

# **Rosa Luxemburg's Contribution to the Movement of Women's Emancipation**

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The major difficulty encountered in the process of studying Rosa Luxemburg's viewpoint of women's emancipation movement is that she didn't make any specific or focused account of it. Her view on women's emancipation movement was that women were the fundamental force of the socialist revolution, that their emancipation movement was a part of the proletariat's emancipation movement and the two are interlinked.

Since 15<sup>th</sup>, January, 1919 when Rosa Luxemburg was murdered, there have been a great many works about her. However, few of them are about her thoughts of women's emancipation movement. Particularly, in the two biographies of her by the English scholar, Pierre Nettel, published in 1966, there was no mentioning of Luxemburg's ideas about women's emancipation. In addition, the biography author argued, "Unlike her friend Clara Zetkin, Rosa Luxemburg was not interested in the noble movement of women's rights. She believed that the low status of women was a characteristic of the society, just like the movement of anti-Judaism, that it could not be abolished until socialism arrived, and that there was no need to trifle over women's movement".<sup>1</sup> Some researchers agree that Rosa Luxemburg was not interested in women's movement. We, however, hold a different opinion. Although she didn't write any specific works or papers on this issue, she had expressed some incisive expositions and ingenious opinions.

When studying in Zurich University in Switzerland, Rosa Luxemburg attended feminists' gathering and began to involve in the women's movement. When she moved to German in 1898 for the revolutionary cause, she was already one of the top leaders of the Social Democratic party of the Kingdom of Poland. At first, they were not willing to admit her to the party caucus and tried to arrange her to work on women's problems. Luxemburg refused solemnly, saying that she wasn't belittling the importance of the women's problems, but that her interest and work area shouldn't be confined to women's problems and she was looking for a career which was more fulfilling and could give full pay to her talent and ability. To her, revolution was fundamental for the resolution of some problems and women's emancipation was one of them.

**I. Women should be emancipated from the role of the family slave.**

The late 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century's German social life was enshrouded by a gloomy and ruthless marriage and family concept. In the bourgeois families, the husbands were the dictators, supporters and decision-makers of the affairs concerning laws and properties, while women were under the supervision of their fathers, husbands or brothers all their life. If housewives and mothers had some spare time to their own after the house chore, and if they had aesthetic inclinations, they could fulfill themselves by pursuing art, like painting, writing, playing the musical instrument and so on. These activities were morally acceptable. On the contrary, it was considered indecent for them to leave home, come out in the public and advocate for women's emancipation.

Rosa Luxemburg broke away from the traditional view, maintaining that women should be freed from the household enthrallment and be given the equal right with men. She firmly demanded sex equality and the right for women to work outside. As stated in an article of Leipzig Daily, in 1903, "with the political liberation of women, the political and spiritual life of the German Social Democratic Party will represent a fresh and powerful atmosphere which is to disperse the present vulgar and stifling patriarchal practice and remove the old habits of the party members."<sup>ii</sup>

In his discourse of the correlation between the family pattern and the production pattern, Grosse, the bourgeois scholar declared that history begins and ends with the individual family and men's domination. Rosa Luxemburg contended, "In the view of many vulgar guys and the bourgeois civil law, whoever owns bread rules the house..... The history of the family pattern is indeed the history of women's enslavement".<sup>iii</sup> She sharply pointed out the hypocrisy of 'equality of men and women' preached by Christianity and bourgeois scholars, believing that in the capitalist society, there was no genuine equality for women and that it wasn't until the victory of the proletariat revolution that they could be liberated from the household enslavement.

In a speech of May, 1912, Luxemburg said, "Today, millions of women are making profit as men do for the capitalists in the factories, workshops, ranches, work houses, offices and stores. Therefore, in the strictest scientific sense of the modern society, they are productive force. Every day there is an increase of a large number of women to be exploited by the capitalist system and industry and technology make new space for women in the exorbitantly profitable capitalist factories. Hence every day and every step of the industrial progress is laying a solid foundation for women's equal political rights. The party and the trade union should free women from the tedious and narrow life and from the distressing and trivial chores of household management. The class struggle of the proletariat has broadened their horizons, quickened their minds, developed their thinking and led them to a greater task. Socialism has brought a rebirth to their minds. Therefore, it's no doubt

that they would become competent workers for the capital.”<sup>iv</sup>

## **II. Advocacy for marital freedom**

As to marriage, Luxemburg held that people should marry by love, not by force and that they should help their loved ones to be independent, rather than confine them with marriage. On the road of marriage, what the husband and the wife pursue is not the division of labor typically practiced by ordinary families, but rather shared spirit and room for thinking.

Luxemburg met Leo Jogiches in 1891 when she was studying at Zurich University. Out of common revolutionary ideal and aspiration, they maintained an intimate relationship for 15 years. But they began to have problems with their relationship in 1907 and finally broke up. Luxemburg insisted that women should maintain independence and self-determination. In order to enter Germany to carry out the workers' movement, she registered (falsely) marriage with a German citizen named Gustav Lubeck, and obtained the German citizenship.

Thus, it was never possible for her and Leo to be legally united. The two lovers were long separate in two different countries and they had to hide their loving affairs from the public because she had a “legal husband”. In this circumstance, how to handle her love and marriage in a proper way was a tough problem for her. On the one hand, she, like everybody else, wanted a happy and peaceful family in which she could have tidy sitting rooms, book-loaded shelves and an adorable baby and in which she and her love could hang together and enjoy their youth. On the other hand, her loving and marital concept had to put the revolutionary need at the priority. She asked Leo to move to Berlin many times, but was all declined. Thus she believed that there was no need for their intimate relationship to last. After a long-time emotional suffering, she wrote to him and said, “I will take actions at once to make it easier for you to break up. That is to say, I will not write to you, or form a new relation with you in the letter so that it will not affect your feeling.”<sup>v</sup> Fortunately, they still maintained their comradeship after split-up. Luxemburg was very independent on her own marriage.

Clara Zetkin, a close friend of Luxembourg, was a well-known woman activist and revolutionary of the International Communist Movement. Her second marriage with Sandrel was problematic for many years for she didn't agree to divorce her 18-year-old-younger husband. Luxembourg was displeased with Clara Zetkin's handling of her marriage, saying, “It shattered not only my tranquility but also my friendship”. Luxembourg believed that the marriage is formed on a mutual basis, that husband and wife should give each other freedom and that when their love has come to a dead end, they should get it over promptly, rather than waver on it and that people should not be confined by marriage. In her opinion, women are inherited with two basic innate key qualities, kindness and self-esteem. She said, “If I feel by

intuition that he doesn't love me any more, I will immediately fly away like a stricken bird".<sup>vi</sup>

From what Luxemburg said, we can see her viewpoint on marriage was that husband and wife should respect and be tolerant of each other and give each other freedom instead of treating the other as his or her slave. She offered to criticize Clara Zetkin, her congenial companion who fought with her in the same line that she shouldn't preach sex equality in public but implement inequality at home. Then, Clara Zetkin accepted her and others' kind criticism and ended her marriage with her second husband.

### **III. Criticizing the bourgeois feminist movement and striving for proletarian women's rights to vote.**

Starting from the time of the American Civil War and the French Revolution, the Feminist Movement was part of the bourgeois democratic revolution. The entry into the age of machinery mass production created conditions for women to participate in the social labor. Women began to walk out of their houses and enter factories. But the fetter of the feudal system and traditional ideas prevented large numbers of women from taking part in the social labor and hindered the development of the capitalism. In this background, the feminist movement representing the bourgeois benefit came up. They fought against the fetter of women by the feudal system and tried to achieve equality of men and women in the capitalist system.

But there was a great limitation to the capitalist feminist movement. Luxemburg believed that most of the capitalist women fought like lionesses in the battle against "male privilege", but once they won the right to vote, they would behave like meek lambs in the conservative and missionary camp.

Luxemburg believed that fighting for the voting right is not merely the mission of women but the common class mission of proletarian workers and women. She appealed women to call for and fight for the voting right and made it a necessary condition to realize class struggle and emancipation of women. Fighting for the right to vote is a necessary step for educating and leading the proletariat from one struggle to another.

In order to achieve the goal of women's emancipation, Luxemburg and Clara Zetkin, the leftist leaders of Germany Social Democratic Party, together with the socialist women from every country realized the increasing importance of strengthening the international union of women. They not only exchanged their experiences of proletarian women's campaigns at the Second International Congress, but also expressed their hope to found international women's organization.

Luxembourg addressed at the first international socialist women's representative convention, held in Stuttgart, in August 1907. She analyzed the state of every country's Socialist Party working for itself in the cause of the Women's Emancipation, and urged the representatives from different countries to strengthen the solidarity of the international socialist women's movement. The convention held a principled class view on women's suffrage that it is an organic part of the cause of the working class.<sup>vii</sup>

Luxembourg often encouraged women around her to actively participate in political activities. In a letter to Louise Kautsky in 1907, she asked her to remain active in women's movement. She also encouraged other women to go in for women's movement. After the breakout of the World War I, women performed as a revolutionary force in the anti-war campaign.

During the war, Luxembourg continued the anti-war campaign on the newspaper of *Equality*, encouraging working women and the general workers alike to oppose the war and demand peace. At Clara Zetkin's suggestion, the International socialist woman convention was to be held in March 1915, in Bern, capital of the neutral country, Switzerland. But the government abruptly arrested ailing Luxembourg just before the convention and threw her into prison. With Clara Zetkin and her own efforts, the International socialist woman convention was convened in March, 1915 as planned and resolutions were passed to protest against this imperialist war which afflicted pain and suffering on the working people.

Luxembourg was a consistent activist of socialist women's movement. She deeply understood that only when they seized the state power, could Proletariat realize the ultimate goal of socialism defeating capitalism. Proletarian women played an important role in this process. Without their participation, the revolution could never succeed.

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i <http://www.workersliberty.org/node/4968>

ii *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, edited by Peter Hudis & Kevin B. Anderson, New York, Monthly Review Press, 2004, p236

iii *The Introduction to National Economy*, Rosa Luxemburg, translated by Peng Chenshun, SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1962, p104

iv *Selected Political Writings of Rosa Luxemburg*, edited and introduced by Dick Howard, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971, p219.

v *On Russian Revolution•Collection of Letters*, Rosa Luxemburg, translated by Yin Xuyi, Guizhou People's Press, 2001, p179

vi *On Russian Revolution•Collection of Letters*, Rosa Luxemburg, translated by Yin Xuyi, Guizhou People's Press, 2001, p 251

vii *The History of the Second International (Volume II)*, [Soviet Union] edited by Zuberk, translated by the Foreign Languages Department of Nankai University, People's Press, 1984, p550