

The Struggle for Equal Rights (October 7, 1968)

Abstract

Film director Helke Sander, who co-founded the Action Council for the Liberation of Women in 1968, takes a critical look at the role of women in society and sharply attacks male members of the Socialist German Student League (SDS) for their stance on equality.

Source

The SDS—An Overblown Counterrevolutionary Ball of Yeast Dough^[1]

The women who took the stage were the sensation of the SDS delegates' conference in Frankfurt. When their arguments threatened to be drowned out by the general chaos of the conference, they used tomatoes to make themselves heard. konkret is reprinting an excerpt of the talk given by Helke Sander (Action Council for the Liberation of Women).

The separation between private life and social life keeps hurling the woman back into the individual conflict of her own isolation. She is still raised for private life, for the family, which, in turn, depends on the conditions of production that we are fighting against. The role she is raised into—the instilled feeling of inferiority, the contradiction between her own expectations and the demands of society—leave her with a perpetually guilty conscience for not being able to meet the demands placed on her or for having to decide between alternatives that mean neglecting vital needs whatever the case.

Therefore, most women remain apolitical because politics up to now has always been defined one-sidedly, and women's needs were never registered. Thus, women persisted in top-down appeals to authorities because they did not recognize that their demands represented a contradiction that might bust the system.

The groups most easily politicized are women with children. With them, the aggression level is the highest and the speechlessness the lowest. Women who can study at universities today owe that fact not so much to the bourgeois movement for liberation as to economic necessity. When these privileged women have children, they are thrown back into behavioral patterns they thought they had already overcome thanks to their emancipation. Their studies are abandoned or delayed; their intellectual development stagnates or at least slows because of the needs of husband and child. In addition, insecurity emerges because they could not manage to decide between being a bluestocking or a “woman for the house,” between either building up a career largely at the cost of their own happiness or becoming a woman-cum-consumer. In other words, it is those privileged women who learned that the bourgeois path to emancipation was the wrong one. They recognized that they could not use the means of competition to emancipate themselves; they recognized that the general principle of achievement has also become the determining factor within relationships; they recognized that the path to emancipation lies in the method through which it is sought.

These women realize, at the latest when they have children, that all their privileges are of no use to them. They are most likely to shed light on the rubbish pile that is social life, which is the same thing as bringing the class struggle into marriage and relationships. The man assumes the objective role of the exploiter or the enemy of the working class, which, subjectively, he does not want, of course, since it was forced upon him, in turn, by a performance society that imposes a certain type of role behavior.

We cannot solve the social oppression of women individually. We cannot wait for some time after the revolution, since a strictly political-economic revolution does not abolish repression in the private sphere, as has been proven in all socialist countries.

We are striving for living conditions that abolish the competitive relationship between men and women. This can only be done by changing the relations of production, and thus the relations of power, in order to create a democratic society.

Since the willingness to show solidarity and become politicized is greatest among women with children, since they feel the most pressure, we have focused our practical work thus far on their conflicts. This does not mean that we do not care about the conflicts of female students without children; it does not mean that we overlook the class-specific mechanisms of oppression despite the common characteristics of the oppression of all women; it simply means that we want to do the most effective work possible, and we need to create a starting point that allows us to address the issue systematically and rationally.

Since our initial efforts to tackle these conflicts with the SDS and within the SDS failed, we withdrew and worked on our own.

When we started working six months ago, most male comrades responded with mockery. Now they resent our having withdrawn. They are even trying to prove to us that our theories are all wrong; they are trying to pin on us that we claim that women do not need men for their liberation and all sorts of bullshit that we never said. They insist that they are oppressed, too, which we know. *We just no longer see why we should passively accept the oppression through which they are oppressing us.* We are here precisely because we believe that liberation is only possible in society as a whole. We have to state here that there are more women than men in society as a whole, and we think it is high time that we register the demands that derive from that fact, and we demand that women be included in future planning. If the SDS cannot manage to take the big step forward toward this insight, then we would of course have to resort to a power struggle, which we would prefer to avoid (it would be a waste of our energy). Because we will win this power struggle, since we are historically on the right side.

The helplessness and arrogance that we have to show here is not particularly fun.

We feel helpless because we actually expected progressive men to understand the urgency of our conflict. And our arrogance comes from being able to see what blockheads you are, because you can't see that, without any action on your part, people are suddenly organizing, [people] you never even thought about before, and in numbers that, were we workers, you would take as the absolute dawning of liberty.

Comrades, your meetings are unbearable. You are full of inhibitions, which you vent as aggression against other comrades who say something stupid or something you already know. This aggression comes only in part from political insight into the stupidity of the other camp. Why don't you finally say that you're worn out from last year, that you don't know how you can take the stress any longer of exhausting yourselves physically and mentally in political action, without connecting it with any pleasure. Before you start new campaigns, why don't you talk about how they should actually be implemented? Why are you all going out and buying yourselves Reich[2]? Why do you talk about class struggle here and about trouble having an orgasm at home? Is that not a subject for the SDS?

We don't want to go along with all this repression anymore. [...]

NOTES

[1] In the German original *Hefeteig*: yeast dough. Revolutionaries saw themselves as the catalyst that would change society. Helke Sander satirizes this notion by mentioning the "puffed up" quality of

yeasted dough, suggesting that the revolutionaries were also exaggerating their claims—trans.
[2] This is a reference to Wilhelm Reich’s *Function of the Orgasm*—trans.

Source: Helke Sander, “Der SDS – ein aufgeblasener konterrevolutionärer Hefeteig,” *konkret*, no. 12, October 7, 1968. Republished with author permission.

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