female veterans stated they were victims of rape while in the military, with rape by colleagues being a primary contributor to PTSD in women (p. 49). Further, “US appellate judges have ruled in several cases that female victims, after release from the military, are not eligible for financial help for psychiatric or other damages unless they had reported the crime immediately after it occurred” (p. 48). Because the commanding officer holds the decision whether to move forward with prosecution for rape, victims are hesitant to report.

The #MeToo and #TimesUp campaigns have highlighted not only the egregious acts of men in positions of power, but the systemic protections that shield them from the consequences of their actions. Additionally, the experiences of those victimized by rape and sexual assault repeatedly demonstrate that “the rules that claim to be in place to protect women from abusers are there to protect the institutions from women’s complaints of abuse” (Schulte, 2018, p. 20). This happens through the design of the criminal justice system that serves to discourage all but the most determined and well-resourced women to report sexual harassment and rape cases. If a case makes it to trial, the focus turns to the actions of the victim, with personal and often unrelated details laid out for all to see through virtually unlimited cross-examination by defense lawyers (Carter, 2014; Nicol, 2016; Schulte, 2018). Even if a group of women testifies against a single perpetrator, any inconsistencies between their accounts, which is often common in cases of sexual trauma, is used to create the perception that the victims are unreliable witnesses (Nicol, 2016). Sociological and psychological research about victims of sexual assault is not taken into consideration. Essentially, a woman “can be raped with impunity because she is not a believable witness” (Nicol, 2016, para. 32).

Rape and sexual harassment are unique in that the status of the victim in terms of her innocence is immediately the focus. This is due to the patriarchal construct of the “perfect victim,” where, in order to meet this standard, a woman must have absolutely no sexual history whatsoever attached to her (Nichol, 2016). Instead of assuming that the perpetrator is innocent until proven guilty as one would with robbery or even murder, the default position is that the woman is lying or has somehow “misinterpreted” the intent of the perpetrator (Loofbourow, 2018; Nichol, 2016). Loofbourow (2018) explains:

> We don’t question the particulars of someone’s account of their mugging, but rape inspires people to start panning the story for possible “misunderstandings….” The painful experiences claimed by women make no impression at all on a certain kind of man’s sense of reality. Her perspective is as unreal as it is inconsequential to him. Result: His and her story can be, in a limited and horrifying sense, equally true. (para. 13)

Loofbourow provides the example of Kavanaugh’s friend Mark Judge, who Christine Ford asserted was in the room at the time of her assault when she was a teenager. It is indeed possible that Judge had no recollection of witnessing the attack, not because
he was deliberately lying, but, more frighteningly, the event didn’t even register as significant enough for him to remember.

What lies beneath patriarchal assumptions regarding rape and sexual harassment is the double standard, or the notion of “boys will be boys,” more recently encapsulated in Trump’s dismissal of his past assault of women as “locker room talk” (Weida, 2017). However, these sayings go beyond merely excusing men’s behaviors or even naturalizing them, to fully stating that white men in particular are entitled to what they consider to be “youthful indiscretions” without any sort of consequences or controls on their behaviors (Loofbourow, 2018; Traister, 2018). Further, it is not enough that women are supposed to endure these behaviors, they are expected to openly forgive and absolve their perpetrators so as not to “ruin their lives.” Solnit (n.d.) sees this as a way to invert the important gains of #MeToo and #TimesUp as more men are finally facing the threat that women have had enough:

The follow-up story to the #MeToo upheaval has too often been: how do the consequences of men hideously mistreating women affect men’s comfort? Are men okay with what’s happening? There have been too many stories about men feeling less comfortable, too few about how women might be feeling more secure in offices where harassing coworkers may have been removed or are at least a bit less sure about their right to grope and harass. Men themselves insist on their comfort as a right (para. 18)

Solnit points to the example of Larry Nassar, the gymnastics physician who abused girls, and then complained that the testimonies of his victims made him uncomfortable.

The televised Kavanaugh hearing as a whole presents a case study of white male entitlement in live time. Traister’s (2018) account of Republican responses to vocal protests during the first day of the hearings described a parade of privilege and dismissiveness, which was only a sign of things to come. When one of the female protestors accused Republican politicians of how cutting health care would lead to her death, Orrin Hatch responded, “We shouldn’t have to put up with this kind of stuff” (para. 5). Ben Sasse insisted that “maybe the ladies should all just calm down” and stop the hysterics of exaggerating about the impact of health care cuts (para. 5). Then came Christine Ford’s testimony of her assault at the hands of Kavanaugh when she was a teenager, which was a powerful indictment of not only Kavanaugh, but the Trump administration as a whole:

With Ford’s story came the explicit acknowledgment of what all those demonstrators had been working to convey for weeks: that this fight has been against an administration with virtually no regard for women, for their rights, or for the integrity of their bodies, either in the public or private sense. (para. 4)

The impact of Ford’s testimony was immediately apparent, with even Trump concerned that she sounded very credible. Because of her status as an upper-middle
class white woman, Republican politicians couldn’t use their usual discursive weapons to deny her experiences as they did with Anita Hill during the Clarence Thomas hearings in the 90s. Something bigger would have to do, in the form of presenting a united white male grievance front. This involved taking the focus off of Ford and her believability—which they knew they had no chance of fighting—and placing it onto their supposed victimization. Aside from Kavanaugh’s red-faced, tear-filled angry tirade at even having to hear Ford’s testimony, there was Lindsey Graham’s resentful declaration of, “I’m a single white male from South Carolina, and I’m told to shut up, but I will not shut up” (Beauchamp, 2018b, para. 2). Beauchamp notes that this quote marked the moment when the stakes of this hearing were elevated beyond just Kavanaugh and Ford:

It’s about beating back the challenge from feminists and people of color demanding a seat at the table; it is about showing that white men in power are not going anywhere—that they will not listen, will not budge, and will not give ground to #MeToo or the Black Lives Matter movement. (para. 3)

In particular, Graham’s statement inverts a key assertion by women and minorities that “white men in positions of privilege don’t have direct experiences with hostile sexism or racism, and should listen to the people who have” (Beauchamp, 2018b, para. 12). Indeed, during the hearings, one of the White House lawyers expressed concern that if Kavanaugh could be “brought down” by such accusations, then “every man certainly should be worried,” a statement echoed by other conservative politicians and pundits (Loofbourow, 2018, para. 3). The idea that Supreme Court Justice, one of the most powerful and permanent positions in government, isn’t automatically granted to a nominee, but said nominee is held to scrutiny is considered an affront too difficult for an oppressed white male to bear:

“I will not shut up” is a perfect mantra for Trumpian backlash politics. There is no risk that white men are, en masse, going to be silenced: They occupy the commanding heights of power in every walk of American life. The demands that they be quiet at times are a response to the overrepresentation of their voices, that they understand what life is like for more vulnerable people and then change the way they act accordingly. (Beauchamp, 2018b, para. 13)

Ultimately, rape and sexual harassment are manifestations of a misogyny that is not outside the norm, but built directly into the structures of institutions and relationships. Much of this is religiously informed as well, with women cast as inferior and subservient to men (Carter, 2014). In commenting on the doubling down of prominent politicians after the Kavanaugh hearing, Loofbourow’s (2018) sober assessment effectively sums up the realizations of many women just waking up to the authoritarian populism and fascism in their midst:

It is now clear, and no exaggeration at all, that a significant percentage of men—most of them Republicans—believe that a guy’s right to a few minutes
of “action” justifies causing people who happen to be women physical pain, lifelong trauma, or any combination of the two. They’ve decided—at a moment when they could easily have accepted Kavanaugh’s denial—that something larger was at stake: namely, the right to do as they please, freely, regardless of who gets hurt. Rather than deny male malfeasance, they’ll defend it. Their logic could not be more naked or more self-serving: Men should get to escape consequences for youthful “indiscretions” like assault, but women should not—especially if the consequence is a pregnancy. (para.15)

**Labor**

Since capitalism depends on the labor of women, including unpaid domestic and emotional support work, it is not possible to separate women’s inequality at work from the discrimination they face outside of it (Penny, 2011; Roesch, 2019). Globally, women are responsible for performing two thirds of all work, yet 70% remain in poverty and 66% are illiterate due to lack of access to education or having to work to support their families, even as children (Carter, 2014, p. 86). Climate change also more dramatically impacts women, who are often displaced after weather events due to inability to afford housing in less affected regions:

> It’s the women and children who increasingly have to go further and further from their homes to get water or face the daily threat of drought who do not have the luxury of being in denial about climate shifts. In fact, climate-change policy debates and ideological wars are a luxury that only men…and people of color with privilege can afford. The real, unfortunate truth is that the world’s predominantly female poor will feel the effects of any and all attempts to soften, silence, or deny climate change. (Sanders, 2017, p. 20)

As Weida (2017) observes, “it seems there is no resume solid enough, no political pedigree pure enough to overcome sexism and misogyny in America” (para.16). Though capitalism has adopted neoliberal feminist discourse in shaping workplace policies within more prosperous democracies, gender inequality is an inherent feature of the workplace. Despite women making up nearly 50% of the workforce in the US and receiving more college degrees than men, women who work full time still earn just over 76% of what men do (Carter, 2014, p. 168). Older women often face additional employment discrimination (Paquette, 2017). Even in more “liberal” and privileged job sectors, such as postsecondary education, women only hold 28% of professorships at the highest rank and earn 80% of male professors of similar rank (Carter, 2014, p. 170). Within attacks on K-12 education, a combination of funding cuts and privatization has targeted women, in particular “mass layoffs of teachers of color” along with increased policing of black students through the school-to-prison pipeline (Blanchard, 2018, p. 12).

Massive sociological changes within a short period of time have shaped the composition of households, with women often placed in the role as sole income
CHAPTER 1

earner or, at the very least, vital to the survival of a two-income-earner household. Currently, 44% of mothers who work outside the home are the only income earner in their families, with 25% co-breadwinners who contribute one fourth to half of their household’s income (Roesch, 2019, p. 14). Black women provide over 86% of their household’s income, illustrating the impact of race and gender on labor (p. 14). This is in sharp contrast to 1950, where 93% households consisted of married people with children (p. 13). By 2017, just over 20% of children live in single-mother-headed households (p. 13). As the median age for marriage approaches 30 along with more people opt out of marriage, this is continuing to shape the formation of the family.

Labor also involves the harder-to-track but far more ubiquitous forms of unpaid labor or reproductive work, which includes things like household maintenance (itself a vast category of work), child care, care for older relatives, agricultural work, extra errands at work, and the like (Burns, B., 2017). This is borne out by the astounding statistic that of all goods sold in developed countries, 80% are purchased by women (Penny, 2011, p. 1). Often this unpaid labor is accompanied by the labor of emotional support that often falls on women who are already employed full time, as Pиеpzna-Sамарасинха (2017) aptly sums up:

They’re going to ask you to listen, do a favor, do an errand, drop everything to go buy them some cat food or crisis counsel them. Manage logistics, answer feelings emails, show up, empathize, build and maintain relationships. Organize the childcare, the access support, the food. Be screamed at, de-escalate, conflict resolute. They’re going to say, “Can I just pick your brain about something?” and then send you a five-paragraph email full of pretty goddam complex questions. It’d be real nice if you could get back to them ASAP. They’re going to ask if you can email them your PowerPoint and all your resources. Some of them will be people who are close to you; some of them will be total strangers. Do you have a minute? For free. Forever. And you know what’s going to happen? You’re going to do those things. Because you do, indeed, care. (p. 21)

Even though more affluent women perform such reproductive and emotionally supportive labor, they are often able to offset it by paying poor and minority women for maid service and child care, at often poverty-wage levels. Penny (2011) links this to “western women’s despair at the very point of asking our male relatives to do their bit, our unwillingness to challenge the system at its root” where “an entire generation has been willing to simply hand down their oppression to poor, migrant, and ethnic minority women” (p. 61). Essentially, exploitation through reproductive labor is now shifted onto a specific segment of the population who are also women. This is reflected in women making up three fourths of the top ten lowest wage jobs, with much of that work in service industry occupations (Roesch, 2019, p. 15). This type of work is also associated with higher rates of sexual harassment, with 50% of all women who work in food service reporting unwanted sexual advances (Sustar, 2018, p. 38).
In examining issues related to labor and gender, it is clear that “working-class women are valued less by just about every measure—wages, benefits, housing, education” and that this isn’t an accidental development (Schulte, 2018, p. 23). It is of benefit to the capitalist class to disrupt any form of solidarity between men and women, especially to reinforce the idea that women are gaining too much power at the expense of men. At the same time, the capitalist class is all too aware of the consequences of women themselves coming together and saying “no”:

Female power of refusal is the single most scary, most horrifying, most insistently phobic thing facing any society, ever. Women could, in theory, refuse to cook and clean and care and keep society running. Women could refuse to fit themselves out in conformity with the patriarchal proclivity not just for staid, acceptable sex, but for social order. (Penny, 2011, p. 62)

Media Representation

Female politicians represent an important case study that is worth examining concerning the double standard inherent in media representation. Dittmar (2016) analyzes how female candidates’ appearance and mannerisms are more of a media focus than their intelligence or policy positions, where coverage “includes more attention to hair, hemlines, and husbands” (para. 12). Common examples include an intense analysis of voice and inflection, as in critiques of Carly Fiorina and Hillary Clinton for being “shrill, whiny, or unnecessarily angry or nagging,” all age-old sexist stereotypes applied to women (para. 10). Right-wing blogger Matt Drudge created a front-page headline and feature story on his website speculating on if Clinton wore wigs or not and _Slate_ noting that she dressed like a lesbian, even if she wasn’t one herself. While all critiques of female politicians like Clinton are not inherently sexist, people rarely seem to ask, “am I judging this woman candidate in ways that no candidate could ever measure up?” (Wilz, 2016, p. 357).

A key component of differential treatment of female politicians in the media includes the requirement that they be “likable.” This includes having to walk a fine line between masculine and feminine performances and involves behaviors like not talking too loudly, smiling more and certainly never openly confronting sexism (Penny, 2011; Wilz, 2016). Even after being subjected to three years of Trump’s public conduct, the media continues to speculate on the likability of 2020 presidential candidates like Elizabeth Warren and Kamala Harris. It is clear that male candidates can adopt any manner of masculine posing, and still be within the realm of acceptability and relatability, as with Trump’s treatment during the entire runup to the 2016 election as a candidate with equivalent viability. Another example includes Clinton and Sanders advocating the same policy positions, but Sanders’ positions seen as more viable because of his particular populist masculine presentation style (Wilz, 2016).
In this sense, Hillary Clinton represents the apex of unlikability, not only due to her serious demeanor, but because she doesn’t let a sexist remark go unnoticed. During a 2015 debate with Clinton, Bernie Sanders rebutted her questioning his record on gun control by stating, “all the shouting in the world” wouldn’t stop gun violence (Dittmar, 2016, para. 11). The very next day, Clinton referred to Sanders’ statement at a political appearance, noting, “I’ve been told to stop, and I quote, ‘shouting about gun violence.’ Well, first of all, I’m not shouting. It’s just, when women talk, some people think we’re shouting” (para. 11). The media continued to dismiss Clinton’s policy positions—as well as the concerns of millions of female voters—by focusing on unfounded conspiracies about emails, fueled by Wikileaks’ distribution of Russian sources: “over and over again, Clinton voters watched the media ignore a woman’s experience in both foreign and domestic matters and her extensive, well thought out platform in favor of chasing the titillating shadow of her alleged misconduct“ (Weida, 2017, para. 18).

A more extreme example of likability applied to Clinton was Meet the Press’s Twitter critique of her as being “over-prepared” when there was no comparison to Trump’s ill-prepared performance (Kellner, 2017). Apparently, a woman being prepared is too alienating and unfriendly, as Weida (2017) explains,

When given a choice between a blatantly sexist, incompetent man who spewed violence at every turn and a calm, controlled woman who had steered our country through troubled waters for the better part of a decade, 46.4% of the voting populace pulled the lever for the nightmare we are currently living. The threat of nuclear war, racism in the White House, and the slow bleed out of Constitutional Rights was more palatable than a woman who didn’t “smile enough” and seemed “too prepared.” (para. 22)

The double standard of media treatment applied to female politicians also takes on social class dimensions. Washington Examiner media writer Eddie Scarry shared a photo on Twitter of Representative Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez in office attire, with the caption “I’ll tell you something, that jacket and coat don’t look like a girl who struggles” (Del Valle, 2018, para. 4). This remark was an attack on Ocasio-Cortez’s embracing of her background as a working-class Latina, open solidarity with her younger, multi-racial constituency, and her direct critiques of the capitalist class. As Del Valle explains, “the underlying message in Scarry’s tweet is clear: if people are really from working-class backgrounds, they can’t afford to look well put together or elegant” (para. 9). Scarry’s remark also alludes to the common conservative talking point that people aren’t really be poor if they have a television or cell phone; therefore, “people who can’t afford things like health care or housing are blamed for their inability to do so” (para. 19).

Because women candidates are often vocal supporters of issues like reproductive rights or equal pay, this automatically “feminizes” these issues and frames them as less important compared to “real” policy, touted by male candidates (Dittmar, 2016; Wilz, 2016). Hillary Clinton took on the notion of “playing the gender card”
by replying, “if calling for equal pay and paid leave is playing the gender card, then deal me in…if helping more working parents find quality, affordable childcare is playing the gender card, then I’m ready to ante up” (Dittmar, 2016, para. 17). Indeed, constant criticisms of female supporters of Clinton took the form of accusations of “vagina voting,” implying that the only reason women voted for her was because of their shared gender. The irony is that male voters continually express gender affinity through their voting patterns, but often get to hide behind party affiliation as well as men nearly exclusively running for office since the founding of the United States. Dittmar discusses exit polling from 27 Democratic primaries where Clinton earned 60% of the female vote compared to 49% of the male vote (para. 18). In contrast, Sanders gained 38% of female voters and 48% of male voters (para. 18).

Objectification

Closely associated with the double standard in terms of how women are portrayed within the media is their hostile objectification and sexualization without their consent, as a form of diminishment and gender policing. Wilz (2016) points to the example of search engines, where typing in the name of a male politician, like Trump, Cruz, or Sanders along with the word “porn” yields far fewer graphic results than doing the same with Clinton, Pelosi, or Palin. This form of pornification carries over into the daughters of female politicians, as a way to censure the audacity of women seeking public office:

Pornification highlights sexuality in contexts that otherwise are not normally sexualized and, through the use of crude humor or gender-based parody, disciplines individuals who do not conform to traditional gender norms. Furthermore, because women candidates perpetually combat the double bind between femininity and competence, media frames that cast them as sex objects undermine their credibility as leaders in ways that the same frames do not undercut male candidates. (p. 358)

Not just limited to more prominent women seeking office or celebrities, objectification is saturated throughout all forms of media and extends into everyday life. As soon as a woman is perceived to have stepped “out of line”—in other words, going about her daily life in public—they are immediately disciplined through being called a slut or other sexual slurs, nearly always paired with the words “ugly” and “fat.” Penny (2011) asserts this is a form of backlash against the legal gains that women have made under feminism. The increased policing of women’s bodies, which has accelerated under neoliberalism, includes intensified monitoring of any kind of fat, in any form, and is tied to men’s fears of women gaining power:

Cellulite, saggy bellies, fat around the arms, natural processes which affect all female bodies, even the leanest, after puberty, are particularly loathed… the threat that patriarchal birthright will be “swallowed up” or “suffocated”
by gender equality is made manifest in the fear of female fat, and that phobic response to the reality of physical femaleness has been internalized by women and men across the western world. (Penny, 2011, pp. 32–33)

Trump himself regularly demeans women through attacks on their appearance, as in his connecting Fox News host Mika Brzezinski’s facelift to her lack of intelligence (Paquette, 2017). Many women could relate to this because of how they are regularly judged based on their appearance, which is directly connected to age and gender discrimination in the workplace. During a 2016 rally, Trump referred to his debate with Hillary Clinton: “I’m standing at my podium and she walks in front of me, right. She walks in front of me, and when she walked in front of me, believe me, I wasn’t impressed” (Kellner, 2017, p. 5). Transgender bodies are also constantly surveilled, as in 2015 when Mike Huckabee, in a speech to a religious broadcasters convention, flippantly remarked, “I wish someone had told me that when I was in high school I could have felt like a woman when it came time to take showers in PE” (Dittmar, 2016, para. 7). Here, we see this feeble attempt at humor used to diminish transgender identity as a matter of flippant decision-making. With this type of comment, Huckabee and others also employ sexism to “present masculinity and sexuality as mutually reinforcing, so that masculine dominance relies upon heteronormativity” (para. 7).

A major contribution to the use of objectification as a form of backlash is the legalization of oral contraceptives in 1965 (Penny, 2011; Mason, 2016). This marked the moment when women’s sexual activity could be separated from pregnancy and, more importantly, placed that decision squarely into the hands of women. The arrival of the pill, along with other forms of contraception, has been one of the single biggest contributing factors to the growth of women participating in the paid workforce. Women could determine when and how far apart to space having children, assuming they even elected to have children in the first place. As a result, the “post-Fordist capitalist control of women’s gendered labor needed to be extended beyond the sexual and into the substantive, nutritive, and the semiotic architecture of gender and physicality itself” (Penny, 2011, p. 4). The monitoring of women’s bodies had to move into other aspects of daily life.

In particular, capitalism feeds on two powerful, gendered insecurities: discontent with one’s appearance and responsibility to meet men’s needs, both aspects of women being expected to keep themselves in check (Penny, 2011; West, 2016; Solnit, n.d.). Both of these insecurities have spawned massive profit in the cosmetics, lifestyle coaching/counseling, fitness, household maintenance, boutique foods, and other related industries. As West (2016) notes, women are exposed to constant media messaging, which has become internalized and reinforced through interactions with others. This “steers humanity toward conservatism and walls the narrow interests of men, and keeps us adrift in waters where women’s safety and humanity are secondary to men’s pleasure and convenience” (p. 19). An example of this is Stormy Daniels’ interview with Anderson Cooper regarding her past involvement with Trump, where
she explained, “I had it coming for making a bad decision for going into someone’s room alone…well you put yourself in a bad situation and bad things happen, so you deserve this” (Solnit, n.d., para. 14). On the flip side, Solnit notes how the media also portrays Daniels as an opportunist because of her financial success.

Finally, while the media superficially conflates 24/7 surveillance of the female body with liberation, what is actually happening is that objectification has become a form of alienation under capitalism. As Penny (2011) notes, “we live in a world which worships the unreal female body and despises real female power” (p. 22). This is reflected in how men’s suffering—defined as not getting what they feel entitled to at that very moment—is viewed as more significant than “a woman in pain who has never been told that what she wants might matter” (Loofbourow, 2018, para. 10). Ultimately, by remaining fixated on what women need to do to improve their bodies, this limits the scope of our political expectations to highly individualized things like weight or lifestyle fixes, as a form of personal responsibility, which then becomes the flippant go-to solution when presented with larger social problems (West, 2016).

“IT GOES WITHOUT SAYING”: AGAINST BROCIALISM

One of the more challenging problems that socialist feminists confront is sexism and racism on the part of leftist men. This ranges from regular dismissal of the importance of acknowledging the need to include feminism as part of Marxist analysis and organizing, to condescending forms of communication, to exploiting the characteristics of patriarchal constructions of leftist organizations to sexually harass and rape women (Goodman, 2016; Morris, 2010). “It goes without saying” refers to the usual opening response of leftist men when socialist feminists raise important issues related to gender, race, and sexuality, as in, “it goes without saying that these are major problems, but once capitalism has ended, these problems will as well.” Women are supposed to sacrifice their political interests for the larger aims of the group so as not to be “divisive.” Often this takes the form of “mansplaining,” where males will assume a condescending tone in online settings, to lecture women about things like what makes someone a real feminist or what is or isn’t racism. A more dramatic example of mansplaining took place in an online comment that went viral where someone identifying as male told women they were overinflating the estimated cost of tampons by not using them correctly (Khan, 2019).

A more recent social-media-based term for sexist leftist men is brocialist, combining characteristics of “bro” behavior (immature, fraternity culture, centered on male bonding/joking around) with socialist or left-progressive beliefs. Manarchist and manarchism are similar terms, referencing the anarchist community. The accompanying ideology—brocialism—advocates for a more aggressive insistence on colorblind Marxism, often using “edgy” and ironic discourse via social media, usually commenting rapid-fire in groups. When confronted about their sexism, they will immediately point to their progressive credentials, as if they cannot possibly be misogynistic:
Brocialists are quintessentially anti-intersectional...they dominate spaces, manipulate women, and dismiss identity politics as “divisive.” Typically, they are privilege-blind cishe white men, often significantly above the poverty line...who refuse to acknowledge oppression and privilege, intersectional or otherwise, outside of classism and socioeconomic status...brocialists refuse to accept that within their own movement (as within society more broadly) there may be misogyny, from mansplaining to rape threats; resorting instead to the No True Scotsman fallacy by accusing feminists and other critics that they must be speaking to the wrong so-called “socialists.” (SJWiki, para. 3)

Morris (2010) provides an example of a meeting organizer who would dominate gatherings by speaking loudly, using difficult vocabulary to shut people out of the discussion and talk down to those he considered less intelligent. If anyone pointed this out, “he would feign ignorance…and complain of being infantilized” when he was the one patronizing the members (para. 13).

Though Sanders himself is a vocal supporter of women’s rights, a segment of his brocialist followers, dubbed “Bernie Bros” were described as “flustered, shouting white guys” who regularly dismissed feminism while aggressively touting a colorblind class analysis (Dittmar, 2016, para. 18). During the Democratic primaries, comments from Bros included “their vaginas are making terrible choices,” referencing the stereotype of women only supporting Clinton because of her gender, along with regularly using “bitch” and “cunt” to describe both Clinton and her supporters (McMorris-Santoro, 2016, para. 5). The comments of the Bros seemed to advance a nostalgic view of past elections without female candidates being gender neutral and not cluttered up with identity politics, when “gender dynamics have been at play in all US presidential elections to date” (Dittmar, 2016, para. 1).

Sensing that the online harassment was beginning to negatively impact Sanders, his campaign officials reached out to the Clinton campaign to apologize and try to more intensely monitor Facebook and Twitter pages for “Bro-y” posts (McMorris-Santo, 2016, para. 3). Male Sanders supporters responded by either asserting that the Bernie Bro persona was a fictional media construct meant to attack Sanders or distancing themselves by calling out the Bro behavior. As McMorris-Santo describes, “online Sanders supporters always stress in conversation that the vast majority of Sanders supporters aren’t Bros—and they claim many of the so-called Bros can in fact regularly be found posting in conservative forums” (para. 39). Indeed, much of the Bro posts ranged in style from a detached mansplaining, to angry accusations of Clinton supporters trying to bring Bernie down, “a style of discourse that’s anathema to the progressive, feminist quarters of the internet that share many of Sanders’ policy views” (para. 29).

The foundation of misogyny and racism within leftist spaces is the refusal of socialist men to acknowledge the need for intersectional Marxist analysis. A recent example was the 2016 World Conservation Congress failing to directly acknowledge women or gender within the motions brought to the membership (Burns, B., 2017).
ON THE RELEVANCE AND NECESSITY OF SOCIALIST FEMINISM

Because of insisting on automatically “folding in” the issues of women and minorities into socialist organizing by never directly using the term “feminism,” this creates a climate where sexism can occur unchallenged as well as making it more difficult for women who have been harassed and assaulted to come forward (Camfield, 2013). Accounts of leftist women have included organizations ignoring or covering up instances of patronizing behaviors, intimidation, domestic abuse, sexual harassment, and rape (Morris, 2010; Wrigley-Field, 2019).

As Morris (2010) points out, rather than being an anomaly, sexism is built into the functioning of many leftist organizations as well as representing a major reason these organizations often collapse because of their vulnerability to infiltration by informants. In recounting her experiences with leftist men within socialist organizations, the failure to address misogyny is apparent:

Despite all that we say to the contrary, the fact is that radical social movements and organizations in the United States have refused to seriously address gender violence as a threat to the survival of our struggles. We’ve treated misogyny, homophobia, and heterosexism as lesser evils—secondary issues—that will eventually take care of themselves or fade into the background once the “real” issues—racism, the police, class inequality, U.S. wars of aggression—are resolved. There are serious consequences for choosing ignorance. Misogyny and homophobia are central to the reproduction of violence in radical activist communities. Scratch a misogynist and you’ll find a homophobe. (para. 4)

Morris discusses the activist accounts of Assata Shakur, Elaine Brown, and Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz who all noted that the same organizations that were easily infiltrated by informants also happened to be spaces that regularly overlooked gender violence.

It is also worth examining that the political trajectories of many older far-right spokesmen such as Irving Kristol, David Horowitz and Michael Savage, once involved memberships in New Left groups and movements from the 1930s to the 1960s (Nagel, 2017; Packer, 2016). These movements were typically rigid, ultra-doctrinaire and relegated women (assuming they were part of the organizations) to service-oriented positions. More contemporary alt-right figures like Andrew “Weev” Auernheimer once participated in the Occupy actions and “now regularly posts anti-Semitic and anti-gay rants on YouTube, has a swastika tattoo on his chest and was the self-appointed president of a trolling initiative called the Gay Nigger Association of America” (Nagle, 2017a, p. 16). The discursive tone within these New Left groups (both online and in-person) is often indistinguishable from the right-wing ones they now occupy.

Ghomeshi (2018), a Canadian journalist who was accused (and later acquitted) of sexual assault by multiple women, provides insight into the ability of sexist men to take cover in leftist organizations:

At some point, when it came to women, I began to use my liberal gender studies education as a cover for my own behavior. I was ostensibly so schooled in how sexism works that I would arrogantly give myself a free pass…before
2014, it was unimaginable that I would become a poster boy for men who are assholes. I had not been a network boss or an executive with institutional power; there had been no formal complaints at work that I was aware of over the years. (p. 29)

Ghomeshi also catalogues an extensive list of activities that provided him progressive street cred, including wearing the right slogans on his t-shirts, speaking at liberal events, participating in marches, and supporting various social justice causes.

Organizational structures and their insistence on handling things “in-house” (because law enforcement is an arm of the capitalist class) also provide cover for sexual predators. Morris (2010) recounts several sexual assaults experienced by female and transgender volunteers from Common Ground one year after Hurricane Katrina. These assaults were committed by white men, but the leadership of the organization “shifted the blame to the surrounding Black community,” in the form of distributing warnings to female activists to not be out alone at night, building on racist stereotypes of the Upper Ninth Ward being a “dangerous place” (para. 9). Essentially, it was “easier to criminalize Black men from the neighborhood than to acknowledge that white women and transgender organizers were most likely to be assaulted by the white men they worked with” (para. 9). One man was finally reported to the police, but only after he assaulted three women in the span of one week. The more recent example of the dissolution of the International Socialist Organization after it surfaced that the group mishandled an accusation of sexual assault is another example of the organizational structure providing cover for gender violence to continue (Wrigley-Field, 2019).

A subset of brocialist also openly supports authoritarian regimes like Putin or Assad, simply on the basis of them being considered enemies of the US. Known as tankies, these individuals will employ whataboutism to reference the imperialism of the US as a way to make excuses for oppressive rulers, similar to apologists for Stalin (SJWiki, n.d.). One of the more prominent tankies is Julian Assange, often celebrated for his self-styled whistleblower journalism through WikiLeaks. Originating with a specific focus on anti-war activism through releasing videos of the US military committing war crimes, eventually Assange’s efforts moved in a more disturbing and far-from-social-justice-oriented direction. In massively dumping documents with no vetting in the name of “transparency.”

WikiLeaks also posted links to a set of huge voter databases, including one with the names, addresses, and other contact information for nearly every woman in Turkey. It also apparently published the files of psychiatric patients, gay men, and rape victims in Saudi Arabia. Soon after that, WikiLeaks began leaking bundles of hacked Democratic National Committee e-mails. (Halpern, 2017, para. 12)

Halpern goes on to recount how Assange refused to disguise the identity of Afghani civilians in the Manning leak, with the blanket response, “Well they’re informants. So, if they get killed, they’ve got it coming to them. They deserve it” (para. 9).
Assange has also been tied to alt-right and nationalist figures like Nigel Farage, former head of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and Israel Shamir, anti-Semitic associate of Putin who shared documents from the Manning leak with Belarusian President Lukashenko, who then used the documents to “imprison and torture members of the opposition” (Halpern, 2017, para. 8). More recently, there is the example of Russian intelligence efforts to influence the US election through the WikiLeaks hack (Halpern, 2017; Kellner, 2017). It is also telling how Assange expresses open contempt for feminism. Silverman (2017) reviews footage of Assange responding to allegations of sexual assault by two women:

Assange’s own lawyers seem exasperated with him at times, particularly during a scene where he blames “radical feminists” for his legal problems. As the scene continues, Assange mulls how one accuser might be ripe for character assassination, but he decides it’s far harder to torpedo the reputations of two accusers. Going public with their accusations could be difficult for the women, Assange proposes, implying that WikiLeaks supporters would make their lives miserable. Perhaps, he says, adopting a vague, conditional tone, he could apologize for whatever hurt he may have somehow caused. Later in the film, he states his belief that these accusations actually brought him and his organization valuable attention. (Silverman, 2017, para. 7)

Ultimately, the sheer amount of resources and energy that misogyny takes from activist movements slowly erodes the solidarity that is necessary to confront oppression under capitalism. While we can expect right-wing spaces to be patriarchal, authoritarian, and racist, the fact that leftist groups and leaders can harbor the same ideologies is demoralizing. Time that should be spent on organizing and community outreach is instead devoted to addressing sexual harassment and assault, assuming that those are even acknowledged. Because of the marginalized status of leftists in countries like the US, instances of gender violence are often assumed to be false constructions by the capitalist class to divide the movement (Wrigley-Field, 2019). This creates a default cover for misogyny to flourish. As Morris (2010) stresses:

We have a right to be angry when the communities we build that are supposed to be the model for a better, more just world harbor the same kinds of antiqueer, antiwoman, racist violence that pervades society. As radical organizers we must hold each other accountable and not enable misogynists to assert so much power in these spaces. Not allow them to be the faces, voices, and leaders of these movements. (para. 22)

CONCLUSION

Socialist feminism is relevant and necessary for confronting authoritarian populism and fascism. It advocates an intersectional analysis, which is critical because of the multifaceted nature of oppression within capitalism. Power operates in a variety
of ways, and is experienced differently depending on one’s position in society; understanding this allows us to respond accordingly. As Camacho (2016) concludes, “we will have to utilize all of the legal, political, economic, activist/organizing, artistic, and religious means available to us (para. 9). Socialist feminism allows us to deal with the many contradictions inherent in people’s common-sense formation of their understanding of the world, changing common sense into “the good sense of our times” (Nowak & Prashad, 2016, para. 12).

It is also clear that though there have been important gains within the past few decades, the current political system is not meeting the needs of the working class, and of women in particular. The fact that much of political discourse and policy—whether liberal or conservative—remains mired in a nostalgic past prevents the ability to enact a dialectical materialist vision:

The time of the present is over, and the time of the future is at hand. What this means is not that we are on the threshold of a breakthrough, but that the managers of our world order are not capable of solving our problems. That means that the present has no solutions for us. We need to seek our solutions from the future, from a different way of ordering our needs and our luxuries, our excesses and our scarcities. (Nowak & Prashad, 2016, para. 41)

What is needed is to build a militant, unified movement across the global working class that is focused on meaningful change (Goodman, 2016). Socialist feminism can provide a foundation for that vision and a strong enough one for confronting the growing threat of authoritarian populism and fascism.