AT SOME TIME in the future it will be necessary for a theoretical analysis to be made round an idea of revolutionary change in Australia which will take into account not only the material factors but also the ideas and attitudes of men and women which are among the interchanging forces which determine the maintenance or otherwise of these factors. Specific to this study would be the working out of the sex-roles which men and women play within the imposed structure of society and the way both suffer from this, yet help to cement or to break up this basic imposition.

The authors of this article are both Communist Party activists in Adelaide.
The Communist Party of Australia has not attempted such an analysis, and is primarily held back from even seeing the need for this by not only a firm acceptance of those imposed rules, but by an even more firmly cemented encrustation of capitalism — that of paternalism.

The indulgent complacency within which a paternalistic society traps and chains women's consciousness is reflected in the totality of the CPA's assignment of roles within its ranks — by the methods of work over the years which encompass its attempt to state a revolutionary position regarding women's place in society — and its failure, so far, to do this. To examine the position of men and women in society from a revolutionary point of view is it not necessary to review the means whereby revolutionary consciousness is constantly renewed? The answer must lie in the interpretation of Marxist theory in practical events, the theory and the practice giving rise to new theories, new practices.

There has been much written and printed by the various political groupings of the Left, particularly recently, on what is a revolutionary approach to this or that issue. But intrinsic to all this literature (with the notable exception of some material circulated by Women's Liberation groups) is a general acceptance of the old roles men and women play. There has been no examination of the subtle and mostly unconscious attitudes prevalent for so long in society as a whole, and regrettably and unavoidably still in the Left, and in the CPA — with which this article is concerned.

We have mouthed heroic truths and theorised with magnificent egaliterianism, and then charged off on a wrong premise — the premise of paternalism. What is needed that will clearly expose this subtlety, this paternalistic attitude? We need an examination at both theoretical and practical levels — through research and debate — of the real position of women in society today. We believe it will be found that the past approach of the CPA to women in society has been reflected in its attitude to women in the Communist Party. With benevolent consideration and paternal interest women members were set into a triangular framework which had as its apex the National Women's Committee (an appointed body), then via the various State (appointed) Women's Committees, to the base of the triangle, which found the majority honoured from time to time by being asked to cater at functions, work for money-raising events, as well as canvassing sales of Tribune, leafletting, acting as "chairman" at factory gate or area meetings, and often forming the backbone of the local Branch. Secretarial ability would sometimes mean an "advice" position of trust to a selected few, whose office and organising abilities made
them essential to various National and State Executives from time to time.

Women often rose to State Committee and Central Committee ranks. And of course it was necessary to have women on these committees if only to prove that the necessary attention was being paid to "work among women". Almost every State Conference report concluded on two notes — attention to "work among women" and to "youth work". The highest compliment paid to a woman was that "she thinks like a man; she’s a fine politician". And the ablest women from State and Central Committees, according to this kind of judgment, were appointed to the various women's committees. From this setting up of women's committees, we see the paternalistic thought pattern enacted in deeds.

We see a party committed to evaluating society from a revolutionary viewpoint encompassing half of the human species within an entirely bourgeois concept. We see men being treated as "people", able to act in any sphere, and any situation, in the way people in a revolutionary party should be able to act. But we see women as "things", and therefore needing a special type of structure within that same revolutionary party, because paternalistic society has always said that women have "special needs" and "special problems" and the revolutionaries have not questioned this in depth. Those women who did rise to eminence in party organisations were confronted by terrible contradictions within themselves, as well as within society, within their families, and within the party, the special contradictions inherent in being a woman. Very seldom have they stayed in these positions for any length of time, but when they have, the refining fires they have had to endure within themselves have produced people of tremendous strength of character and sustained intelligence, but also, sometimes, of singlemindedness and dogmatic approach.

And because there is such a total acceptance by both men and women of their role-playing, these "special needs" and "special problems" (so called) have been translated into a need for special organisation within the revolutionary organisation itself, which in itself negates the revolutionary character of the organisation. Thus we have not only the society paternalistically trapping and chaining people's consciousness into enacting special roles, but we have the very organisation, which for almost the past thirty years offered the only revolutionary alternative to that society, itself trapping and chaining women within its own ranks (and thereby further emphasising women's subordinate role) by providing a network within which they must work.
Are there any “men’s committees”? Of course not! Committees which happen to be made up of mostly men are open — in theory — to people (of both sexes). Yet what single issue anywhere in society today concerns women only?

For many years such issues as peace, the rights of children, provision for child care facilities, have often been synonymous with “work among women”. We have hampered and entrapped the development of women’s consciousness, kept them from the broad spectrum of understanding the struggle for revolutionary change by substituting a bourgeois ideal.

It is the function of bourgeois ideology to present the character and role of women as aspects of Nature itself. It should not be the function of a revolutionary organisation to perpetuate the habits of reformist or bourgeois thought. It should be possible for the freeing of consciousness within the revolutionary organisation to be a joint exercise in practice by both men and women. It should be possible to see the need for both men’s and women’s liberation. That the CPA has not yet attempted this indicates quite clearly that the male members accept their roles, laid down by the bourgeois society they wish to change, to overthrow, and take these roles blindly with them into their revolutionary party, which, of course, as we said before, negates the whole thing.

The example from history which illustrates the best-known attempt by women to free themselves from this imposed role, and to raise their eyes to the broader views of both sexes, is seen in the history of the suffragette movement. Where this struggle achieved success — i.e. in the right to vote, it received support from men (who also stood to gain from this). But, on the other hand, where the demands of the suffragettes became more basic, more revolutionary, then paternalistic society confined them to the women themselves, making them appear feminist, narrow, amazonian and comical.

This is not to say that this is how the party regards women’s struggles today, entirely. But where once paternal attitudes confined the movement so does the party today — not in a deliberate attempt to isolate the struggle, but from sheer neglect of the issues involved in the struggle.

Among the revolutionary left today, many young people are cynical of the characterisation of the CPA as a revolutionary organisation. Among other things, they question the attitude of a revolutionary party which still allows the organisation of women within its ranks on the basis of sex. Yet even these same young people are tending to act out exactly the same bourgeois roles in
their work as the CPA has done for so many years. Are there any more opportunities for the young women of the revolutionary left student organisations, for instance, to be much more than the coffee-makers, the “bird”, or the “chick”, comfortably there to complete the circle of the male ego?

Julet Mitchell says:

The problem of the subordination of women and the need for their liberation was recognised by all the great socialist thinkers in the 19th century. Yet today, in the West, the problem has become a subsidiary, if not an invisible element in the preoccupation of socialists. Perhaps no other major issue has been so forgotten.¹

It is fundamental to a revolutionary concept that women as people be not differentiated against on the basis of sex — or any other basis. To channel women off, at a top level, into women’s committees, is to deny the total acceptance of women’s ability to play a role equal to men in achieving revolutionary change. It is looking backward over the political shoulder, seeking solutions from the past as answers to today’s needs for women’s, and men’s liberation.

What is needed is for both men and women to grasp that ideological liberation from habits of the past brings self-recognition. No limiting factors should any longer be applied to women of the revolutionary left. Of course, if there is a need in some particular sphere, and the people involved are mostly women, then obviously a nucleus or committee may operate comprising mainly women as members. But this would mean that action has given rise to the need for such a committee, not the artificial imposition of a committee for members of one sex only, because it is the policy of an organisation already in existence.

What, then, do we see as the results of the establishment of committees for women within a revolutionary organisation?

1. Their very existence indicates that the male members of the organisation must feel, quite wrongly, that they are not capable or qualified to discuss, analyse, understand or take part in issues involving women and their liberation.

2. They tend to make the women feel, also wrongly, that they alone have the answers to their problems, and that men are impediments to this.

This in fact encourages the most subtle form of feminism and divisive tactics, however unconsciously.

The existence in bourgeois society of separate reformist working-class organisations for women have meant the continued frustration and isolation and futility of women’s struggle for liberation. The

reformist view that these organisations have a part to play may be quite acceptable for the Liberal Party and the Labor Party, who have their own separate women's committees, but the qualitative difference between their attitudes and the revolutionary attitude must be that women within the organisation must have exactly the same choice of fields of work as do the men. It is imperative that this happen, in order to overcome the legacy from the past.

It is an urgent task to break down the concepts which give constant life to old habits of thinking about women and their role, and about men and their role. We will not do this immediately. Those who seek some kind of personal liberation will find, at times, that it is much more comfortable to slip back into past thought patterns, because these are so much part of the fabric of the present too. We will not solve anything by simply doing away with women's committee's because their re-structuring can take place only as understanding grows of what women's liberation is all about. At present there is a demand for the existence of such committees, from men and women in the CPA. The debate about what constitutes a revolutionary party will, we believe, bring about the demise of many encumbrances from the past. Discussion arising from an understanding of personal alienation, as well as alienations within society will broaden the understanding for the need for liberation.

To help us overcome personal alienation, we should try to understand the role of the monogamous family in capitalist society and the tyranny implicit in its function, which no less affects members of political organisations than it affects all other members of society. Many of the faults in methods of work for women's liberation, as we have indicated before, stem from the fact that we are all victims of this tyranny, and consciously or unconsciously act out our roles within it. Some communists are still terrified of discussions on sexual freedom, the oppressive role of monogamy, abortion, prostitution, contraception, and sexual role-playing, the understanding of which are fundamental to the real liberation of all human beings.

If we would hope to be fully integrated (compassionate, imaginative) revolutionaries, to be able to see another person's point of view, and then be able to see why they have it, it behoves us to really assail the bastions of past prejudices and present institutions. What are these? For women, the mould of the maternal, female role is a mighty bastion to assail. Women, from their earliest years are instructed as the only sex capable of bringing up children, the people responsible for the care of the home (even if they work
outside the home); they have the care of their husbands, to give 
pre-school education to the child or children, and to fulfil the 
role of home nurse when necessary. In the course of all this, 
women repeat their own mould unconsciously, and that of their 
husband, by instilling their own sex-roles into their children. 
As Simone de Beauvoir has said, "One is not born, but rather, 
one becomes a woman".

For men, the paternal mould forces them into the pattern of 
the breadwinner, the protector and leader, the guide and aggressor, 
the thinker and careerist, and like women in this respect, they 
instil their own sex-roles into their children.

We are all familiar with the conflicts arising from these imposed 
sex-roles. Husbands are tied to (mainly) less educated, more 
frustrated, subjective partners for life, because these partners are 
less educated, powerless and without financial, social, physical, 
economic and emotional independence. They, in their turn, depend 
on women to care for their children, their home and for themselves. 
Here we have the essential conflict of the interdependence of 
unequal entities. The more we break down the accepted roles 
and inequalities, the less contradiction, the greater the unity, the 
closer the liberation of men and women.

How can we do this, particularly in the left (although we have 
no lien on the need)? Education and discussion in the widest 
sense involving close collaboration and alliance with the greatest 
possible number of organisations and individuals may help. Such 
an educative program should involve the close study of all current 
progressive, radical, revolutionary and Marxist classical literature. 
This should pre-suppose the publication of present and future 
progressive, radical and revolutionary theory, and pre-supposes the 
encouragement of the writing of such theory, especially that dealing 
with the personal realisation of the individual, and his or her 
role in society today.

Practical activity, and these are only the briefest suggestions, 
could include revolutionary demands of women, which by definition 
are also revolutionary demands for men.

1. Sexual independence.2

2. Contraception research for males and females — since the "Pill" seems 
to be by no means the last word on contraception.

3. Publicising and agitating for the need for research into sterilisation of 
men and women — related to the population explosion (or implosion).

4. Activity and research around abortion and the paternalistic repressive 
reforms that now exist, where such reforms have been gained.

2 Such works as Sexual Repression & The Family by Laurel Limpus, Adelaide 
Women's Liberation publication should be studied and evaluated.
5. Better understanding of the causes and results of prostitution and the role it plays in capitalist society.

6. The monogamous structure of the family and its implications in capitalist morality.

7. Direct attacks on sex-biased advertising, marriage manuals and mothercraft manuals.

8. Economic independence (the socialisation of housework; in fact, housework as a paid career). In direct relation to this are the questions of education for girls, and the careers available to them. Further, important law reforms should be considered, such as those governing inheritance, deserted wives (and/or husbands), pensions, and so on.

9. Social independence: what are the traditions regarding this, what do we accept, what discard, what from the point of view of the integrated revolutionary?

10. Political independence: here, of course the cry of the traditionalists is that “you’ll get equality and liberation after the revolution — let’s get on with the revolution: let’s change the objective conditions” . . . and of course, while you’re waiting for the changes in the objective conditions, you help to perpetuate those conditions. It is the undemocratic nature of the imposed sex-roles in society which will act as a brake on women’s ability to enter any political sphere in which they may be interested. This sentences half the population to entering a new state of society (i.e. socialism) as an already oppressed section of that society which will in itself act as a further brake on the new society.

A crucial mistake made by the CPA over the past thirty years was in thinking that the task of educating women, and raising their consciousness, was the task of the women themselves. It was male chauvinism which dominated the thinking that translated the struggle for raising women’s consciousness into one for women only — apart from important policy making at the top. It is still male chauvinism, within the framework of men’s sex-role in society, that is making men sentence themselves and the left generally, to an acceptance of past mistakes, and attempting to fit a vision of the new within the framework of the old. A revolution is more than a change of power: a personal revolution is needed. There is a need to understand alienation not only on a public level, but on a personal level. Until we begin to grapple with this task, to stop sniggering at women’s liberation and understand what it means, our alienations will restrict our effectiveness.