

# **BLOCK VI**

**ALEXANDRA  
KOLLONTAI**

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## INTRODUCTION

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This is the last block in this course that discusses ideas of Alexandra Kollontai who was born in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. She applied theoretical tools of Marxism to find solutions of problems faced by women in general and proletarian women in particular. She was instrumental in bringing important reforms in post-revolution Russia which benefited the working class women. As a Marxist, she believed that women's liberation was inseparably concurrent to emancipation of men and women from capitalism. She always spoke against middle class and bourgeoisie feminism.



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## UNIT 13 SOCIALISATION OF HOUSEWORK\*

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### Structure

- 13.0 Objectives
- 13.1 Introduction
- 13.2 Life, Work & Philosophy
- 13.3 Understanding Gender and Work
- 13.4 Kollontai's contribution to the Woman Question
- 13.5 Kollontai's views on Socialisation of Housework
- 13.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 13.7 References
- 13.8 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

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### 13.0 OBJECTIVES

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The aim of this unit is to familiarise you with the life, philosophy and work of Alexandra Kollontai especially with a focus on her ideas on the woman question and her prescription of socialisation of housework. After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- Know the life, work and philosophy of Alexandra Kollontai
- Understand the idea of work and gender
- Describe socialization of housework

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### 13.1 INTRODUCTION

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In this unit, we shall explore the ideas of a socialist and feminist revolutionary Alexandra Kollontai. Her ideas and discussions on the woman question were far ahead of time and also have contemporary relevance. She once said “I am a person before I am a woman”. These words convey the core of her philosophy which is liberation of women from the socially constructed confines of family, marriage or any other such impositions on her personhood. She fought for recognition and realisation of women's personhood. She was fervently criticised for her radical ideas. Nonetheless, any discussion on women's issue must not ignore her contribution to feminist debate.

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## 13.2 LIFE, WORK AND PHILOSOPHY

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*Alexandra Mikhailovna Domontovich* was born in 1872 in St. Petersburg in a rich aristocratic family. She shared a deep bond with her father who served in the military. She loved to discuss history and politics with him. Her mother who most of the time could not devote time for her was a demanding person. She forced Kollontai to do everything in an order. She was home schooled and was a very good student. She could speak multiple languages. When she expressed her desire to join university her parents hired professors to teach her from home as they feared influence of revolutionary ideas on her. She aspired to be a writer. She was forced into an arranged marriage at the age of sixteen, but she refused to acquiesce. Instead, she rebelled by marrying her cousin *Vladimir Kollontai*, an impoverished army officer. Her parents were very cautiously supportive of this marriage. Alexandra was a very independent minded person hence; soon, she refused to be imprisoned by the confines of family and marriage. Her marriage was short-lived and later she maintained that "The happy existence of housewife and consort were like a 'cage' to me". She also said (in 1926), "Although I personally raised my child with great care, great passion, motherhood was never the kernel of my existence". She, on the contrary, always passionately felt for social questions. This was mainly because of her close interaction during her childhood with kids belonging to the peasant and the proletarian class. She left for Zurich, Switzerland in 1898 to study Marxism leaving behind her husband and her son Misha. However, she never dropped her husband's surname for the rest of her life. She was not ready to accept the docile role imposed on her in a marriage system; hence, she chose to set herself free.

Alexandra Kollontai then fully plunged herself into the *Socialist Democratic Movement*. She participated in the revolutionary activities of 1905. In the following years when the socialist movement was continuously growing, she travelled throughout Europe and also met other Marxist thinkers such as *Rosa Luxembour*g and *Georgii Plekhanov*. As a Menshevik in the beginning, she conceptualised and wrote about the woman question. Between 1907 to 1917 she wrote extensively and delivered lectures on the woman question, while she was in exile. Later, she turned to become a Bolshevik in 1906 mainly because of her anti-war ideas. Kollontai's philosophical ideas about women and the family developed out of her personal experiences with marriage and motherhood, maintains *Barbara Evans Clements*. Though she never accepted the traditional roles of a woman she always longed for affiliation which forced her to search for heterosexual relationships. However, she admitted that she could never get genuine intimacy. She lamented that, women are objectified more than often by men, viewed as mere sexual objects and are not treated as equal intellectual partners.

Women's emancipation from social exploitation and ignorance were the primary causes for which she worked all her life. As a Marxist, she believed that women's liberation was inseparably concurrent to emancipation of men and women from

capitalism. She always spoke against middle class and bourgeoisie feminism. She is *infamously* known for her *Glass of Water Theory of Sex*. The theory states that sex should be as easy and uncomplicated as drinking a glass of water. Kollontai's ideas are expressed in her writings, *The Social Basis of the Women's Question*, *The International Proletariat and War*, *Communism and Family*, *Sexual Relations and the Class Struggle*, *The Soviet Woman – a Full and Equal Citizen of Her Country* and *Workers' Opposition*. Kollontai expounded her ideas through her numerous pamphlets, books, speeches and writings in which she proposed innovatory theories about the role of women and the importance of sexual and personal relationships in a revolutionary new society. She died in Russia in 1952, unaware that her ideas were to gain her international recognition from the new generation. It is not widely known that she wrote a fiction *novel* titled, *Love of Worker Bees*. In this novel she describes people's everyday lives during and after the Bolshevik Revolution. Though she had a lot of intellectual differences with Lenin, he described her as an excellent orator and a brilliant propagandist. She was the only woman member in the central committee in August 1917 and became the Commissar of social welfare in the *first* Soviet government. Kollontai later headed the central women's department (*Zhenotdel*) of Soviet Russia as a foremost leader of the Russian Social Democratic women's movement. She held important diplomatic positions, though it was never her first choice of occupation.

However, *politics of memory* and *selective history writing* has done a lot of *injustice* to the intellectual contribution on Kollontai to the questions of women. This can be very well understood from Lenin's writing titled, *On the emancipation of women* which barely makes any reference to the questions raised by Kollontai during those days. She was also very much vocal about the plight of Russian working women and failure of the Socialist Democratic Party and its leaders to recognise the significance of the same. She spoke and wrote in favour of the Workers' Opposition, which was demanding power to the workers, and not to the Communist Party bureaucracy. Few Central committee members also tried to expel her from the party on grounds of factionalism, but it was all in vain. Though, later she was effectively exiled in 1923 to take up diplomatic assignments. She was isolated and fervidly criticised for her radical ideas on family, love and sex. Many leaders of socialist democratic movement saw diversionary danger of feminism in it. But it definitely carved a future road for *Socialist Feminism*.

Kollontai was an exceptional socialist feminist figure very rarely studied in detail. She can be considered as a pioneer of the struggle for socialist women's liberation. Rebellious, radical and reflective are the apt words that very well define Kollontai. In the sections that follow, we shall explore her ideas on the woman question, housework or domestic labour and socialisation of housework.

## Check Your Progress Exercise 1

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your progress with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

1. Briefly discuss Kollontai's life and philosophy.

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### 13.3 UNDERSTANDING GENDER AND WORK

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It was utopian socialist *Charles Fourier* who *first* talked about equal rights for women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Women emerged as a distinct group demanding equality. The articulation of the woman question happened around this time to seek equal share of fruits of Enlightenment, Renaissance and Reformation. However, engagement with the questions of women was *not* the same in non-western societies or post-colonial societies. Despite many internal debates within the feminist discourse all feminists agree that all societies have a gender based hierarchy in which women are considered inferior. They are unfairly discriminated, subjugated and treated unequally on the basis of a socially constructed idea called gender. Biological or natural differences are only very minor between men and women. Therefore, *Simone de Beauvoir* a French feminist famously said that, "One is not born, but becomes a woman."

Let us now try to look at a very primary idea of work through the lens of gender. Work done by men and women is one of the defining aspects of any society. Men in the patriarchal societies have come to decide what work women can do and whether it belongs *inside* the household or *outside* of it. Women are further constricted through norms of the society which limit their access to resources and even freedom over their own bodies. This makes them entirely dependent on men. Sexual division of work/labour either in the family, in the work place, or in bed is very much normalised in most of the societies. For example, men go out in the public space to earn, participate in economic activities, play role in political circles etc. Whereas women mostly are confined in the four walls of a household doing cooking, cleaning, rearing up children, taking care of elderly etc. This sexual division of labour is at the root of the problems women face. The work done by men is valued more in comparison to what women do. This inequality has spilled over in the public space as well where today men and women both work. So there are some jobs that are *traditionally* considered as *feminine* for instance, a teacher, a nurse, a receptionist etc. This distinction based on sex makes the process of humanisation of men and women very complicated.

Traditionally, Women have to do *two* types of work; one is inside the household and the other is outside the household (as part of economy or public space). Hence, their work need to be contextualised within a broader socio-economic

setup in which household and economies are positioned. We also need to understand how the idea of work is defined. There are broadly *two* types of work done by men and women. One is *paid* work and the other is *unpaid* Work. Paid work falls mostly in the domain of economy and is considered productive for the economy. Whereas unpaid work such as household chores, child care, care of the elders etc are normally considered unproductive and hence, not counted as part of the economy. *Charnie Guettel* maintained that what women do as housework is considered external to the formal economy. Work performed outside the home is valued as productive as they earn profit in a capitalist society. While the work that women do at home is regarded as unproductive. This also results in women's double subordination due to the significance attached to the work men do.

Different approaches and perspectives emerged to find answers to this Gordian knot. For instance *Liberal feminists* speak from the standpoint of introducing reforms in the existing liberal capitalist societies. However, the *Marxist* and *Socialist Feminists* treat the bourgeoisie societal structure as the root cause of this sexual division of work. Despite, this primary consensus even among Marxist feminists there are *discrepancies* in the way work or labour done by men and women is looked at within the Marxist approach. Marx and Engels did *not* treat the woman question *independent* of the fight against the entire capitalist structure. They continued to believe in the idea of biology is destiny when it came to discuss the idea of work differently. It is in this context that the work done by Alexandra Kollontai is extremely important to consider. She tirelessly worked for the articulation of the woman question and objected to the gender blindness of the Marxists thinkers of her time to the issues of working class women. She maintained that this subordination of women can be overcome by *socialist liberating* strategies only. She opined that housework needs to be socialised and the gender roles have to become more flat with equitable distribution of work.

## Check Your Progress Exercise 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your progress with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

1. Discuss the idea of work through a gendered lens.

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## 13.4 KOLLONTAI'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE WOMAN QUESTION

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Alexandra Kollontai, a socialist feminist revolutionary figure in Russian history has articulated the woman question ( See *Social Base of the Woman Question*, 1909) very well by raising some fundamental concerns that were ignored by socialist theorists of her time. She very clearly maintained that women's questions required not only political liberation or social reforms, but also needed economic independence of women. She also argued that the women question must address the question of women's independence from *domestic* and *marital* situations. Women cannot be truly free unless family ceases to be a closed unit, she believed. She firmly believed that Women's rights were closely related to the rights of the working class as a whole. In her opinion, *only* Marxism and socialism had the potential to liberate all women and *particularly*, working class women. Kollontai was proved correct in 1917, when working class women began *demonstrations* on the International Women's Day that led to the *end* of autocracy in Russia. Kollontai strived to bring together Marxism and Feminism. She argued that women were not only oppressed by economic conditions, but by socio-cultural factors as well. In the introduction to *The Social Basis of the Women's Question*, she asked, "How can we make sure that the female section of the population of Russia also receives the fruit of the long, stubborn and agonisingly difficult struggle for a new political structure in our homeland?" In essence, what is the relationship between women and social revolution? She *disagreed* with the bourgeoisie or middle class feminism for it failed to recognise the exploitative patriarchal capitalist social structure. She called for the liberation of the working class as a whole. She also recognized that issues that primarily affect a women required *specific* resolutions. Kollontai's major contribution is her focus on Woman's role as a *housewife* and as a *mother* which also sets her apart from other workers. She developed on the ideas of *Marx*, *Bebel*, and *Engels* concerning the oppression of women. She maintained that *legislative reforms* in the *industry* could address the conflictual relationship between women at workplace as professional labour and women in private spaces as mothers, wives or home makers. Post revolution, Russia realised that women have not been actively engaged in party activities and are also less visible in party ranks. Kollontai since long was working to establish separate bureau for women within the party. Lenin too shared this idea with her. Later a *separate* bureau named *Zhenotdel* was created in 1919 as part of the central committee. Alexandra Kollontai became the first person to head the same. She also served briefly as Commissar of Social Welfare. The efforts of Zhenotdel to raise socialist consciousness among women proved expedient. During this time, she worked to introduce important reforms in *labour legislation*. For instance, eight-hour work day, social insurance, pregnancy leave for two months before and after birth, time at work to breast-feed, free medical care, prohibition of child labour and night work for women. Kollontai insisted that women who served society by providing it with future workers deserved collective support. Kollontai also had proposed *government protection*



for mothers in the form of *state subsidies*. She also had wished for creation of *General Insurance Fund* to replace alimony given to divorced women. Entire working adult population would contribute to this fund, she suggested. This would make it possible to provide for the cost of children's crèches and homes, homes for mothers in need, support to single mothers unable to work and for their children. However, her idiosyncratic proposal was rubbished as an offshoot of romantic socialist utopia by some of her own followers. Along with this, there were also efforts made in that time to bring in equality between husband and wife, civil registration of marriage, easy divorce, abolition of illegitimacy and ending of the wife's obligation to take her husband's name.

Alexandra Kollontai made pioneering contribution to the woman question by focusing on *psychological* and *mental* aspects of women's issues along with economic aspects as espoused by socialists. She criticised the *basic* unit of a capitalist system i.e. *Family* and *Marriage*. Family was an oppressive unit and so was marriage in her opinion. These units treat women as inferior and establish the rule of man over woman. Family and Marriage foster a sense of ownership which aids in continuation of subordination of women. Her socialist solution to woman's subjugation was the eventual *dissolution* of the institution of marriage and the family. "To become really free woman has to throw off the heavy chains of the current forms of the family, which are outmoded and oppressive" said Kollontai. Once this breaks, the tasks and responsibilities attached to family and marriage will be transferred to a *collective/commune*. She supported the idea of communal raising of children and providing safe collective environment to pregnant women. She basically attempted to apply Marxist ideas and tools *outside* the domain of merely labour and production. It is also important to note that *not* all socialists identified with the issues raised by Kollontai's exposition of the woman question. She believed that only communism can liberate women from marriage, motherhood, and financial dependence on men. She also argued, that men should be interested in women as intellectual equals and not just as sexual objects. She suggested that post-revolution Russia required not only economic changes, but also fundamental psychological and attitudinal changes in both men and women. Nonetheless, as she had established herself as an oppositionist, it invited a lot of flak and fury from tall leaders of her time. Her capitulation to *Stalin* in 1927 ended the most serious attempt of *Bolshevism* to treat the woman question on the basis of socialist theory. Woman question received a setback under Stalin when it was declared resolved and the women's department of the communist party, the Zhenotdel was dissolved.

### **Kollontai's views on Love and Sex**

Alexandra Kollontai's views on love and sex are quite *ahead* of her time and in that sense very radical. She maintained that a "new morality" would emerge in the process of building the new society. Monogamous or long-lasting relationships may soon become obsolete. Men and women will come together only if they love each other and could easily separate if love ended. People would have a free

choice in sexual relationships based on mutual sexual attraction. Kollontai wrote about *erotic love* which she referred to as *winged Eros* – non-possessive love based on emotional compatibility, spiritual closeness, equality and respect; a love freed from the constraints of bourgeois society.

### Check Your Progress Exercise 3

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your progress with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

1. Explain Kollontai's contribution to the woman question.

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### 13.5 KOLLONTAI'S VIEWS ON SOCIALISATION OF HOUSEWORK

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Alexandra Kollontai aimed to emancipate women from the drudgery of housework for it chained them infinitely to their roles as mothers, wives or care givers. If a woman needs to be humanised and liberated, then the issue of housework needs specific solutions. The burden and eventual double oppression because of housework has been already discussed in the previous section. The debate around political economy of housework has been highly entangled, for various factions within feminism propose different liberating strategies. The debate is also further made complex by the discussions about inter-sectionality of class, caste, race and ethnicity. In contemporary times, the debate further has become more complex due to multiple changes in our society, economy, technology etc. (For a detailed discussion on this emerging aspect see Huws, 2019).

In this section, we shall focus on Kollontai's views on house work and how its socialisation could resolve the fundamental issues in women's emancipation. Kollontai used Marxist theory and tools for the analysis of women's housework and suggested that *only* Communism would be able to liberate women from the exhausting burden of carrying out this work. She recommended collectivising it, in the form of *state* provided restaurants, laundries, 'clothes-mending centres' and childcare facilities. According to Kollontai, within the capitalist system, household labour/domestic work is rendered completely unproductive and is rather devalued. On the other hand, in an agricultural economy the work done by women at home is needed essentially for the well being of the family. Additionally, a woman also contributes things like cloth, thread, butter that are

sold in the market place which is outside of the house. Every man whether peasant or worker tried to find a wife who had 'hands of gold', for he knew that a family could not get along without this 'domestic labour'. She believed that the work done by women benefitted not only the family, but also the nation. With the advancements in technology, production of commodities shifted to public space under capitalism. According to Kollontai, this led to family becoming a mere consumption unit where housework was limited to cleaning, cooking, washing and care of clothes. These tasks are extremely exhausting and time consuming in Kollontai's view. Additionally, they add no value to the state and national economy. Since, Kollontai used the Marxist framework of analysis, she focused on creation of value for the national economy through productive labour. Many other feminists have criticised this understanding as it devalues and delegitimises the significance of domestic labour performed by women. Kollontai, however, recognises the fact that capitalism brought women out as a workforce in the public space. But problems of women had worsened, for the capitalist system exploits the labour of women in the workforce and also continues to depend on the unpaid labour of women at home. Capitalism thrives on the unpaid and unaccounted domestic labour of women. If it isn't free, then either these services have to be provided as public services or wages of the labour have to be increased. Both of which would eat profits of the capitalists; hence, will not be liked by them. Kollontai also raises another important question; that why only *rich* women are relived of this domestic burden. In the capitalist system crèches, kinder gardens, restaurants, laundries etc are available, but they were commercialised. The women from the working class become on the other hand literally domestic slaves. They hardly get chance for leisurely activities or opportunity to participate in meaningful social life. If women, particularly, from the working class need to be freed from this slavery, then housework or childcare must not remain a private responsibility of only women within a universal system of family and marriage. The state should come forward and socialise these responsibilities. Under socialism, the working class seeks to unburden the women from these oppressive forms of work by opening public dining rooms, communal kitchens and cloth mending centres. The vision underlying that was "the four categories of housework are deemed to extinction with the victory of communism". Kollontai suggested that only communism can offer a truly socialized alternative which is not based on economic transactions, but is based on expanded relations of solidarity and care. Since women are over burdened doing domestic maintenance based labour, communism can socialize that labour in a truly progressive manner. She writes, under communism everyone will be able to eat in the communal kitchens and dining-rooms. Furthermore, the education of children (the other remaining task of women) can also be socialized. Capitalist Systems too have created state-run systems of socialized education. Full socialization of this system has been deliberately prevented for "the capitalists are well aware that the old type of family... constitutes the best weapon in the struggle to stifle the desire of the working class for freedom", She writes. Communism has the potential to achieve this full socialization.

Kollontai assumed that the *family* eventually would *wither* away or be *abolished*. She opposed both double standards and the double burden of work of the capitalist family system. Kollontai rejects the romantic bourgeois view of the family, acknowledging that under capitalism, the family is nothing more than “the primary economic unit of society and the supporter and educator of young children.” She maintains that a new form of family would emerge under communism, “In place of the old relationship between men and women, a new one is developing: a union of affection and comradeship, a union of two equal members of communist society, both of them free, both of them independent and both of them workers. No more domestic bondage for women. No more inequality within the family... Marriage will be a union of two persons who love and trust each other... Instead of the conjugal slavery of the past, communist society offers women and men a free union which is strong in the comradeship which inspired it.” Kollontai’s contribution to the question of housework through the lens of socialism and communism is *unmatched*. She was one of the leading theorists who expanded the question of domestic labour in extra-ordinary detail and provided definite prescriptions in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although she failed to go beyond the Marxist understanding of productive labour given the era in which she wrote.

### Check Your Progress Exercise 3

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your progress with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

1. What is socialisation of housework?

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### 13.6 LET US SUM UP

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In this module, we understood the exemplary and path-breaking contribution of Alexandra Kollontai to a very significant idea of the Woman Question. She was inspired by the Marxist framework of analysis and applied its theoretical tools to expand on the problems faced by women in general and proletarian women in particular. She was instrumental in bringing important reforms in post-revolution Russia which benefited the working class women. She was an exceptional orator and writer and fought for the woman question until she died in 1952. Her work on socialisation of work proposes important reforms to collectivise domestic labour done by women; thus, envisions emancipating women from the confines of bourgeoisie institutions such as family and marriage. She was a free spirited and

opinionated woman who experienced a stormy life, but lived a life on her own terms. Kollontai is *rarely* studied in details for her ideas appear quite radical. However, her analysis of the woman question was much ahead of her time and quite useful for contemporary women's questions.

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## 13.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress Exercise 1

1. Your answer should highlight following points
  - Kollontai's personal life
  - Her engagement with Marxist and Socialist ideas
  - Her concerns and ideas on women's issues

## **Check Your Progress Exercise 2**

1. Your answer should answer following questions.
  - What is the difference between sex and gender?
  - What is work?
  - What work women do?
  - How women's work is valued?

## **Check Your Progress Exercise 3**

1. Your answer should highlight following points
  - Socialism and women's liberation
  - Her views on family, marriage, love and sex
  - Her work as a member of Zhenotdel

## **Check Your Progress Exercise 4**

1. Your answer should highlight following points
  - Nature of work done by women
  - Work under capitalism
  - Domestic labour is slavery
  - Socialist solution to this problem

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