

KOLLEKTIVAL

COMMUNISM
AND
THE FAMILY



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Communism and the Family

Alexandra Kollontai 1920

Women's role in production: its effect upon the family

Will the family continue to exist under communism? Will the family remain in the same form? These questions are troubling many women of the working class and worrying their menfolk as well. Life is changing before our very eyes; old habits and customs are dying out, and the whole life of the proletarian family is developing in a way that is new and unfamiliar and, in the eyes of some, "bizarre". No wonder that working women are beginning to think these questions over. Another fact that invites attention is that divorce has been made easier in Soviet Russia. The decree of the Council of People's Commissars issued on 18 December 1917 means that divorce is, no longer a luxury that only the rich can afford; henceforth, a working woman will not have to petition for months or even for years to secure the right to live separately from a husband who beats her and makes her life a misery with his drunkenness and uncouth behaviour. Divorce by mutual agreement now takes no more than a week or two to obtain. Women who are unhappy in their married life welcome this easy divorce. But others, particularly those who are used to looking upon their husband as "breadwinners", are frightened. They have not yet understood that a woman must accustom herself to seek and find support in the collective and in society, and not from the individual man.

There is no point in not facing up to the truth: the old family in which the man was everything and the woman nothing, the typical family where the woman had no will of her own, no time of her own and no money of her own, is changing before our very eyes. But there is no need for alarm. It is only our ignorance that leads us to think that the things we are used to can never change.

Nothing could be less true than the saying “as it was, so it shall be”. We have only to read how people lived in the past to see that everything is subject to change and that no customs, political organisations or moral principles are fixed and inviolable. In the course of history, the structure of the family has changed many times; it was once quite different from the family of today. There was a time when the kinship family was considered the norm: the mother headed a family consisting of her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, who lived and worked together. At another period the patriarchal family was the rule. In this case it was the father whose will was law for all the other members of the family: even today such families may be found among the peasantry in the Russian villages. Here the morals and customs of family life are not those of the urban proletariat. In the countryside, they observe norms which the worker has long forgotten. The structure of the family and the customs of family life also vary from nation to nation. Among some peoples such as the Turks, Arabs and Persians, a man is allowed to have several wives. There have been and there still are tribes where the woman may have several husbands. We are used to the fact that a young girl is expected to remain a virgin until marriage; however, there are tribes where it is a matter of pride to have had many lovers and where the women decorate their arms and legs with the corresponding number of bracelets. Many practices which might astonish us and which might even seem immoral are considered by other peoples to be quite normal and they, in their turn, consider our laws and customs “sinful”. There is, therefore, no reason to be frightened of the fact that the family is in the process of change, and that outdated and unnecessary things are being discarded and new relations between men and women developing. Our job is to decide which aspects of our family system are outdated and to determine what relations, between the men and women of the working and peasant classes and which rights and duties would best harmonise with the conditions of life in the new workers’ Russia. That which is in being with the new life should be

maintained, while all that is old and outdated and derives from the cursed epoch of servitude and domination, of landed proprietors and capitalists, should be swept aside together with the exploiting class itself and the other enemies of the proletariat and the poor.

The type of family to which the urban and rural proletariat has grown accustomed is one of these, legacies of the past. There was a time when the isolated, firmly-knit family, based on a church wedding, was equally necessary to all its members. If there had been no family, who would have fed, clothed and brought up the children? Who would have given them advice? In days gone by, to be an orphan was one of the worst fates imaginable. In the family of old, the husband earns and ors his wife and children. The wife for her part is occupied with housekeeping and with bringing up the children as best she can. But over the last hundred years this customary family structure has been falling apart in all the countries where capitalism is dominant and where the number of factories and other enterprises which employ hired labour is increasing. The customs and moral principles of family life are changing as the general conditions of life change. It is the universal spread of female labour that has contributed most of all to the radical change in family life. Formerly only the man was considered a breadwinner. But Russian women have for the past fifty or sixty years (and in other capitalist countries for a somewhat longer period of time) been forced to seek paid work outside the family and outside the home. The wages of the "breadwinner" being insufficient for the needs of the family, the woman found herself obliged to look for a wage and to knock at the factory door. With every year the number of working-class women starting work outside the home as day labourers, saleswomen, clerks, washerwomen and servants increased. Statistics show that in 1914, before the outbreak of the First World War, there were about sixty million women earning their own living in the countries of Europe and America, and during the war this number increased considerably. Almost half of these

women are married. What kind of family life they must have can easily be imagined. What kind of “family life” can there be if the wife and mother is out at work for at least eight hours and, counting the travelling, is away from home for ten hours a day? Her home is neglected; the children grow up without any maternal care, spending most of the time out on the streets, exposed to all the dangers of this environment. The woman who is wife, mother and worker has to expend every ounce of energy to fulfil these roles. She has to work the same hours as her husband in some factory, printing-house or commercial establishment and then on top of that she has to find the time to attend to her household and look after her children. Capitalism has placed a crushing burden on woman’s shoulders: it has made her a wage-worker without having reduced her cares as housekeeper or mother. Woman staggers beneath the weight of this triple load. She suffers, her face is always wet with tears. Life has never been easy for woman, but never has her lot been harder and more desperate than that of the millions of working women under the capitalist yoke in this heyday of factory production.

The family breaks down as more and more women go out to work. How can one talk about family life when the man and woman work different shifts, and where the wife does not even have the time to prepare a decent meal for her offspring? How can one talk of parents when the mother and father are out working all day and cannot find the time to spend even a few minutes with their children? It was quite different in the old days. The mother remained at home and occupied herself with her household duties; her children were at her side, under her watchful eye. Nowadays the working woman hastens out of the house early in the morning when the factory whistle blows. When evening comes and the whistle sounds again, she hurries home to scramble through the most pressing of her domestic tasks. Then it’s oil to work again the next morning, and she is tired from lack of sleep. For the married working woman, life is as hard as the workhouse. It is not

surprising therefore that family ties should loosen and the family begin to fall apart. The circumstances that held the family together no longer exist. The family is ceasing *to be necessary either to its members or to the nation as a whole*. The old family structure is now merely a hindrance. What used to make the old family so strong? First, because the husband and father was the family's breadwinner; secondly, because the family economy was necessary to all its members: and thirdly, because children were brought up by their parents. What is left of this former type of family? The husband, as we have just seen, has ceased to be the sole breadwinner. The wife who goes to work earns wages. She has learned to earn her own living, to support her children and not infrequently her husband. The family now only serves as the primary economic unit of society and the supporter and educator of young children. Let us examine the matter in more detail, to see whether or not the family is about to be relieved of these tasks as well.

Housework ceases to be necessary

There was a time when the women of the poorer classes in city and country spent their entire lives within the four walls of the home. A woman knew nothing beyond the threshold of her own home, and in most cases had no wish to know anything. After all, in her own home, there was so much to do, and this work was most necessary and useful not only for the family itself but also for the state as a whole. The woman did everything that the modern working and peasant woman has to do, but besides this cooking, washing, cleaning and mending, she spun wool and linen, wove cloth and garments, knitted stockings, made lace, prepared – as far as her resources permitted – all sorts of pickles, jams and other preserves for winter, and manufactured, her own candles. It is difficult to make a complete list of all her duties. That is how our mothers and grandmothers lived. Even today you may still come across remote villages deep in the country, far

from the railroads and the big rivers, where this mode of life has been preserved and where the mistress of the house is overburdened with all kinds of chores over which the working woman of the big cities and of the populous industrial regions has long ceased to worry.

In our grandmother's day, all this domestic work was necessary and beneficial; it ensured the well-being of the family. The more the mistress of the house applied herself, the better the peasant or craftsman's family lived. Even the national economy benefited from the housewife's activity, for the woman did not limit herself to making soup and cooking potatoes (i.e. satisfying the immediate needs of the family), she also produced such things as cloth, thread, butter, etc. which had a value as commodities that could be sold on the market. And every man, whether peasant or worker, tried to find a wife who had "hands of gold", for he knew that a family could not get along without this "domestic labour". The interests of the whole nation were involved, for the more work the woman and the other members of the family put into making cloth, leather and wool (the surplus of which was sold in the neighbouring market), the greater the economic prosperity of the country as a whole.

But capitalism has changed all this. All that was formerly produced in the bosom of the family is now being manufactured on a mass scale in workshops and factories. The machine has superseded the wife. What housekeeper would now bother to make candles, spin wool or weave, cloth? All these products can be bought in the shop next door, formerly every girl would learn to knit stockings. Nowadays, what working woman would think of making her own? In the first place she doesn't have the time. Time is money, and no one wants to waste time in an unproductive and useless manner. Few working women would start to pickle cucumbers or make other preserves when all these things can be bought in the shop. Even if the products sold in the store are of an inferior quality and not prepared with the care of

the home-made equivalent the working woman has neither the time nor the energy needed to perform these domestic operations. First and foremost she is a hired worker. Thus the family economy is gradually being deprived of all the domestic work without which our grandmothers could hardly have imagined a family. What was formerly produced in the family is now produced by the collective labour of working men and women in the factories.

The family no longer produces; it only consumes. The housework that remains consists of cleaning (cleaning the floors, dusting, heating water, care of the lamps etc.), cooking (preparation of dinners and suppers), washing and the care of the linen and clothing of the "family (darning and mending). These are difficult and exhausting tasks and they absorb all the spare time and energy of the working woman who must, in addition, put in her hours at a factory. But this work is different in one important way from the work our grandmothers did: the four tasks enumerated above, which still serve to keep the family together, are of no value to the state and the national economy, for they do not create any new values or make any contribution to the prosperity of the country. The housewife may spend all day, from morning to evening, cleaning her home, she may wash and iron the linen daily, make every effort to keep her clothing in good order and prepare whatever dishes she pleases and her modest resources allow, and she will still end the day without having created any values. Despite her industry she would not have made anything that could be considered a commodity. Even if a working woman were to live a thousand years, she would still have to begin every day from the beginning. There would always be a new layer of dust to be removed from the mantelpiece, her husband would always come in hungry and her children bring in mud on their shoes.

Women's work is becoming less useful to the community as a whole. It is becoming unproductive. The individual household is

dying. It is giving way in our society to collective housekeeping. Instead of the working woman cleaning her flat, the communist society can arrange for men and women whose job it is to go round in the morning cleaning rooms. The wives of the rich have long since been freed from these irritating and tiring domestic duties. Why should working woman continue to be burdened with them? In Soviet Russia the working woman should be surrounded by the same ease and light, hygiene and beauty that previously only the very rich could afford. Instead of the working woman having to struggle with the cooking and spend her last free hours in the kitchen preparing dinner and supper, communist society will organise public restaurants and communal kitchens.

Even under capitalism such establishments have begun to appear. In fact over the last half a century the number of restaurants and cafes in all the great cities of Europe has been growing daily; they are springing up like mushrooms after the autumn rain. But under capitalism only people with well-lined purses can afford to take their meals in restaurants, while under communism everyone will be able to eat in the communal kitchens and dining-rooms. The working woman will not have to slave over the washtub any longer, or ruin her eyes in darning her stockings and mending her linen; she will simply take these things to the central laundries each week and collect the washed and ironed garments later. That will be another job less to do. Special clothes-mending centres will free the working woman from the hours spent on mending and give her the opportunity to devote her evenings to reading, attending meetings and concerts. Thus the four categories of housework are doomed to extinction with the victory of communism. And the working woman will surely have no cause to regret this. Communism liberates woman from her domestic slavery and makes her life richer and happier.

The state is responsible for the upbringing of children

But even if housework disappears, you may argue, there are still the children to look after. But here too, the workers' state will come to replace the family, society will gradually take upon itself all the tasks that before the revolution fell to the individual parents. Even before the revolution, the instruction of the child had ceased to be the duty of the parents. Once the children had attained school age the parents could breathe more freely, for they were no longer responsible for the intellectual development of their offspring. But there were still plenty of obligations to fulfil. There was still the matter of feeding the children, buying them shoes and clothes and seeing that they developed into skilled and honest workers able, when the time came, to earn their own living and feed and support their parents in old age. Few workers' families however, were able to fulfil these obligations. Their low wages did not enable them to give the children enough to eat, while lack of free time prevented them from devoting the necessary attention to the education of the rising generation. The family is supposed to bring up the children, but in reality proletarian children grow up on the streets. Our forefathers knew some family life, but the children of the proletariat know none. Furthermore, the parents' small income and the precarious position in which the family is placed financially often force the child to become an independent worker at scarcely ten years of age. And when children begin, to earn their own money they consider themselves their own masters, and the words and counsels of the parents are no longer law; the authority of the parents weakens, and obedience is at an end.

Just as housework withers away, so the obligations of parents to their children wither away gradually until finally society assumes the full responsibility. Under capitalism children were frequently, too frequently, a heavy and unbearable burden on the proletarian family. Communist society will come to the aid of the parents. In Soviet Russia the Commissariats of Public Education and of Social Welfare are already doing much to assist the family. We

already have homes for very small babies, creches, kindergartens, children's colonies and homes, hospitals and health resorts for sick children. restaurants, free lunches at school and free distribution of text books, warm clothing and shoes to schoolchildren. All this goes to show that the responsibility for the child is passing from the family to the collective.

The parental care of children in the family could be divided into three parts: (a) the care of the very young baby, (b) the bringing up of the child, and (c) the instruction of the child. Even in capitalist society the education of the child in primary schools and later in secondary and higher educational establishments became the responsibility of the state. Even in capitalist society the needs of the workers were to some extent met by the provision of playgrounds, kindergartens, play groups, etc. The more the workers became conscious of their rights and the better they were organised, the more society had to relieve the family of the care of the children. But bourgeois society was afraid of going too far towards meeting the interests of the working class, lest this contribute to the break-up of the family. For the capitalists are well aware that the old type of family, where the woman is a slave and where the husband is responsible for the well-being of his wife and children, constitutes the best weapon in the struggle to stifle the desire of the working class for freedom and to weaken the revolutionary spirit of the working man and working woman. The worker is weighed down by his family cares and is obliged to compromise with capital. The father and mother are ready to agree to any terms when their children are hungry. Capitalist society has not been able to transform education into a truly social and state matter because the property owners, the bourgeoisie, have been against this.

Communist society considers the social education of the rising generation to be one of the fundamental aspects of the new life. The old family, narrow and petty, where the parents quarrel and are only interested in their own offspring, is not capable of

educating the “new person”. The playgrounds, gardens, homes and other amenities where the child will spend the greater part of the day under the supervision of qualified educators will, on the other hand, offer an environment in which the child can grow up a conscious communist who recognises the need for solidarity, comradeship, mutual help and loyalty to the collective. What responsibilities are left to the parents, when they no longer have to take charge of upbringing and education? The very small baby, you might answer, while it is still learning to walk and clinging to its mother’s skirt, still needs her attention. Here again the communist state hastens to the aid of the working mother. No longer will there be any women who are alone. The workers’ state aims to support every mother, married or unmarried, while she is suckling her child, and to establish maternity homes, day nurseries and other such facilities in every city and village, in order to give women the opportunity to combine work in society with maternity.

Working mothers have no need to be alarmed; communist not intending to take children away from their parents or to tear the baby from the breast of its mother, and neither is it planning to take, violent measures to destroy the family. No such thing! The aims of communist society are quite different. Communist society sees that the old type of family is breaking up, and that all the old pillars which supported the family as a social unit are being removed: the domestic economy is dying, and working-class parents are unable to take care of their children or provide them with sustenance and education. Parents and children suffer equally from this situation. Communist society has this to say to the working woman and working man: “You are young, you love each other. Everyone has the right to happiness. Therefore live your life. Do not flee happiness. Do not fear marriage, even though under capitalism marriage was truly a chain of sorrow. Do not be afraid of having children. Society needs more workers and rejoices at the birth of every child. You do not have to worry

about the future of your child; your child will know neither hunger nor cold.” Communist society takes care of every child and guarantees both him and his mother material and moral support. Society will feed, bring up and educate the child. At the same time, those parents who desire to participate in the education of their children will by no means be prevented from doing so. Communist society will take upon itself all the duties involved in the education of the child, but the joys of parenthood will not be taken away from those who are capable of appreciating them. Such are the plans of communist society and they can hardly be interpreted as the forcible destruction of the family and the forcible separation of child from mother.

There is no escaping the fact: the old type of family has had its day. The family is withering away not because it is being forcibly destroyed by the state, but because the family is ceasing to be a necessity. The state does not need the family, because the domestic economy is no longer profitable: the family distracts the worker from more useful and productive labour. The members of the family do not need the family either, because the task of bringing up the children which was formerly theirs is passing more and more into the hands of the collective. In place of the old relationship between men and women, a new one is developing: a union of affection and comradeship, a union of two equal members of communist society, both of them free, both of them independent and both of them workers. No more domestic bondage for women. No more inequality within the family. No need for women to fear being left without support and with children to bring up. The woman in communist society no longer depends upon her husband but on her work. It is not in her husband but in her capacity for work that she will find support. She need have no anxiety about her children. The workers’ state will assume responsibility for them. Marriage will lose all the elements of material calculation which cripple family life. Marriage will be a union of two persons who love and trust each

other. Such a union promises to the working men and women who understand themselves and the world around them the most complete happiness and the maximum satisfaction. Instead of the conjugal slavery of the past, communist society offers women and men a free union which is strong in the comradeship which inspired it. Once the conditions of labour have been transformed and the material security of the working women has increased, and once marriage such as the church used to perform it – this so-called indissoluble marriage which was at bottom merely a fraud – has given place to the free and honest union of men and women who are lovers and comrades, prostitution will disappear. This evil, which is a stain on humanity and the scourge of hungry working women, has its roots in commodity production and the institution of private property. Once these economic forms are superseded, the trade in women will automatically disappear. The women of the working class, therefore, need not worry over the fact that the family is doomed to disappear. They should, on the contrary, welcome the dawn of a new society which will liberate women from domestic servitude, lighten the burden of motherhood and finally put an end to the terrible curse of prostitution.

The woman who takes up the struggle for the liberation of the working class must learn to understand that there is no more room for the old proprietary attitude which says: “These are my children, I owe them all my maternal solicitude and affection; those are your children, they are no concern of mine and I don’t care if they go hungry and cold – I have no time for other children.” The worker-mother must learn not to differentiate between yours and mine; she must remember that there are only our children, the children of Russia’s communist workers.

The workers’ state needs new relations between the sexes, just as the narrow and exclusive affection of the mother for her own children must expand until it extends to all the children of the great, proletarian family, the indissoluble marriage based on the

servitude of women is replaced by a free union of two equal members of the workers' state who are united by love and mutual respect. In place of the individual and egoistic family, a great universal family of workers will develop, in which all the workers, men and women, will above all be comrades. This is what relations between men and women, in the communist society will be like. These new relations will ensure for humanity all the joys of a love unknown in the commercial society of a love that is free and based on the true social equality of the partners.

Communist society wants bright healthy children and strong, happy young people, free in their feelings and affections. In the name of equality, liberty and the comradely love of the new marriage we call upon the working and peasant men and women, to apply themselves courageously and with faith to the work of rebuilding human society, in order to render it more perfect, more just and more capable of ensuring the individual the happiness which he or she deserves. The red flag of the social revolution which flies above Russia and is now being hoisted aloft in other countries of the world proclaim the approach of the heaven on earth to which humanity has been aspiring for centuries.

