How, or if, feminism relates to the class struggle is an issue in both the women’s movement and in left politics generally. Views are wide ranging and varied and some in both fields argue for separatist politics. There are feminists who reject any form of co-operation or action with male dominated structures or movements, and sections of the left who claim that feminism splits the class and has nothing to do with class politics. Some of the latter work in the women’s movement with the aim of “converting women to revolutionary politics”.

The fact that working class organisations - the unions and political parties - and their actions are predominantly male oriented helps to obscure some of the issues involved.

There is little argument about the fact that real differences between the sexes do exist, though what they are and when and how they arose is contentious.

One of the earliest marxist contributions on this question was Engels’ “The Origin of the
Family, Private Property and the State”. It was a major contribution when sex differences were still regarded as primarily biological and natural. He showed that environment and production were significant factors in the emergence and development of the family and in determining the distribution of power between the sexes.

Yet Engels’ view that “The first class antagonism which appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman” is not supported by a great deal of evidence from what is now known about human history.

Much of the history of how the human race evolved is still hidden so there is no uncontestable theory as to how and why the differences between the sexes arose. While environmental and economic factors are obviously significant there is much missing evidence and many variations. This puts all theories about the origins of sex differentiation into the area of speculation.

However, we do know from the study of contemporary pre-literate societies that sex discrimination did exist prior to the development of classes. This shows that there was no inevitable link between discrimination based on sex and the emergence of economic class. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the removal of classes will not automatically eradicate sex discrimination.

One of the limiting factors in many of the studies made of women’s position in pre-literate societies is that much of the work was carried out by male scientists with explicit and unconscious male biases. This resulted in studies where the evidence about women was gathered, not from the women themselves, but from the men in the tribe concerned. Yet even some of these studies show that many of these women were far from being equal. The following extract from Our Primitive Contemporaries by G.P. Murdoch, Professor of Anthropology at Yale University, 1934, about the Eskimo people illustrates this:

“Among the polar Eskimos the status of woman is not high. She must observe rigid taboos during menstruation and she is definitely subordinate to her husband, though she is not devoid of rights. ‘There is only one thing in which the woman is not allowed any voice whatever and that is in sexual matters. Her husband can lend her to a friend for a night or longer without considering her wishes in the slightest, indeed without even consulting her, but she is severely condemned if she gives herself to another man without permission’.

“A husband often displays signs of tenderness towards his wife.... On other occasions, however, he treats her with what we should call brutality, for the alleged reason that, ‘if affection is to be kept alive, the woman must feel that the man is strong’.”

Similar conditions exist for women among other food gathering peoples. (See Woman, Culture and Society, published 1974 by Stanford University). This type of society pre-dates economic class, although the social position of women even then is clearly connected to her position in production and as a bearer of children.

There are many variations in the way the division of labor based on sex operates in pre-literate societies, but generally speaking the higher status is accorded to the work of the male, even though the same work may be designated to the female in another society (see Sex, Gender and Society by A. Oakley).

It is evident that in some pre-literate societies, at least, there existed a double sexual standard, whereby women were regarded as their husband’s property to be lent or passed on to other men. There also existed many forms of social denigration of women during menstruation as well as other taboos and rituals which effectively excluded women from the arenas of power. Male councils, ceremonies, taboos are the dominant culture and ritual is connected with economic and political activity.

There is, however, evidence of a female sub-culture - of women’s ceremonies and dances and, in some instances, open hostility and ridicule of the male. In some societies there is a specific ‘ritual of rebellion’ in which women assume the roles of men and express their rebellion in the form of abuse and obscene remarks and gestures. A form of activity not otherwise permissible for women. This could be regarded as latent feminism - the first tentative rejections of discriminations based on sex. How this awareness and resistance developed through the ages has mainly been hidden or misinterpreted. “Most opinions coming down to us from the past are those of victors”. (Not in God’s Image, by O’Faolain and Martines). In this contest the working classes and women, on a double score, suffered the most.

Marxists, too, have found it difficult to interpret the feminist movement and in the past have largely failed to recognise its
significance, even though it has never been acceptable to the establishment and many courageous and militant women have been persecuted and suppressed.

The British suffragette movement developed into a militant mass movement of women which took the lives of at least four of them. Over a seemingly simple struggle for law reform to allow women to vote, the British establishment unleashed severe repression and violence against those women, who came to total tens of thousands and included larger numbers of mill workers. The death toll included two women who were injured by police in a demonstration, one who died as the result of forced-feeding in jail and another who threw herself in front of the king’s horse at Epsom. Many more were injured in demonstrations and in jail. If militancy and courage were the criteria for revolution, then the suffragettes had little to learn from anyone. Although initially peaceful, the resistance to their demands, the arrests and forced-feeding of many women evoked a militant guerrilla type response which included arson, the destruction of mails, mass smashings of windows and bombings. Hundreds of women were arrested and were so brutally treated in prison that had not the First World War intervened, many more would have lost their lives.

The reasons for such a movement disappearing with the outbreak of war, or failing to develop politically, lies not only in the limitations of the movement itself, but also in the political opportunism and economic determinism of social democracy of the day.

“Feminism in this period was diffuse, inchoate and contradictory. It was not a clearly worked out ideology, but was rather a rebellion against the norms of bourgeois Victorian femininity. It extended into every area of cultural life and it had an international impact. The newly emerging socialist organisations were no exception. Their response to the feminist movement was varied and complex. They had no universally held position on either the ‘woman question’ or on the feminist movement and the reaction to the latter was somewhat different from a theoretical analysis of the origins of women’s oppression. Formal commitment to the emancipation of women was one thing. A practical and personal response to feminism as an autonomous movement was another.” (Hidden from History by S. Rowbotham).

The responses in the left ranged from attempts to integrate the right to vote into the concept of total commitment to the class struggle, to arguments that “Woman’s place is in the home .... once the means of production were conquered and controlled by the people woman would be restored to her true sphere.” By and large, the heritage of this and the years after the First World War was to make feminism a dirty word in the communist movement - a concept which persists today among some on the left - and to make feminists very suspicious of class politics.

Yet class politics explain one part of today’s reality and feminism another. The problem is to find the ways to integrate the struggle on both these fronts without the ‘woman question’ being buried at the bottom.

Though capitalism has intensified class, sex and race oppression it has perhaps also produced the conditions which make it possible for women to develop in a new way their double-fronted struggle. The demands for an end to the division of labor based on sex, for women to control their own bodies and take back control in the area of reproduction are no longer issues relevant only to a small number of women. The development of the pill and safe abortion and the introduction of modern technology in production has dramatically changed the way of life and the potential for all women.

To some feminists the ultimate answer to all problems is a type of feminist Shangri La. with not a single male in sight. To others it is a revolution waged by women alone, presumably for the good of all. For many women who have suffered some of the worst effects of sexism these solutions may be tempting. But the majority of women are unable to separate themselves from the total social problem of the human race, and there are times when other forms of oppression press on them harder than sexism.

A woman who spends eight hours a day at a factory bench and several more in the service of a family, the Black woman whose work opportunities are at the very bottom of the already restricted range of female occupations, the woman who left school at 14 as her parents did before her, and at 18 is a wife and mother trying to keep a family on unskilled man’s wage, may understandably have some difficulty in deciding whether her oppression is due to class, race, or sex. But, on the other hand, such women will not necessarily see the economic problem as the primary one.

Surveys and discussions have shown that
industrial working women are often more concerned about having to do the housework when they knock off, or having to shop in their lunch hour, or having to assume main responsibility for the family than they are about pay and work conditions. Nor do economics, for example inflation, affect women and men in exactly the same way. A woman’s right to a job is tenuous under capitalism - her right to work is not even universally accepted by the union movement. A woman worker’s wage usually is already less than for a man. So that a class response to inflation must take account of these differences. Otherwise what are regarded as “class” slogans, e.g. workers’ control and jobs for all are seen by many women (and men) as meaning “male workers’ control”, “defence of male workers’ jobs”, “work for all men”, and not directed at the problems of women. This isolates women and splits the class more effectively than any feminist demands.

A woman on the factory floor knows that if she wants to improve her working conditions she has to find the ways to unite with her male workmates to fight the boss - even though the same male workers may unite with the boss under other conditions to limit the woman’s work opportunities or to prove that he needs her job more than she does.

The only solution for that woman is to be able to fight on two fronts. Yet in practice this is extremely difficult as some recent industrial experiences show. It is almost impossible for women to sustain opposition to sexism in industries where they also rely on those men for support in struggles against the boss.

There are lulls in all struggles and times when forces withdraw to regain breath and fight again: but to fight sexism women need something more than the existing male dominated class organisations.

To enable them to fight on two fronts they require an autonomous women’s movement capable of giving theoretical and practical assistance in all aspects of their work and life. This means a feminist movement which recognises that political activism outside the feminist movement is not only valid but essential. It means giving practical assistance to the women who work in male dominated organisations, political parties, unions and job organisations to help build feminist groups in these organisations, to develop the activity of women and to help women inside and outside such organisations to exchange experiences. It means working out priorities in the women’s movement which take into account the particular difficulties of industrial women workers, and women who have children and are employed and/or housewives. It means developing ideas on what happens to women after they have come to women’s shelters, women’s houses, or health centres.

For women working in male-oriented movements and organisations, it involves recognising and struggling against the danger of submerging the interests of women for the “good of all”. Participation in, preservation and building of the autonomous women’s movement is a vital component of this struggle.

A women’s movement which aspires to unite all women who stand for a radically different society and the liberation of women, is essential to preserve for women the right to be the architects of their own liberation and to develop women’s confidence and abilities in a supportive and feminist environment. It can ensure that the struggle against sexism is an integral part of the socialist revolution.

With close to 40 per cent of the Australian work force women, the presence of such a movement in the work force and unions is vitally important for those who seek revolutionary change. In an era when women are becoming more and more conscious of their rights as women, any class organisation which does not confront sexism both in its practice and in the attitudes of its members jeopardises the unity of the class. Marxists have a particular responsibility in this respect.