"The Scourge of the Bourgeois Feminist": Alexandra Kollontai’s Strategic Repudiation and Espousing of Female Essentialism in The Social Basis of the Woman Question

Hannah Pugh
Brigham Young University

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Author Bio
Hannah Pugh is a transfer student from Swarthmore College finishing her second year at BYU. She is pursuing a double major in English and European studies—a combination she enjoys because it allows her to take an eclectic mix of political science, history, and literature courses. She’s planning to attend law school after her graduation next April. Currently, Hannah works as the assistant director of Birch Creek Service Ranch, a nonprofit organization in central Utah that runs a service-oriented, character-building summer program for teens. Her hobbies include backpacking, fly fishing, impromptu trips abroad, and wearing socks and Chacos all winter long.

Abstract
In *The Social Basis of the Woman Question*, Bolshevik feminist Alexandra Kollontai responds to bourgeois feminists’ essentialist calls for female solidarity to resolve the “woman’s question”—the question of women’s status in society—by presenting the woman question as a struggle defined not by gender but by the intersection of class and gender. Kollontai appropriates and extends their essentialist rhetoric, engaging in the classed and gendered essentialism of the particular socioeconomic position of the female worker. I argue that, by placing the essentialized woman worker at the heart of the woman question, Kollontai suggests that the woman question is an economic question rather than a social one and that consequently socialism is the only real remedy. Thus, the bourgeois feminists’ limited class-stratified female equality within the capitalist system pales in comparison to the total emancipation from the economic power structures on which the subjugation of women is built that Kollontai offers through socialism.
“The Scourge of the Bourgeois Feminist”: Alexandra Kollontai’s Strategic Repudiation and Espousing of Female Essentialism in *The Social Basis of the Woman Question*

Hannah Pugh

In November of 1905, a group of Russian female railway workers went on strike as part of the larger Revolution protesting the Tsar. Seeking solidarity, these women workers declared in a statement to a local newspaper, “Shame on all those, particularly women, who . . . go against their comrades.” ¹ Their rhetoric is typical of the dominant attitudes among Russian feminists around the turn of the century, as it reflects a belief in a united female fellowship in which women are obligated to support one another by virtue of their common sex. During this era, Russian feminists frequently adopted attitudes of female essentialism, which social scientist Rosalind Barnett characterizes as “a body of belief in women’s ‘otherness’ from men.” ² Female essentialism, in other words, is the belief that the breadth of fundamental, inherent differences between women and men not only reach beyond the biological realm, but that those differences significantly shape and unify people. Based on those assumptions, essentialism makes what contemporary feminist philosopher Alison Stone characterizes as “universal claims about all women which actually only apply to some women” as well as “claims that certain experiences, situations or concerns are common to all women.” ³ Essentialism builds on women’s otherness from men to assert overarching female commonality in nature and experience that is, in fact, not grounded in the diverse reality of women’s lives and beings. Nevertheless, during the early twentieth century, Russian feminists

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tended to utilize an essentialist philosophy in order to advocate for a transcendent female solidarity that united all women in their efforts to remedy the common marginalized female position.

In response to this essentialism, socialist feminist Alexandra Kollontai insisted in her 1909 book, *The Social Basis of the Woman Question*, that class, not gender, was the root of women’s ills and that only by dismantling capitalist structures could women’s place in Russian society be improved. Kollontai strongly denounced the “bourgeois feminist” and her “classless” feminism.4 Her criticism was that the feminist’s adoption of female essentialism blinded her to the impact of class and that her consequent efforts to unify women in the fight for equality within the existing capitalist systems would not benefit proletarian women. The bourgeois feminist decried by Kollontai has been painted by historians as a member of “the country’s educated elite . . . from the urban-based intelligentsia.”5 This feminist differed from Kollontai in “ideology, political strategies, and personal rivalries,” however, not in “socioeconomic distinction.”6 Kollontai, named “the scourge of the bourgeois feminist” by one biographer,7 was an unlikely candidate to become the voice of Russian socialist feminism; as a child of low-ranking nobility, she grew up in a privileged bourgeois family and received an outstanding education. She appeared to have much more in common with the bourgeois feminist she denounced than the worker she championed.

From an autobiographical perspective, however, it seems clear that Kollontai was enticed by the struggle of proletarian women because of her personal quest for independence and autonomy from “the control of family, husband, and tradition.”8 Her own determined pursuit of emancipation drew her to working women, who sought those same

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things for themselves without the advantages of the bourgeois class. In 1909, Kollontai published *The Social Basis of the Woman Question*, in which she portrays the bourgeois feminist’s appeal for all-encompassing female solidarity as false and calls on proletarian women to unite instead with the socialist movement to achieve real freedom and power through class revolution. In thus defining the woman question as a class struggle rather than a gender struggle, Kollontai redefines the concept of “woman” to mean the inhabitant of the doubly-marginalized social position of the female worker. A woman is the woman worker, exploited as a member of the proletariat and as a person who is gendered female. By thus redefining woman, Kollontai employs essentialism that is unique because it takes both a classed and a gendered form.

Kollontai produced *The Social Basis of the Woman Question* in response to discussions of the eponymous “woman question”—the question of how to remedy women’s marginalized position in society—amongst different feminist groups. Before examining Kollontai’s definition of and response to the woman question in detail, it is worth considering the notion of the woman question itself. Alison Stone notes that “the word ‘woman’ is ambiguous between sex and gender”; it refers to biology, “a female human being,” as well as to cultural constructs, “a specific social role” and “specific set of psychological traits.” The word *woman*, in other words, can refer both to an individual with a female body and to the cultural beliefs about the roles, characteristics, and responsibilities associated with that female body. The very idea of a woman question, therefore, also inhabits a certain amount of ambiguity between sex and gender. If the question interrogates sex, then the answers might in fact be universal for all females, making the essentialism of the bourgeois feminist appropriate. If, however, the question interrogates issues concerning gender, then it is not one question but many, with a broad variation of answers specific to other intersecting factors. In reality, the woman question is a series of questions that are neither entirely about sex or gender, but contain components of both.

The converging elements of sex, gender, and class characterize the woman question with which Kollontai engages. These intersections are prominently evident in the case of the female workers Kollontai champions who find, as sociologist Maria Mies remarks, “the basic conflict between [their] class interests . . . and their interests as an

9 Boxer, “Rethinking the Socialist Construction,” 137.
10 Stone, *Introduction to Feminist Philosophy*, 141.
oppressed sex remained unresolved” despite both the feminist and socialist movements.\textsuperscript{11} This demonstrates that the woman question is ultimately far too complex to solve when reduced to a gender or class struggle. Therefore, as I consider Kollontai’s “economic and social” approach to the woman question (as opposed to the bourgeois feminists’ “legal and political” one), I will not examine the effectiveness of her response as policy or political philosophy; I will instead engage in rhetorical analysis for the purpose of understanding how her response represents the concept of woman and the woman question itself.\textsuperscript{12} Such analysis reveals that Kollontai engaged in a classed and gendered form of female essentialism, using “woman” to refer exclusively to an individual who inhabits the socioeconomic position of the female worker.

True to her socialist agenda, Kollontai suggests that the woman question is one of economic structures. Her basic thesis in \textit{The Social Basis of the Woman Question} is that “specific economic factors were behind the subordination of women, natural qualities have been a secondary factor in this process.”\textsuperscript{13} Capitalist systems that, first and foremost, benefit the bourgeois man, not sex-based discrimination, are the primary source of the woman question. Even as she rebuffs the bourgeois feminist and the essentialist idea that the solution to the woman question is a rehabilitation of the social value of female qualities, Kollontai engages in a particular kind of essentialism.

This essentialism is evident in her analysis’s acknowledgment that women do not have any “natural qualities.”\textsuperscript{14} She does not suggest that these natural qualities differ according to class but instead promotes the idea that they are simply female and inherent to women. By simultaneously recognizing qualities common to all women and rejecting them as the primary source of female subjugation, Kollontai suggests that there is, perhaps, an essential woman at the heart of the woman question, although she does not exist as the bourgeois feminist defines her. The bourgeois feminist might argue that the essential woman for whom she

\textsuperscript{11} Maria Mies, “Class Struggle or Emancipation? Women’s Emancipation Movements in Europe and the US,” \textit{Economic and Political Weekly} 8, no. 50 (1973): 2225.


\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
advocates could be any woman in all of Russian society, but by ignoring factors that intersect with gender, such as class, ethnicity, age, political affiliation, etc., the bourgeois feminist ultimately champions an essential woman who looks just like her—a woman whose primary concern is legal, political, and economic gender discrimination because she is relatively privileged in other arenas of her life.

Through rejecting the bourgeois feminists’ essential woman, Kollontai essentializes the woman worker, subordinated first by economic factors and second by her gender. The essential woman at the heart of Kollontai’s argument is concerned simultaneously by the way she is marginalized as a woman and as a member of the proletariat; her concerns cannot be limited exclusively to issues of gender. The essential woman worker is more invested in improving the reality of her day-to-day life than achieving the abstract lofty goals of the bourgeois feminist which, though nice, will not raise the quality of her living conditions. Kollontai thus creates an essentialized woman worker who is defined by her position as doubly-marginalized by her socioeconomic position and her gender. Thus, the woman question is one of emancipating this essentialized woman worker from the economic and gender structures that restrain her, both of which Kollontai advocates accomplishing through “economic independence” for the woman worker. The intersection of class and gender is therefore her basis for understanding the woman question, with woman defined according to the particular socioeconomic position of the essentialized female worker.

It seems hypocritical of Kollontai to simultaneously eviscerate the bourgeois feminist’s essentialism while using the same rhetorical strategy herself. Further consideration of the context of her work, however, makes it clear that the rhetorical move of essentialism gives her the necessary leverage to appeal to the female proletariat. Political scientist Jinee Lokaneeta points out that, despite Kollontai’s insistence that bourgeois feminists would inevitably fail “due to their own internal contradictions,” they “posed a major challenge to the socialists.” Working women were gathering around bourgeois feminist organizations and drawing important sections of the proletariat away from the socialist movement, whose viability was consequently threatened. Kollontai writes The Social Basis of the Woman Question, historian Marilyn Boxer observes,

15 Ibid., 178.
“expressly to undermine potential class collaboration” between women. Kollontai demonstrates a particular feeling of responsibility to convince working women to abandon bourgeois feminists and join the socialist movement; without the female proletariat the movement simply is not large enough to succeed.

Additionally, feelings of solidarity between bourgeois and proletarian women threaten the possibility of socialist revolution, which is ultimately to be against all members of the bourgeoisie, not just the men. Kollontai’s intense need to appeal to the woman worker explains her essentialism. As a socioeconomic group, the female proletariat “did not consider it proper for their sex to be involved in politics.” In essentializing them as members of a particular gender and class that suffer from particular systematic oppressions, Kollontai provides the woman worker a new identity with which to mask her individuality. She makes it possible for the female proletariat to engage in politics without the fear of impropriety because they engage not as a member of the female sex but as the woman worker. By providing an essentialist category to join and new identity to adopt, Kollontai recreates the solidarity that attracts women workers to the bourgeois feminist, but does so in a way that also bolsters the socialist movement. The woman worker, ultimately, is only willing to join a movement under the guise of an essentialist identity and consequent solidarity, and Kollontai adapts to entice her to socialism.

Essentializing the woman worker also gives Kollontai leverage because it makes her discussion of the woman question more palatable to the Socialist Party. In acknowledging the particular subordination of the woman worker, Kollontai makes what the Party considers the “heretical implication that women carried a special burden—sexism—in addition to the capitalist yoke they shared with men.” The idea of a unique female burden is controversial within the Party because it suggests that there are factors beyond class conflict that account for the suffering of the proletariat. By essentializing the woman worker, Kollontai suggests that the woman question is fundamentally part of the bourgeoisie’s exploitation of the proletariat rather than a separate question that transcends class lines. She does not blame the male proletariat, as she suggests the feminists who “see men as the main enemy” do, but instead suggests that the female proletariat “think of men as their comrades” in

17 Boxer, “Rethinking the Socialist Construction,” 137.
18 Clements, Bolshevik Feminist, 45.
19 Ibid., 55.
their struggle as women. Kollontai thus rejects pure female essentialism, adopting instead a unique classed form of female essentialism.

As a general rule, female essentialism, as social scientist Rosalind Barnett writes, emphasizes “the size of the differences between men and women,” and obscures the sizable differences “among women and among men.” Female essentialism divides into groups based on biological differences and examines men and women in comparison to each other without considering the individuals that make up the groups. Kollontai’s essentialism, however, is unique because it does not fall into such a trap. Her essentialism is distinctive because it is based on the intersecting factors of gender and class; consequently, it is more versatile than the essentialism of the bourgeois feminist. Her essentialism, in fact, compares the significant differences among women to the significant similarities between women and men to advocate for solidarity between the sexes. This solidarity, however, goes beyond the class struggle and includes the woman question; the male proletariat is enlisted to come to the aid of the essentialized female worker. Thus, not only does Kollontai’s essentialism draw the woman worker to socialism, it gains her allies within the movement specifically committed to her emancipation both as a member of the proletariat and as a woman.

Placing the essentialized woman worker at the heart of the woman question, Kollontai further interrogates the social implications of the essentialized woman worker’s doubly marginalized position as woman and proletariat. The woman worker, she argues, is uniquely oppressed in the form of “dependence” on others. This dependence is both economic and emotional. Given that the woman worker is doubly exploited on account of her gender and class, hers is a unique economic disempowerment by the capitalist system. Consequently, she is particularly dependent on those whose positions, on account of their gender or their class, are less marginalized.

Economic dependence, however, does not only have economic ramifications; the woman worker’s vulnerable situation of economic dependence on those in more privileged positions also changes the nature of her relationships. As an example, consider the case of a woman economically dependent on her husband. For such a woman, Simone de

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21 Barnett and Rivers, Same Difference, 13.
Beauvoir notes, “the successes and failures of her conjugal life are much more greatly important for her than for her husband.”\(^24\) De Beauvoir suggests, in other words, that because the woman is dependent economically, she has more at stake in her marriage’s success and is more vulnerable to its failure. Her economic dependence obliges her to please her husband because, as the wielder of power, his dissatisfaction poses a threat to her. Her marriage, then, is no longer a genuine relationship but an unequal partnership. Woman’s economic dependence, therefore, not only further marginalizes her, but pollutes the quality of her relationships by making them, at their core, about money. People on whom she depends economically are reduced, in the words of sociologist Charles Zueblin, to their “economic functions.”\(^25\) Because economic dependence requires that woman maintains lucrative relationships for survival, regardless of the quality of the relationships, the very concept of a relationship transforms into an economic transaction. This kind of dependence ultimately then results in the corruption of what Kollontai calls the woman worker’s “sphere of social relationships.”\(^26\) By using this term, Kollontai implies that the effects of the woman worker’s decaying relationships due to her economic dependence are not limited to her and her personal life, but include all those in her social sphere. Rhetorically, this has the advantage of making the woman question more critical. The woman question is not only a question for the woman worker, but for all who are in her social sphere. Kollontai invites those who might not identify with the essentialized woman worker personally to consider how her position nevertheless fundamentally affects their society. She consequently invokes a sense of social responsibility and examination. The subject of the woman question is transformed from the burdens carried by the woman worker because of capitalism to the very nature of Russian society based on capitalism.

After defining the woman question as the two-pronged economic and social subjection of the woman worker, Kollontai advocates addressing it as a class movement. When responding to the question, she suggests that women naturally group into divisions based on class as their experiences with the woman question differ according to class lines. The bourgeois feminist, she writes, considers it “a question of rights

\(^26\) Kollontai, “Social Basis of the Woman Question,” 179.
and justice” while the woman worker sees it as “a question of a piece of bread.”\(^{27}\) Her message is clear: the problem is an economic one, and the disconnect in class experience is an unbridgeable cavern. Having never experienced the double marginalization of the woman worker and the resulting dependence on others, the bourgeois feminist simply cannot see the class issues at the heart of the woman question faced by the woman worker. And while the bourgeois feminist’s concern with political power might, in some way, be beneficial to the woman worker within the existing capitalist system, without dismantling that system it is an insufficient response to the entirety of the problem.

Given these different understandings of the problem, as women enter the political arena, Kollontai writes, they “spontaneously” arrange themselves around different political “banners” on account of “class consciousness.”\(^{28}\) Her choice of the word “spontaneous” reflects the idea that women separate themselves by the class with which they identify not as the result of institutional pressures, but because of an intuitive understanding that class joins them together. Class, then, is more than a social construct or a name given to an interpretation of socioeconomic structures—it is a natural force that fundamentally shapes people. Kollontai thus engages in class essentialism, promoting the idea that there is something intrinsic that unifies all members of the proletarian class across all other intersecting identities. This unification cannot be constructed but is instead inherent in their very being. Kollontai labels this intuitive understanding as “class instinct.”\(^{29}\) Again, “instinct” connotes something ingrained in the very being. Because she names class instinct in the context of her discussion of the woman question, it is clear that she attributes this class instinct especially to the woman worker. Thus, she further develops the essentialism of the woman worker, who no longer merely inhabits a particular socioeconomic position, but now has a unique awareness of her location in the social strata. Rhetorically, this final furthering in the identity of the essentialized woman worker allows Kollontai to finally invalidate any remaining vestige of the bourgeois feminist’s female essentialism as a call for female solidarity. Having granted and relied on a limited definition of essentialism, Kollontai’s argument remained vulnerable to the bourgeois feminist’s calls for

\(^{27}\) Farnsworth, *Alexandra Kollontai*, 31.


\(^{29}\) Alexandra Kollontai, “Political Rights,” *Social Basis of the Woman Question*, Kindle.
solidarity on the grounds of any female essentialism. By promoting an equally broad class essentialism, Kollontai is able to counter with a call for proletarian solidarity. Furthermore, by combining expansive class essentialism with her limited female essentialism, Kollontai creates for the female proletariat an essentialist identity that privileges class and thus privileges the socialist movement. Ultimately, then, Kollontai’s efforts to bolster socialism at the expense of feminism are achieved through her construction of the essentialized woman worker.

Kollontai not only undermines the rhetorical basis of the bourgeois feminist’s essentialist appeal for solidarity, she rejects the possibility of female solidarity as a response to the woman question as faced by the woman worker. The “universal ‘women’s question,’” she writes, as defined by a “unity of objectives and aspirations . . . does not and cannot exist.”30 In other words, female solidarity in the face of the woman question is impossible because there is no common female experience. Class, not gender, determines experience and the consequent objectives and aspirations. Temporary cooperation might occur when the objectives and aspirations of the woman worker and the bourgeois feminist coincide, but, ultimately, a “united women’s movement” to emancipate the woman worker is impossible under capitalist structures.31 This impossibility, however, is not derived from the nature of woman, but exists because Russia is “a society based on class antagonisms.”32 Her argument against female solidarity is grounded in the concrete reality of the classed society in which they live. Kollontai’s critique of essentialist solidarity is not that the very idea itself is flawed, but that it ignores more important realities such as the economic factors that subordinate the woman worker and the social oppression she subsequently faces. Though Kollontai objects to the bourgeois feminist’s call for essentialist solidarity, despite class differences, she does not object to the concept of female solidarity built on female essentialism.

Kollontai’s rejection of the all-women’s movement should not be read as a rejection of the ideal to emancipate all women. In advocating for the emancipation of the woman worker, Kollontai moves for an all-encompassing female emancipation. The essentialized woman worker occupies the position most abused by capitalist economic structures. Her

32 Ibid., “Introduction.”
emancipation, therefore, signifies the total and complete emancipation of all of society from those structures. While the bourgeois feminist wishes to disregard class differences in order to falsely construct gender solidarity, Kollontai aims to use class differences to create the reality of commonality through a revolution that dismantles the structural causes of differences. The question of the woman worker and eliminating the economic and social barriers she faces is ultimately then the woman question, because it is the only way that real solidarity, unobscured by class differences, can come into being.

Kollontai’s emancipation, which aims to liberate women from the economic power structures on which their subjugation is built, is thus much more radical than the emancipation of the bourgeois feminist, which seeks limited class-stratified female equality within the capitalist system. Kollontai’s objective is made clear in her autobiography, where she writes that after considering the bourgeois feminist’s arguments, she concluded that “women’s liberation could take place only as a result of the victory of a new social order and a different economic system.” Notably, she does not qualify “women’s liberation” with any descriptor of class; Kollontai perceives the potential for emancipation for all women in socialist revolution. This is further evident in her later writing regarding her adoption of socialism from her bourgeois background, in which she writes that “women’s lot pushed me to socialism.” Kollontai suggests, therefore, that for her the draw of socialism was not economic but gendered; she saw in socialism the possibility of emancipation not just for the proletariat—and by extension proletarian women—but for all women regardless of class. Implicitly then, one can conclude that because female emancipation requires socialist revolution, it relies on male participation as well. Solidarity with the proletariat, not female solidarity, finally achieves female emancipation. The woman question, therefore, is not a question merely for women, because women alone cannot resolve it, least of all the woman worker who must urgently needs it addressed. Instead, the woman question is a measure of society—how it treats its most marginalized population, those who suffer the economic and social effects of capitalism most egregiously, and what it will do to improve that treatment.

33 Alexandra Kollontai, Social Basis of the Woman Question, Kindle.
34 Farnsworth, Alexandra Kollontai, 2.
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