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The Struggle for Equal Rights (October 7, 1968)

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 for their stance on equality.

The SDS¹ – An Overblown, Counterrevolutionary Ball of Yeast Dough²

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

The separation between private life and societal life keeps hurling woman back into the conflict of her isolation, which she is forced to settle on her own. She is still raised for private life, for the family, which, in turn, is dependent upon the production conditions that we are fighting against. The role she is raised into, the acquired inferiority, the contradiction between her own expectations and the demands of society create a perpetually guilty conscience for not being able to meet the demands placed upon her or for having to decide between alternatives that mean neglecting vital needs in any 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. If these privileged women now have children, they will be thrown back into behavioral patterns

¹ German Socialist Student Union [*Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund*]. The German SDS was not affiliated with the SDS in the United States [Students for a Democratic Society], though both were involved in student protests – trans.

² In the German original *Hefeteig*: yeast dough. Revolutionaries saw themselves as the catalyst that would change society. Helga Sander satirizes this notion by mentioning the “airy” quality of yeasted dough, suggesting that the revolutionaries were also exaggerating their claims – trans.

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,” to either build up a career largely at the cost of their own happiness or to become a woman-cum-consumer. In other words, it is those privileged women who learned that the bourgeois route to emancipation was the wrong one. They have recognized that they could not use the means of competition to emancipate themselves; they have recognized that the general achievement principle has also become the determinant within relationships; they have recognized that the road to emancipation lies in the method through which it is sought.

These women notice, at the latest when they have children, that all of their privileges are of no help. 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 resolve the social oppression of women in an individual way. We cannot wait for some time after the revolution, since a strictly political, economic revolution does not eliminate repression in the private sphere, as has been proven in all socialist countries.

We are striving for living conditions that eliminate the competitive relationship between man and woman. This is only possible by changing production relationships and thus power relations, 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, up to now we have concentrated on their conflicts in our practical work. This does not mean that we think the conflicts faced by students without children are unimportant, and it does not mean that we are overlooking the class-specific mechanisms of oppression despite the common characteristics of the oppression of all women; it just means that we want our work to be as effective as possible and we have to create a point of departure that allows us to approach the problem 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 of the 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 any men for their liberation and all kinds of bullshit that we never claimed. 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 with respect to all of society. We have to make it clear that slightly more women than men are part of all of society, and we think it is high time that we register the demands that derive from that, and we demand that they be included in future planning. If the SDS cannot manage to take the big step forward to this insight, then we would of course have to resort to a power struggle that we would prefer to avoid (it would be a waste of our energy). Because we will win this power struggle, since we are on the right side historically.

The helplessness and arrogance that has to accompany our appearance here today is not much fun at all.

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 your having done anything at all, 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 actions, 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 Reich³? 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. [. . .]

Source: Helke Sander, "Der SDS – ein aufgeblasener konterrevolutionärer Hefeteig" ["The SDS – An Overblown, Counterrevolutionary Ball of Yeast Dough"], *konkret*, no. 12, October 7, 1968.

Translation: Allison Brown

³ This is a reference to Wilhelm Reich's *Function of the Orgasm* – trans.