

Trouble and Strife

a radical feminist magazine No.7

£1.95



*n. wickedness or mischief; adj. noisy or boisterous
(made up of the character for woman 女 three times)*

Tokyo feminists

*A Diet of Words or How I
Slimmed for the
Revolution*

Mothers and Others

*Feminist history – fact or
fiction*

Jean Breeze, dub poet

Irishwomen United

Trouble and Strife is cockney rhyming slang for wife. We chose this name because it acknowledges the reality of conflict in relations between women and men. As radical feminists, our politics come directly from this tension between men's power and women's resistance.

Please note our new address:

Trouble and Strife, c/o Women's Centre, 50 Bethel Street, Norwich, Norfolk, Britain.

Trouble and Strife is produced collectively by Lynn Alderson, Dena Attar, Cath Jackson, Liz Kelly, Sophie Laws, Diana Leonard, Judy Stevens and Ruth Wallsgrove, with help from Pam Muttram and Sara Scott (taping), Lyn May, Marion Houghton, Mary Jennings, Alice Henry (paste-up) and Rachel Hasted (proofing).

Although we take collective responsibility for the contents, we do not necessarily agree with every article we print – only that we feel it is interesting. The collective is also responsible for titles and illustrations. Unsolicited articles are welcomed; please enclose a stamped addressed envelope. We do not intend to publish poetry or fiction.

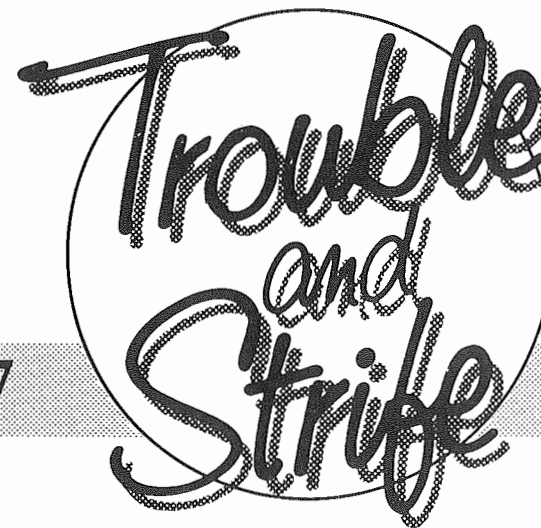
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Letters

Racist language

Dear *Trouble and Strife*,
 In my article on Soviet women in the previous issue I wrote that the Soviet state whilst maintaining and controlling the family, deliberately *relegates* home life. Somehow, however, in the production process, "relegates" was substituted by "denigrates", which is what appears in the magazine (p22, second column, 9th line).

I had consciously avoided "denigrates" myself because of the racism incorporated within it. I believe that the *Trouble and Strife* collective were unaware of this, and it is not necessarily immediately apparent. But the dictionary definition of *denigrate* is 1. trans. To blacken, make black or dark (1623) 2. fig. To blacken, defame.

I believe white women have a responsibility to avoid such words and to be as vigilant as we can about anti-racism in our use of language.
 In sisterhood,
 Bridget Foster,
 London.

Not any old theory

Dear *Trouble and Strife*,
 Sigrid Nielsen's 'Maps of Patriarchy' (*T & S* No. 6), was a welcome introduction to Christine Delphy's work, but I would like to take issue with some of the more general points in her article.

Sigrid says, "Ask a feminist what 'theory' means to her, and she will probably mention two books that are fifteen years old . . . For the newer writers, theory in the conventional sense . . . is not important; what matters is women's experience."

On the contrary, on many women's studies courses in this country, and especially in higher education courses with a feminist input, students will be lucky to find such early texts on their reading lists, or to get any sense of the interweaving of theory and practice in the early days of the Women's Liberation Movement. Instead, they are likely to encounter a proliferation of recent highly theoretical work incorpor-

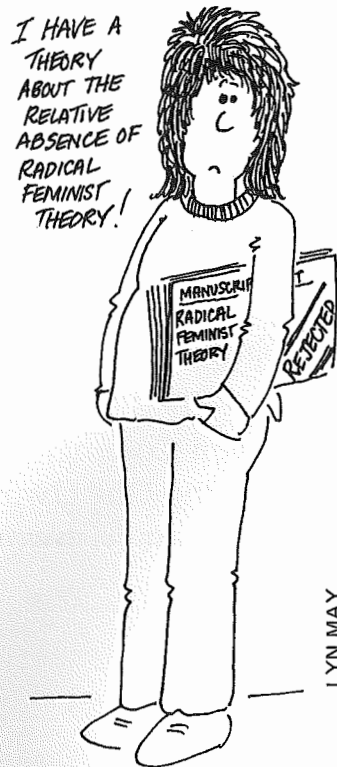
ating marxist feminism and psychoanalysis, which is sometimes difficult to link to practice at all. Such courses are for many women their first encounter with feminism.

To mention only a few random 'first world' writers; Ros Coward and Michelle Barratt in this country, Lisa Leghorn and Katherine Parker in the USA, and the 'new french feminists' addressed by Christine Delphy *do* all attempt to provide general theories of women's oppression. If Sigrid means that there has been a relative absence of radical feminist theory, I agree, and *Trouble and Strife* provides a much needed space for such theory to develop. We need to look at the ways in which certain kinds of feminism have become relatively institutionalised, and address both the theories themselves and the academic contexts in which they are produced and reproduced. I have been too angered by the way many socialist feminist writers and academics omit or distort radical feminist ideas to want to see radical feminists do the same thing to them.

In sisterhood,
 Judy Greenway,
 London.



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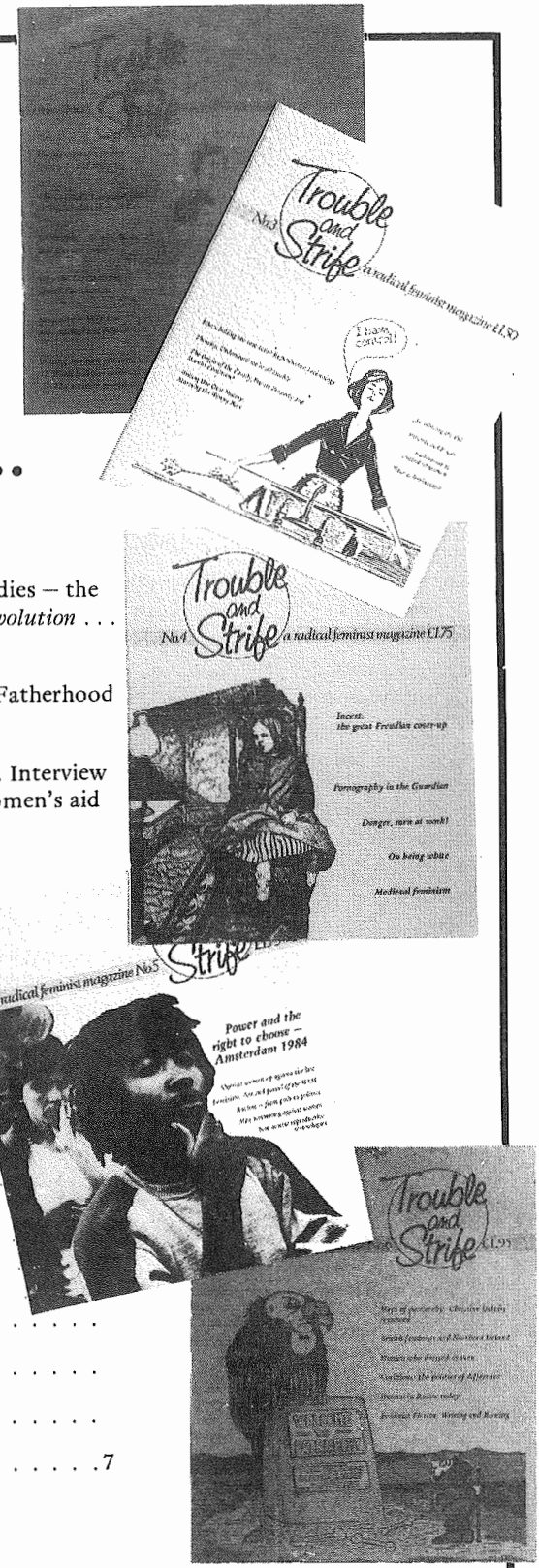
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FEMINIST

What can be done about porn?

A recent dispute among American feminists has thrown the debates around laws on porn into sharp relief. Anti-pornography feminists have proposed a radically new kind of law to give women redress: others are fighting them through the courts arguing that censorship must damage women's interests. Liz Kelly guides us through the events so far and draws out the lessons for us in Britain.

Is pornography the cause, or one of the causes of women's oppression? Is it in itself a form of violence against women? These are longstanding feminist debates and even amongst women who agree that pornography is a form of male violence there have been disagreements as to how we should campaign against it. Some of the most bitter and personally upsetting arguments between feminists have taken place around pornography and lesbian sado-masochism recently. The porn debate is about to be re-run in the US, not at a women's conference, but in a court of law, feminist v feminist!

PORNOGRAPHY IS CENTRAL IN CREATING AND MAINTAINING SEX AS A BASIS FOR DISCRIMINATION

In this article I want to explain what is happening, so far as I understand it, both to inform *Trouble and Strife* readers and because it raises some fairly fundamental questions. There are a number of crucial issues at stake: what are the roots of women's oppression; whether and how we campaign against pornography; the problems of using the law; how are feminists to act when there is no agreement within the movement about particular issues; and who should we enter into coalitions with.

The US Background

Andrea Dworkin published her book on pornography in 1981. The title *Men Possessing Women* summarises her thesis that pornography is an expression and validation of men's power over and control of women. Catherine McKinnon is a lawyer: she wrote the first full length study of sexual harassment (1979) and she has been working recently on a feminist analysis of the state. Both have campaigned around violence against women for many years.

In 1983 they taught a course on pornography together in Minneapolis. A new zoning law to limit the sale of pornography to specific areas was being discussed in the city at the time. McKinnon and Dworkin were approached by a number of working class and black community groups worried about the way the law would affect their neighbourhoods. They argued against zoning laws on two grounds. First, that they negatively affect poor communities as porn is zoned out of middle class areas. Second, that neither zoning nor obscenity laws address the issue of how pornography harms women. They raised the possibility of a new approach to porn laws which focused on women's civil rights. The Minneapolis City Council asked Dworkin and McKinnon to draft a law based on this new approach.

V. FEMINIST

In order to understand what happened I have to give a few details of how the US legal system works. City Councils can pass any legislation they like: laws which apply only to particular cities are called 'ordinances'. If a law involves complex legal issues it may be referred to a District Court in which a judge will rule on whether the law is in keeping with the US constitution.

Dworkin and McKinnon drafted an ordinance on pornography which was submitted to the Minneapolis City Council. It attempted to empower women (and in very limited circumstances, men), not law enforcement agencies, to take pornographers to court. Hearings took place in which evidence supporting the law was given by individual women who had been harmed by pornography, feminist groups, local community groups and social researchers. The ordinance was not passed in Minneapolis.

Indianapolis City Council also approached McKinnon and Dworkin and a similar ordinance was introduced there which received support from several prominent politicians. It was passed here by the City Council, but was ruled unconstitutional by the District Court. An appeal has been lodged. The American Booksellers Association (a coalition including bookstores, trade associations, cable TV stations and the US Civil Liberties Union) will oppose the ordinance and William Hudnut III (the mayor of Indianapolis) will support it. Interested parties can submit evidence (briefs) for this appeal. McKinnon and Dworkin have submitted one supporting the ordinance and a group calling themselves the Feminist

Anti-Censorship Taskforce (FACT) have submitted a brief opposing it. This group whilst calling themselves women, include 10 men in the 76 signatories of their brief. Most of those signing the document are lawyers or well known writers and researchers including: Rita Mae Brown; Michelle Cliff; Linda Gordon; Del Martin; Kate Millet; Minnie Bruce Platt; Adrienne Rich; Gayle Rubin; Susan Schecter; and Barbara Smith.

The disagreement between these two groups has not been limited to submitting legal briefs. The feminist, gay and left press in the US have run for and against articles and interviews and several stormy meetings have taken place on the issues recently. Public and bitter arguments between feminists make great copy! The latest development has been a group including Kathleen Barry, Mary Daly, Robin Morgan and Janice Raymond sending letters to individuals and feminist groups asking for support for Dworkin and McKinnon. Their statement appeared in *off our backs* (OOB) August issue.

PORNOGRAPHY IS NOT 'CENTRAL' IN MAINTAINING GENDER INEQUALITY

What the ordinance actually says: porn as discrimination

McKinnon and Dworkin start from their belief that pornography is a central element in maintaining male dominance. They are convinced that porn causes direct harm to many women. Some selected extracts from the ordinance are by far the best way of understanding what it actually says.

PORNOGRAPHY IS A DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICE BASED ON SEX WHICH DENIES WOMEN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY IN SOCIETY

(2) Pornography is a discriminatory practice based on sex which denies women equal opportunities in society. Pornography is central in creating and maintaining sex as a basis for discrimination. Pornography is a systematic practice of exploitation and subordination based on sex which differentially harms women. The bigotry and contempt it promotes with the acts of aggression it fosters, harm women's opportunities for equality of rights in employment, education, access to and use of public accommodations, and acquisition of real property; promote rape, battery, child abuse, kidnapping and prostitution and inhibit just enforcement of laws against such acts; and contribute significantly to restricting women in particular from exercising full citizenship and participation in public life, including neighbourhoods.

The purpose of the ordinance is:

(8) To prevent and prohibit all discriminatory practices of sexual subordination or inequality through pornography.

Pornography is defined in the ordinance as follows:

Pornography shall mean the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women, whether in pictures or in words, that includes one or more of the following:

1. Women are presented as sexual objects who enjoy pain or humiliation; or
2. Women are presented as sexual objects who experience sexual pleasure in being raped; or
3. Women are presented as sexual objects tied up or cut up or mutilated or bruised or physically hurt, or as dismembered or truncated or fragmented or severed into body parts; or
4. Women are presented being penetrated by objects or animals; or
5. Women are presented in scenarios of degradation, injury, abusement, torture, shown as filthy or inferior, bleeding, bruised or hurt in a context which makes these conditions sexual; and
6. Women are presented as sexual objects for domination, conquest, violation, exploitation, possession, in use, or through postures of servility, submission or display.

A woman taking a case to court under the ordinance has to show that one of these six definitions applies and then make one of four charges: that she was coerced into participating in the production of pornography; that she was forced to view pornography; that she was assaulted as a direct result of pornography. The final charge women can make is a trafficking charge. In this case she will appear for women as a group and the case rests on the public availability of porn being a violation of women's civil rights.

PORNOGRAPHY DOES NOT EXPLAIN VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN WHICH EXISTED LONG BEFORE PORNOGRAPHY WAS WIDELY AVAILABLE AND EXISTS TODAY IN SOCIETIES WHERE IT IS STILL NOT.

Cases will be taken against whoever produced or sold the magazine/book/video/film/photograph and the woman can sue for compensation. The ordinance also includes procedures for investigation and conciliation, so out of court settlements are possible.

The section on coercion into pornography is intended to take account of the fact that women may appear to consent to take part in pornography, whilst in reality they are coerced. Thirteen separate conditions are cited which will not be accepted as a defence; they include: previously appearing in porn; signing a contract, that no physical force was used; and/or that payment was received.

FACT's objections: what about free speech?

The basis of FACT's opposition rests on two issues. Firstly, they do not agree with Dworkin and McKinnon's analysis of pornography; and secondly, they have grave doubts about the use of the law in relation to speech and images — hence the anti-censorship part of their name. Their brief is very long (52 pages) and complex so I have summarised the points they make.

* They argue that the terms used in the ordinance are not defined, so it will be a question of courts, or the woman making the charge, deciding what is "subordinating", "degrading" and "sexual objectification". This leaves open the possibility of feminist art, lesbian erotica, self-help health guides being prosecuted. FACT see this as a fundamental challenge to the First Amendment of the US constitution (the bit about free speech).

* Pornography is not "central" in maintaining gender inequality, the causes are complex and structural. The ordinance does not address actions which deny women access to jobs and education, but images. Our energy should be directed towards acts not images. The coercion women and girls experience as the result of porn are acts and it is the abusive individual who should be punished. A sex education booklet can be

used in an abusive way. The ordinance does not address sexist imagery that abounds in the media, nor does it increase the economic and social power of women that would enable them to escape/resist abuse.

* The ordinance is sexist (!) as it makes men and women out to be fundamentally different. It reinforces the sexual double standard by implying that sexually explicit material subordinates women. It suggests that women as a class are weak, in need of protection, unable to make their own choices about pornography. Women are presented as helpless victims who do not seek or enjoy sex, and/or who cannot enter a legally binding agreement. This "special case" argument is similar to that in protective employment, statutory rape and "white slavery" laws. It also presumes that men as a class are conditioned by porn to commit acts of aggression and believe misogynist myths (they quote McKinnon and Dworkin explicitly comparing men's response to pornography to attack dogs' response to the command "kill"). There is no sense that men may be degraded by images in porn. Men are presented as irresponsible beasts.

* The ordinance assumes a simple link between words/pictures and behaviour, meaning is dependent on context. Men learn about gender roles in many places: the family is probably more important than porn in this respect. Porn does not explain violence against women which existed long before pornography was widely available and exists today in societies where it is not

* Women's experiences with pornography are mixed, some get erotic pleasure from it. It is not that women are silenced by porn but speak with different voices about it. For sexual minorities it can be an affirmation. Porn includes many messages including that sex need not be tied to reproduction, men or domesticity.

* There are serious dangers in restricting sexually explicit speech. The alliance with New Right women in order to pass the ordinance is disturbing.

Keeping bad company

The first thing that struck me when reading these submissions and the reporting of the issues in OOB (June and July 1985) is that both sides do not discuss the questions raised by the other. They end up, therefore, talking about different issues; one side focusing on sexual violence, the other on sexual freedom and censorship.

FACT have very little to say about the increasing evidence¹ of the coercion of women into the sex industry and the abusive use of porn by men in heterosexual relationships. My understanding of the ordinance is that it is an attempt to provide women with legal protection and redress from such abuse. I am not convinced by FACT's argument that protective legislation is always harmful to women. Surely laws about rape, incest and battering are in part protective — should we not have these either, because they are based on the fact that women are victimised by men? There is a difference between a perspective that seeks to see women as survivors rather than victims of sexual violence and one which amounts to denying the reality of victimisation. The suggestion that the laws on sexual violence are adequate to prosecute all forms of abuse is an evasion of the issues raised. The ordinance would create new legal offences within a feminist definition of pornography, particularly being coerced to take part in or watch/look at pornography.

On the other side, Dworkin and McKinnon have been less than forthcoming about the potential problems of implementing the ordinance. McKinnon in OOB (June) did not rule out the possibility that lesbian material could be prosecuted under the act. Their defence of working with women on the Right in terms of organising with women as women just won't do I'm afraid — there are coalitions and coalitions. We know that single issue campaigns which do not encompass a wider feminist perspective are dangerous. Battered women in feminist-run refuges do not become sympathetic to feminism just because women working there oppose battering. This is a starting point from which connections can be made to many other issues. It is precisely these connections, especially those relating to

THE ORDINANCE IS SEXIST AS IT MAKES MEN AND WOMEN OUT TO BE FUNDAMENTALLY DIFFERENT.

MEN ARE NOT ATTACK DOGS. THEY ARE MORALLY RESPONSIBLE HUMAN BEINGS.

THERE ARE SERIOUS DANGERS IN RESTRICTING SEXUALLY EXPLICIT SPEECH.

the family and sexuality, that I suspect many right wing women will not be being encouraged to make in this context, where signing a petition may be the extent of their involvement.

FACT don't come clean, however, about the fact that they too are in a dubious coalition. In supporting the Booksellers Association's case they are allying themselves with the porn publishers and sellers whose interests and to protect their hefty profits, not free speech and even less women. Nor is there a unitary position on porn within the FACT signatories. Adrienne Rich (*OOB* July) in explaining why she signed the brief makes clear that she does not agree with all of it. She clearly feels the connections between pornography and abuse of women are proven by women's experience and that the FACT brief was "dismissive" of this reality. Her opposition to the ordinance is that it "offers false protections, at too high a price". The price being that in the current reactionary climate in the US the ordinance is likely to be hijacked by the Right and that it will limit the emerging debates on sexuality within feminism.

An American woman friend of mine who has done a lot of work around violence against women told me that she does not find the New Right argument convincing. There are already laws in the US relating to community standards which can be used to prosecute materials the Right don't like, so they don't need the ordinance to do this. I don't think the ordinance will be easier to use against sex education and gay literature. There is evidence that the Right is not unified on the ordinance either, some groups have opposed it as it redefines obscenity. McKinnon² insists that she and Dworkin successfully campaigned against a right wing modification of the ordinance introduced in Suffolk County.

The spectre of State censorship looms large in the FACT brief. They do not discuss the attempts that Dworkin and McKinnon have made to place the initiative in the hands of women rather than the state. Maybe there are good reasons for believing that the state will be able to use the ordinance in its own interests, but these are not spelt out. The implication remains that Dworkin and McKinnon are willing to give the state more

power, something I feel they have tried hard to avoid.

How important is porn?

Whilst I don't see pornography as having quite the overarching significance that Dworkin and McKinnon give it, I do think it must be discussed seriously. Diana Russell's suggestion that the rapid increase in pornography is in part a response by men to the women's liberation movement makes a lot of sense to me. In a period where some women are increasingly resisting male power and men's abuse of women, images which reassert that power and legitimise abuse may be comforting to many men. They also communicate a message to us. In this context porn can be seen as a resistance by men to women's liberation. It is, therefore, an important area of struggle for feminists.

There are hints in some of the published articles on this debate that the division reflects the different causes feminists attribute women's oppression to. Some of the FACT supporters stress economic factors and compare their perspective to anti-porn campaigners stress on sexual violence. I find this quite surprising as on a number of levels pornography is a clear example of the interconnections between the two. The production of pornography is part of a multi-million dollar and international industry. We should be discussing pornography in the context of a growing global sex industry, the emergence of US cable TV stations showing a daily diet of porn, the offering of 'erotic adventure holidays' to Thailand to rich business men and pages of ads for 'adult videos' in video and film magazines are just a few of the recent aspects of this growth. It is an industry in which few of the predominantly women workers have any of the employment rights many of us take for granted. It is an industry in which coercion and kidnapping are methods of recruitment.

On a different level the connections between economics and pornography are more complex. I am not convinced, for example, that women hating films/magazines would disappear if women (unlikely I know but . . .) achieved economic equality with men. Certainly some women who feel the sex industry offers the only possibility

for them of earning good money might take up other alternatives, but not all women choose work in the sex industry, many are physically coerced.

FACT do raise the important issue of what the impact of the ordinance may be on women who work in the sex industry. Some women who used to work in the industry have supported the ordinance, some who still work in it oppose it. I find this a difficult and complex area. Whilst wanting redress for women who have been coerced and abused, I am not happy supporting something which knowingly makes the conditions of women working in the sex industry even worse than they already are. I think many of us have a deep ambivalence about the sex industry and find it hard to understand women choosing to work in it, preferring to think that all women are coerced — be it physically or economically. Unfortunately, there are no easy ways of opposing the sex industry without affecting the conditions of work of women within it. FACT are silent about these issues, offering no suggestions for alternative approaches to the sex industry or the specific abuses of women the ordinance attempts to address. The fact that is difficult and complex, however, should not lead us into the "we must wait till after the revolution" train of thought, nor can the issues involved be reduced to an intellectual discussion about sexual freedom.

Adrienne Rich's argument seems to be almost a reverse of this position — that in reactionary times we can't campaign to widen women's legal rights as we will fail/it will be used against us. This feels to me like conceding before we have begun the fight. Whilst I don't believe in a legislative road to Women's Liberation, legal reforms have provided benefits and protection for individual women and aspects of law in many countries still reinforce our oppression.

You have to start somewhere

I find FACT's list of the things the ordinance does not cover rather silly in the context of legal strategies. Gains in this area can only be made around particular issues — perhaps they really think it is possible to draft a law which would make patriarchy illegal! We certainly need to consider any

campaigning over legal reforms carefully and any proposed legislation must be even more carefully drafted. There are undoubtedly some problems within the ordinance that have implications for other areas of law. The provisions which attempt to take account of how women are coerced into the sex industry do come dangerously close to defining women as legal minors. Even with the most carefully drafted laws, however, I don't feel that we can ensure that legislation will necessarily reflect our intentions. Legal systems, in the West, are inherently liberal rather than radical institutions and we have very little control over how laws are implemented by judges and courts. I can't imagine any feminist objecting to the changes in the law over injunctions for battered women achieved in England and Wales in 1976. The intentions of that Act have, however, been progressively undermined by its implementation since then. The lessons we learn from this and other campaigns around the law is that alone they achieve very little. I also feel that if we choose to try and effect change through the law we have to be much more committed than we have been previously to campaigning after legislation is passed to try and ensure its implementation reflects our intentions.

It seems to me that many of the FACT signatories are people who have written about and worked around sexuality and many of those who support the ordinance have written and worked around violence against women. This division is alarming to me as I think the two areas are inextricably linked. Those whose concern is sexuality seem to be separating it from the abusive forms it takes so commonly in patriarchal societies and concentrating on the dangers of sexual repression. Clearly some of them would object to any legislation around pornography, whereas others might find a more limited ordinance which focused only on direct harm to women acceptable.

Women who stress sexual violence have been criticised³ for neglecting the pleasure of sexuality. The defining of these two strands as 'pleasure' and 'danger'; two opposing frameworks around which women's experiences of sex have been conceptualised by feminists reflects this division. I have tried to avoid this in my own work on

WHEN USE AND ABUSE ARE CALLED 'SEX' AND THEREBY EXONERATED. WHEN DONE THROUGH WORDS AND PICTURES THEY ARE CALLED 'SPEECH' AND THEREBY CANCELLED.

THE ORDINANCE DOES NOT ADDRESS ACTIONS... BUT IMAGES. OUR ENERGY SHOULD BE DIRECTED TOWARDS ACTS.

THE 'BIGOTRY AND CONTEMPT IT PROVOKES, FOSTERS RAPE, BATTERY, CHILD-ABUSE, KIDNAPPING AND PROSTITUTION'

sexual violence by looking at women's experiences in terms of a continuum. Whilst many of us will have experiences that we can easily define as either pleasurable or abusive there are others which are not so easy to define. Our experiences of heterosexual sex are not just either freely consenting or rape, in between there is a range of pressure and coercion.

I must admit to not understanding why so many radical Americans go blue in the face when anything that challenges the First Amendment is mentioned. This so-called freedom of speech that has always been encoded in the constitution existed for many years alongside slavery and segregation. It is part of a constitution which has, as yet, no clause guaranteeing equality for women. Do the signatories of the FACT brief also object to the recent ruling that child pornography is a form of child abuse and, therefore, should not be protected by the First Amendment? I am sympathetic to Dworkin's argument that those who are excluded have no freedom of speech, and that to protect pornography as speech means protecting exploitation and in some instance torture. I have always been suspicious of arguments which prioritise abstract rights above the lives of individuals. Those with least power and whose lives are most threatened always seem to lose out in the intellectualising.

It is important to place this development in the context of the US where legislative change is much easier to achieve than in Britain. Many feminist campaigns have effected legal changes, particularly about violence against women, in the last 10 years. The pornography ordinance is different though. Previous campaigns involved coalitions of feminist groups campaigning for the same end, here we have feminists on opposite sides in coalitions with people whose goals do not include Women's Liberation. I end up wondering if this is the shape of things to come if we try to get laws passed for which there is no agreement within the movement as a whole. Are our disagreements to be adjudicated publicly in courts of law? Are our campaigns to be reduced to who can get signatures from the most impressive list of 'important' feminists? □

Footnotes

1. Many women gave evidence at the hearings on both these issues. See Kathleen Barry *Female Sexual Slavery* (1979 Prentice Hall) for discussion of coercion into the sex industry. Diana Russell in *Sexual Exploitation* (1985 Sage) and *Rape in Marriage* (1982 MacMillan) discusses the abusive use of pornography in heterosexual relationships and sexual abuse of girls.
2. In a letter to *Village Voice* reprinted by Women Against Pornography.
3. See, for example, *Pleasure and Danger*, ed. Carol Vance (1984 RKP).

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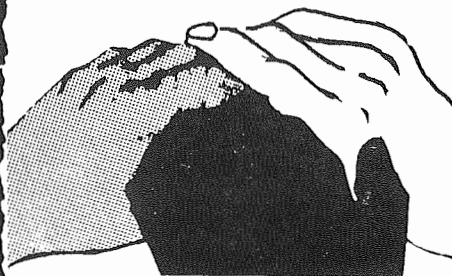
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A Family of Women

Jean 'Binta' Breeze is a celebrated performer in the Caribbean dub tradition. She uses a combination of dance, poetry and music which presents political issues in a dramatic and powerful way.

During a recent visit to Britain, she spoke with Dorothy Francis about her life in Jamaica and the choices facing her and other Black women.

Dorothy: Could you tell us about your life and background?

J: I was born in a village called Pattyhill in the parish of Hanover in Jamaica. Pattyhill is in a farming district in the hills. My grandparents were peasant farmers and my mother left there to become a nurse. She is now a Community Development Officer. My father died four years ago — he was a sanitary inspector. I have four sisters, no brothers. The only man in my immediate family is my son, aged nine. I also have a four year old daughter.

I went to the traditional high school where I did 'O' and 'A' levels. I then went on to study acting, directing, stage management and community drama, at the Jamaica School of Drama. After leaving there I became a teacher and taught English, Geography, Spanish and Drama, amongst other subjects, for five years. I returned to the hills of Hanover for four years where I planted on a small farm. For the last two years I have been working with the Jamaican Cultural Development Commission as a co-ordinator for the speech and literacy programme. I have always written and performed in conjunction with other jobs and have been a freelance performer since January 1985.

D: Can you tell us about dub poetry?

J: Dub poetry is basically using the language of the people to the rhythms of the people. It is a combination of words and

music. Poetry before this had been very intellectual, it was a literary field in a country which is strongly of the oral tradition. Poets like Louise Bennett (Miss Lou) continued this oral tradition using the Jamaican language. Dub poetry came out of this. It embodied the rhythms and language of the people, breaking the rules that we had studied in school, which were basically based on the ti-tum, ti-tum rhythm of the iambic pentameter and replacing it with a rhythm of our own. And so it has become the people's poetry in a way that the other types never were.

Because of the nature of dub poetry a poem is hardly ever recounted in the same way. The poet picks up on the feel and mood of the audience and tailors her poems accordingly. The written word is not a good medium for conveying dub poetry and so the oral tradition has been maintained in recordings.

D: How did you begin to write and perform?

J: The performing aspect started very early because my mother is a great performer of poems. She used to teach me all kinds of English and Jamaican poems and that led me to performing at school and at church concerts. I started writing at about ten. My first poem was called "Post Mortem"! It included the line "And after death, what shall we do?" Can you imagine

writing that as a ten year old? Yes, poetry has been a great part in my life since childhood.

D: Why did you choose poetry as a medium instead of singing, writing or drama?

J: Well, you know, it's a combination for me — it's not just poetry, when I am performing, I draw on all my theatrical talents. I sing, I dance, I dramatise and the verbal content of the poetry carries the message. It is a very African tradition that there should be no separatism of the arts, they all happen together. I find that it is necessary for me to keep all these elements together when I am performing.

Choosing poetry? I don't think I had much choice, poetry chose me. I am interested in other genres however. I have just started work on my first novel and I have written a few scripts, mostly from improvisations that I have directed and then scripted afterwards.

D: What difficulties have you faced being a woman in what so far has been an all male field?

J: It hasn't been an all male field for me — it has in terms of who has recorded previously or who has come to England previously as a dub poet, but for me my influences were so strongly female, I mean my mother, women poets like Miss Lou, my teachers, they were all female and they encouraged me.

D: What do you see as the advantage of being able to bring a woman's dimension to dub poetry? What advantages are there for Black women?

J: I don't think it necessarily makes a difference whether you are a female or male dub poet when it comes to dealing with your people and their struggles and experiences as a people. But, my experiences as a woman will be very different from those of a man. I found that when I first started per-

forming at home in Jamaica, the sisters were really glad because I was presenting things in my poetry that they knew and understood, and it was greatly welcomed. It is helpful to be a woman in dub poetry because I can convey certain messages that men would not bother with. Also, being a Black woman I can present things from a Black woman's point of view. I also feel that it is important because it gives Black women a point of reference and my example helps to give them a belief in themselves.

D: Would you call yourself a feminist?

J: No. You see, I'm not sure of terms anymore because people mean different things when they call themselves by the same words. I deal with the problems of women because they are my own personal problems. I don't feel that because I am a woman poet I must concentrate on female subjects, it's just a natural part of my experiences. I concentrate on women's struggles because it is my struggle.

D: How are women organising themselves in Jamaica?

J: That's a strange question in relation to Jamaica because women in Jamaica have always been a very strong force. The mother is a powerful figure in the home. The majority of teachers are women and many public roles have always been played by women, so it has not been a situation where women are dormant. This is particularly true in my own family which is at the stage of being almost totally female.

There are various women's groups in Jamaica, some artistic, some political, some social, others involved in publishing . . . Women have the usual problems in terms of unemployment, or if you are working outside the home there is the problem of dealing with a family — a situation that I face myself. There are a lot more daycare or nursery centres now than there were a few years ago and this is a definite improvement for working mothers.

But all these formalised nurseries etc, are a very urban concept. The country way of living and providing for working mothers comes very much out of the extended family. Take myself, for example, I am here in England working, my children are home with my mother and sisters. I know that

they are being well looked after and so I have the freedom of mind that is necessary for me to do my work. I also have the freedom to come over here, which I would not otherwise have had. Think of the number of West Indian women who have come to Britain in the years since we started this "reverse colonisation" as Miss Lou calls it. They were in some cases leaving three month old babies at home with their families. How many women in urbanised western society can think of leaving three or four children and going somewhere else, not knowing when they are going to see them again? The family support in Jamaica is very strong.

To come back to your question — this has always been the heart of organisation amongst women. The relationship I have with my mother in Jamaica would probably



DEBBIE MOORE



DEBBIE MOORE

be very rarely found in a society such as you have in England where there are a lot of conflicts in what women's roles are all about. Most western women find it very difficult to understand the system of living that we have back home, they don't, for instance, see the importance of the grandmothers' position in the family. During the three years in which my mother was training to be a nurse I was with my grandmother. Almost everyone in Jamaica can say that their grandmother had a very definite hand in growing them up, unlike here. The family is a source of tremendous strength for women in the West Indies and it is the women in the family who provide this strength.

D: You feel then that the extended family in the Caribbean offers freedom as opposed to the nuclear family over here?

J: Yes, definitely. Having the help of my family gives me a certain amount of freedom of choice that I would not have if I were part of a nuclear family. Also, because of the generation that I am part of and because of the nature of my work, it has been very difficult for me to maintain a nuclear structure for myself. I have tried to set up a nuclear family in terms of a father, myself and my children, but this failed because whereas you find that to a large extent a woman will support her man in his work, a man will rarely contemplate giving that element of support to a woman. After the breakdown of my marriage I returned to my family and it is they who have helped me to get where I am today.

At the same time, you can look at it from a different angle and say that it's maybe oppressive for members of the family to have to give this support, that it is oppressive to a grandmother to have children thrown back on her after she's brought up one set. But, look at the number of old people in a community like this (England) who don't even know where their children are. The children may telephone twice a year or maybe come home for Christmas if they are particularly dutiful but look at the number of old people suffering from loneliness — there is so little family contact in many westernised societies.

D: There is a popular theory that West Indian life is 'falsely' matriarchal and that this is not an African way of living. Is this part of slavery or would the structure of family life have evolved this way anyway?

J: Yes, West Indian life is matriarchal or mother-centred and this is connected to slavery. But we cannot look at what might have been only at what has happened. During slavery the nuclear family in particular was not encouraged by plantation owners — this would have caused a solidarity which they did not want. And so family life for the slaves was continually disrupted, the men were often forcibly taken away from their families and it fell upon the women to maintain and control the family. So, if West Indian life is 'falsely' matriarchal it is slavery and tradition that has made it so. Tradition takes a long time to die, and remember that when we talk of slavery it is still only five generations ago that we were emancipated and even so slavery did not end there.

D: So, you can't really consider the oppression of women separately from the wider situation of the people?

J: No, you can't. The degree of a country's oppression can be measured by the women's oppression — the more oppressed the country is by outside forces, the more oppressed the women are. As Malcolm X said "progress can never be separated from the women. If you are in a country that is progressive, the woman is progressive. But in every backward country where education is not stressed it's because the women don't have education." We are dealing here with two things, education and economics. The only basis on which I can stand is that I am educated and it is because of this that I have always been able to maintain economic freedom.

If I were to support a women's movement it would have to be an economically-based movement because the oppression that we face does not only come from the man but from the entire society of which we are a part. The traditional ways in which men see women and the authority structure to which they conform have been implanted upon them by European systems and therefore it is this structure that needs to be destroyed.

It is very difficult for me to deal with the

whole feminist subject because I can say quite honestly that I have never been oppressed as a woman because I have been economically free all my life of a man. I have always had my own means of sustaining myself — the women who are oppressed most are those who depend economically on a man and his salary to survive.

So, if I am to have anything to do with a woman's movement it has to be one which is providing jobs and economic stability for women. If it's going to be an idealistic word game about oppression and fighting against men, then no, I don't really see the need for that.

D: Do you think that a Black woman in the West Indies cannot afford to be a feminist because she should be out there with her man fighting as a nationalist?

J: If a Black woman is struggling as a nationalist against class oppression, poverty and all the economic depressions then she is necessarily struggling with the man because he faces the same things. But if in the process of that struggle the woman feels that she has a personal oppression to deal with, with her man or men in general, then that is another struggle altogether which also needs to be fought. Obviously the two issues interrelate and it is very difficult to fight one without the other. The woman has to make her own decision as to which battle she is going to fight first on the basis of which form of oppression is harming her most. Of course, the battle can be fought on both fronts at the same time.

D: Is there a need for a separate Black and white feminist movement?

J: Ideally everyone should be able to work together as long as they are struggling towards the same aims. Unfortunately Black and white women cannot wholly share in the same struggle because of the factors that separate them. The Black woman has to fight not only sexism but racism and this calls for a different strategy. There are cases within the feminist movement where Black and white women are working together, but the white women are displaying racism towards the Black women without even being aware of it. This, of course, creates a barrier and prevents the

two groups from working together as they should.

You have to be very careful because a lot of white people nowadays have a guilt complex about the sins of their ancestors and they see the clock ticking away and feel that they have to do something. So, they associate with Black people and try to 'help' not realising that they can't help because they have not sorted out their prejudices, reasons and motives in their minds. Others have an 'underdog' mentality and are always with the sufferers be they Black or whatever. Whenever you are going to work with someone it is important to find out what they are dealing with as an individual. What group they belong to, or what they are saying intellectually is not so important — what you have to look at is their own personal life and decide how much of a statement their life is. For instance, does the white activist fighting passionately for Black causes actually have any Black friends?

D: So what do you see as the way forward for women? What qualities do we need to survive today?





*This poem was written about Yellow Man,
a popular reggae musician.*

Yu Slack

*Get back, yu slack,
A' de daughter yu a mock?
We are sisters in dis dispensation
Get back, yu slack,
A' de daughter you a mock,
We tired of dis degradation.*

*I create you an yu create me,
Hand in band we should be fighting to be free,
But yu go pon de stage an' yu tek up de mike,
And it's like you want to juk me wid yu spite.
Yu under me frock, it's yu madder yu a mock,
An yu bury us wid shame an play yu sexy games,
Fe mek people know your name,
But yu mek me heart flame.*

*Yu seh you love Sue, but yu mek her heart blue,
An when you do it with Fay it's in a sadistic way,
Yu talk 'bout Elaine till you leave her in pain,
But as you chat some more
We can see that you are de bore.*

*To go pon de stage, inna dis here age,
An put yu sisters in a cage
It must fill Jab—Jab's heart with rage,
For words don't have much power
Many are listening, seeking to devour,
Looking for dat speck of light,
To guide de pilgrim tru de night,
But yu tek it for a joke
Like you want us fe choke
Yu a mash down yu madder's expectations.*

*No more rape, we nah suck no bitter grape
We are mothers of dis here creation, yu hear?
Caretakers of Jab—Jab creation.
I say no more rape, we nah suck no bitter grape
We are mothers of dis here creation,
Caretakers of dis here generation.*



J: A woman should have strength of purpose, goals and ideals that she wants to achieve. She should have her own personality and a hand in her own decisions, ie whether to have a child or not. She should also have some economic stability.
It can be very hard for women to stick to their ideals when faced with relationships with men, but the question that I have always asked myself is "Can I live with myself?" not "Can I live with the man that I married?" and if living with myself means leaving the man that I married then I will have to because myself is the ultimate. Women must learn to put themselves first and out of this will come the strength that we need. We are the creators of our own destinies and if we leave our destiny in the hands of men then we have ourselves to blame. Most of the time it is our own doubts about our ability to survive without men that hold us back but we have no need to doubt because we are a very strong force especially when we are united together.
D: *Do you have a message for Black women in England?*

J: I respect the efficiency and dedication of the Black women that I have met whilst in England. Black women seem to be handling their situation very well and are working together to form a solid force. The days of passivity are over — to be passive right now is to play traitor. All women have a hard fight on their hands, but Black women even more so. Anyone who can sit back and say 'there is no race problem' or 'there is no police problem' because it has never happened to them — well, all I can say is God bless the day when it does because there won't be no one around to help you. Our unity is our strength in this struggle.
Black women should remember that we are a very strong set of women — necessity has made us so. I would say to Black women "Don't sell out your strength, you have no need to. If the system doesn't want to deal with you then you have enough talent and creativity to create an alternative. Never underestimate your strength as women and especially as Black women." □

Jean Breeze is coming to live in England and will be teaching in Brixton.

*“Make an effort
to remember.
Or, failing that,
invent.” —Monique Wittig*

MOTHERS OF INVENTION

*First presented to a packed workshop at the Feminist History Conference in July, this paper stimulated a vigorous discussion about how feminists should do history. In *Trouble and Strife* 2, Rachel Hasted described her research into two large witch trials held in Lancaster in the 17th century. She raised questions about how the evidence she could discover fitted with a rather glamourised image of the witch as healer and resistance fighter against patriarchy. Here she looks in more detail at the ways in which feminists have used the notion of the witch. The crucial question is: does it matter if we get our history wrong?*

For me, the issue of the Witchcraze has been central in raising questions about the possibility of feminist history. I was worried by the conflicts between my own work and the very positive image of The Witch I found in many feminist writings. My work on the Lancashire witch trials started a series of questions about what I was doing. Was my work intrinsically feminist at all? What did I think feminist history was for? How were

feminist writers using history, and would my work contribute anything meaningful to the political debate? Was I, in fact, confusing the issue by concentrating on an incident in which women did not play an heroic role, or show themselves as admirable victims of patriarchy? Perhaps it would be as well to say clearly what I mean by "the Witchcraze" to begin with. I am using the word to mean that

period which seems to have begun in the 14th century and lasted until the late 17th century, when almost throughout Europe at different times in different places, purges were carried out by male officials of Church or State against individuals; mainly women. They were accused of belonging to a secret society of witches, all of whom were said to have entered into a pact with the Devil.

These purges occurred equally in protestant and catholic countries of continental Europe, in Scotland, and to a lesser degree in England where the terror never became as acute, because extreme physical torture was not used to extract confessions.

How has feminist thinking about the Witchcraze evolved? Reclaiming the Witch as a foremother is not an immediately obvious theme in 19th century feminist writing, and this is not surprising since some were christians, and all belonged to a christian but science-worshipping society, in which to be linked with outdated superstition would be more of a political handicap than a strength.

I believe that it was Jules Michelet, the French historian, who began the rehabilitation of witches as political figures with his book *La Sorciere* published in 1862. Michelet based his work on a wide study of archive material, but his interpretation was very personal. He accepted the records left by the witch-hunters and interpreted what he saw as a massive turning away from christianity by the peasantry as a form of rebellion. For the anti-clerical Michelet the Church was a major weapon of class war, and he saw the witches as pagan priestesses leading a doomed peasants' revolt against the oppression of a christian ruling class.

The 19th century American historian HC Lea meanwhile took up the cause of the witch as scientist, persecuted by religious fanatics who wished to keep the people in ignorant obedience.

Both of these ideas were taken up in turn by Matilda Joslyn Gage in her book *Woman, Church and State*, originally published in America in 1893. Gage was one of the more radical leaders of the US suffrage movement and a long-standing researcher into women's history. She seems to have been the first US feminist to suggest that in prehistory society had been matriarchal, egalitarian, and people had worshipped a

female deity. She believed that witchcraft and the occult were forms of knowledge, once highly developed under the matriarchy, but later outlawed by a jealous patriarchy. Gage saw the Witchcraze as evidence for this thesis. She was deeply interested in the occult, and believed that magic was in fact an understanding of as yet uncodified natural laws — an intuitive science. Gage was involved in the publication of *The Woman's Bible*, and found in the Old Testament "... a record of ancient mysteries, hidden to all but initiates" and largely referring to women's spiritual powers.

The scientific witch

In her chapter on witchcraft, Gage refers the start of the Witchcraze to the increasing insistence of the Church on priestly celibacy, itself a sign of increased woman-hating according to her. Gage uncompromisingly identifies the Witch as Woman, and never addresses the problem of the men who were also accused.

Gage claims: "... that the so-called 'witch' was among the most profoundly scientific persons of the age", and denies that "witchcraft was merely a species of hysteria." Modern science, she asserts, is re-discovering the knowledge of the witches. Although admitting that many people were executed who were in no way out of the ordinary, Gage claims that:

A vast amount of evidence exists, to show that the word 'witch' formerly signified a woman of superior knowledge. Many of the persons called witches doubtless possessed a super-abundance of the Pacinian corpuscles in hands and feet, enabling them to swim when cast into water bound, to rise in the air against the ordinary action of gravity, to heal by a touch, and in some instances to sink into a condition of catalepsy, perfectly unconscious of torture when applied.

Pacinian corpuscles are found in the sensory nerves of the hands and feet. Their discoverer referred to them as "organs of animal magnetism", and this gave rise to the idea that they might hold a physical explanation for 'supernatural' phenomena such as witchcraft. Gage puts great faith in the science of her time, declaring that: "... the world seems upon the eve of important knowledge which may throw full light on the peculiar nerve action of the witch period..." She further claims that "natural psychics formed a large

proportion of the victims of this period".

Gage's major thesis however is that "The clergy fattened on the torture and burning of women." Gage suggests that the Church consciously used witchcraft charges to discredit women in religious life by referring to pagan priestesses as witches, and by showing women to be easy prey of the Devil. Thus the Church kept women in subjection while confiscating their goods. The State was also active against witchcraft because of its need to suppress unauthorised sources of power and leadership, such as the witch/priestesses.

Gage was a phenomenal worker, always involved in a mass of political work, organising conventions, making speeches, editing a newspaper, taking legal action over voting rights, writing articles, collaborating on *The History of Woman Suffrage*, and doing her own research. With extraordinary energy she nevertheless chose to tackle a complete survey of western history in order to show how women had been affected by the christian state.

I think it is unlikely that she ever had time to go back and check original documents — in any case the majority of those relating to the Witchcraze were still in Europe. She relied heavily on secondary sources, and with the confidence of the age, believed that historical knowledge was advancing towards a complete world view, as scholar after scholar published the results of their research: "We are now informed" she wrote "on the condition of early peoples... Never has research been so thorough or long-lost knowledge so fully given to the world."

Such an attitude did not lead Gage to question the interpretation of established authorities such as Michelet and Lea when these fitted with her own theories on matriarchal cults and women's special spiritual powers. They are her sources for many claims that witches were great scientists and healers.

Gage revisited

In questioning previous male readings of history on other points, in making women visible and in indicating the role of patriarchy in shaping women's history, Gage was an important source of inspiration for feminists. The re-discovery of her work after

her neglect, by Mary Daly and others in the 1970s, and the re-issue of *Woman, Church and State*, have been a major influence on our thinking about history.

However, I am disturbed by the stamp of unqualified approval given to Gage's work by Mary Daly and Dale Spender. Daly speaks of her "impressive erudition" and "accuracy". Spender says: "For my part, the only 'inaccuracy' in Gage's work was her vision of the future." (1982). Both are deeply impressed by Gage's claim that the Witch was: "... in reality the profoundest thinker, the most advanced scientist of those ages..."

I, on the other hand, find Gage's views on witchcraft unhelpful. What evidence is there to show that witchcraft purges grew in direct relation to increased insistence on celibacy in the priesthood? Protestant Germany killed more witches than catholic Spain. Appropriation of goods did not provide a motive for accusations against the poor, and in England was never an issue, yet poor people were tried all over Europe.

Gage never deals with the reality of witch-beliefs amongst ordinary people, beliefs shared by some at least of the accused; nor does she back her claims for

"The clergy fattened on the torture and burning of women" — Gage.

"Many of the persons called witches doubtless possessed a super-abundance of the Pacinian corpuscles in hands and feet, enabling them to swim when cast into water bound..." — Gage.

Jules Michelet saw the witches as pagan priestesses leading a doomed peasants' revolt.

Matilda Joslyn Gage believed that witchcraft and the occult were forms of knowledge once highly developed under the matriarchy, but later outlawed by a jealous patriarchy



CATH JACKSON

WITCH: Women's International Conspiracy from Hell, or Women Inspired to Commit Herstory. Groups of this name popped up all over the States after Hallowe'en 1968, when the 'mother coven' in New York did an action in Wall Street.

women's healing skills with evidence. What does it mean, to call the witch a scientist? How is 'scientific' research possible without benefit of scientific method, with no idea of cause and effect, an inaccurate system of medical diagnosis, and a profound belief in the supernatural cause of physical misfortunes?

Gage quotes statistics with immense confidence and gives no sources for them. She is the earliest source I have found for the claim that 9 million women were executed for witchcraft, ("after 1484" she stipulates). This, I suspect, was her own calculation — she gives no references for it. There simply is no way of estimating how many were killed: guesses vary from 30,000 up. Obviously the figure would be appallingly large whatever it was; one such death is too many; but we have nothing on which to base any calculation of an exact number. The figure of 9 million women executed has become an important part of a new mythology about the Witchcraze, and I will come back to it later.

Is it a bird?
Is it a plane?
)



CATH JACKSON

However, before the rediscovery of Gage in the mid-1970s, American feminists were already interested in witches and the Witchcraze, and I want first to look at what they thought about these issues. Robin Morgan's collection of writings from the Movement, *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970), contains documents from a group calling itself WITCH: (Women's International Conspiracy from Hell, or Women Inspired to Commit Herstory). Groups of this name popped up all over the States after Hallowe'en 1968, when the "mother coven" in New York did an action in Wall St:

... to pit their ancient magic against the evil powers of the Financial District — ... the Coven, costumed, masked ... dancing first to the Federal Reserve Treasury Bank, led by a High Priestess bearing the papier-mache head of a pig on a golden platter

The New York group also put out a leaflet explaining that:

... witches and gypsies were the original guerrillas and resistance fighters against oppression — particularly the oppression of women — down through the ages. Witches have always been women who dared to be: groovy, courageous, aggressive, intelligent, non-conformist, explorative, curious, independent, sexually liberated, revolutionary. (This possibly explains why 9 million of them have been burned)

Resistance fighters

The initial emphasis on witches as resistance fighters is familiar as far back as Michelet, and the idea of the non-conforming explorer from Lea and other 19th century sources. The 1960s here adds its own vision of the "groovy chick" to the composite picture. Even more attractive was the idea that any woman could join. The pamphlet went on:

You are a Witch by saying aloud 'I am a witch' three times, and thinking about that. The Chicago WITCH Coven put out a more closely argued (undated) leaflet reclaiming the witches as an important part of women's history:

Like other oppressed groups women have not been allowed to develop a consciousness of their own history . . . We demand to learn about the history of women in the same way that we demand that history be the history of the people, not of the elite.

The brief outline history of the Witchcraze that follows is heavily influenced by Michelet and possibly also by Margaret Murray's works, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921), and *The God of the Witches* (1931), both of which argue that witchcraft was an organised, pre-Christian religion surviving on amongst the peasantry, in whose rituals women played a prominent part. Here the Witchcraze is explained as the long struggle for supremacy between pagan and christian faiths. The witches are depicted as resisting the Church.

The pamphlet goes on:

... the witch was chosen as a revolutionary image for women because they did fight hard and in their fight they refused to accept the level of struggle which society deemed acceptable for their sex . . . as women today must assume positions of leadership if radical politics are to relate to the real oppression of people, and mutually, if women are to gain true equality in a revolutionary movement.

This final paragraph, I think, comes close to the reasons why American women were interested in the witches in the early 1970s. In her book *Going Too Far* (1978) Robin Morgan comments that the original WITCH group was composed "of women's liberationists who still strongly affirmed a Marxist analysis and a hip Left style". These women were confronting a radical movement dominated by men, and attempting to argue for equality with the men on their own political terms. The appeal to historical precedent is very much in line with the left-wing political thinking from which WITCH emerged. Morgan notes that the group, and her own reports on its activities in the radical press, were intended to gain approval from the male left for women's liberation.

The historical identification between WITCH and the original witches always remained rather playful, a stance taken for effect, according to Morgan:

We in WITCH always meant to do the real research, to read the anthropological, religious, and mythographic studies on the subject — but we never got around to it. We were too busy doing actions.

As a result the group accepted ready-made 'facts' about the Witchcraze, (such as the 9 million burned), which happened to fit their case, without questioning the sources too closely, and gave great publicity within the movement to the idea of the witch as revolutionary.



Where did WITCH find the idea that witches "really fought" against patriarchy and class oppression? I have suggested that this goes back to Michelet's vision of the witches leading a serf rebellion. Is it an analysis which the evidence will support? Certainly the Church was at odds with peasant communities on many issues at various times, but can this be seen as organised, conscious revolution?

American radical women needed a model of women in a leading revolutionary role which was specific to them as women, and felt they had found it in the witches. I would argue that this however is a piece of myth-making based more on a dream of what they would have liked it to have been.

It was, however, an immensely powerful view at the time. The publication, in 1973, of Thomas Szasz's book *The Manufacture of Madness*; which interprets the Witchcraze as a massive repression of non-conforming individuals by the Church, and makes a direct comparison with contemporary practices in psychiatry, added a further dimension to the picture of the witch as a woman in rebellion against the might of State power. 'The Burning Times' continue, but now with electric shock therapy.

To Szasz the witch is not a heroic resister so much as a victim. He takes up comparisons originally made by Hugh Trevor-Roper in his book *The European Witchcraze of the 16th and 17th Centuries*, published in 1967, between the witch-hunts and the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany. The emotive figure of '9 million burned' (which in fact

Robin Morgan notes that WITCH, and her own reports on its activities in the radical press, were intended to gain approval from the male left for women's liberation.

neither author gives credit to), has also been linked by feminist writers to the 6 million Jews who perished in the Holocaust.

In a footnote to her account of the Witchcraze, Mary Daly writes:

The witch trials in Germany were characterised by extreme brutality combined with masterful meticulousness. Yet most authors . . . write about the massacre of the Jews as if such sadism were without historical precedent. (1978)

What is Daly saying here? My understanding is that European Christians had been massacring Jews on a grand scale long before the Church turned its attention to witches, and that the two persecutions continued side by side for centuries.

Interestingly, in *Woman, Church and State* Gage, writing of the European Witchcraze, specifically mentions a place of execution in Madrid, known as the Quemadero de la Cruz. Here, she says, layers of ashes left by inquisitorial burnings lie feet deep, and implies that the victims were all convicted of witchcraft. In his book, however, Thomas Szasz, looking at the same evidence comments that the Spanish Inquisition burned fewer witches than anywhere else in continental Europe — because it was too busy exterminating Spanish Jews. It was the Jews who refused forced conversion to Christianity who were burned at Quemadero de la Cruz.

Feminist role models

Why have feminists insisted so strongly on the comparison between the Witchcraze and the Nazi persecutions? I would suggest that it has something to do with the moral status accorded to women as victims.

Lynnette Mitchell has commented on the determination with which some women cling to the highest estimated death-rates they can find when discussing the Witchcraze. She points out the profoundly anti-feminist politics of glorifying Woman as Victim. (*Trouble and Strife* 2).

In *Going Too Far*, Robin Morgan shows that a proper attitude to the 'fact' of the 9 million deaths became an issue in the split between gay rights activists and feminists in New York in the early 1970s.

"But how many of those 9 million women were actually lesbians?" demands a gay man. "How many of the 6 million Jews were Zionists?" counters Morgan.

My understanding is that European Christians had been massacring Jews on a grand scale long before the Church turned its attention to witches.

Elsewhere she refers to: ". . . the smoke of our 9 million martyrs".

The moral authority of any argument which has several million murdered people behind it is obvious. As a weapon of debate it was unanswerable. It was a clear, dramatic proof that women had been oppressed in the past just for being women, but it put the blame for this on the institutions of Church and State, rather than on individual men. This left it open for men on the radical Left to recognise women's legitimate claim for liberation, without feeling personally attacked.

Meanwhile, in 1973 Barbara Ehrenreich and Dierdre English published a pamphlet entitled *Witches, Midwives and Nurses* on the history of women's involvement in health care. The bibliography credits Jules Michelet and Thomas Szasz, along with Margaret Murray. They do not mention Gage, but she had in fact written at some length, and in a similar way, on witches as healers in *Women, Church and State*.

Ehrenreich and English take up the argument that:

The great majority (of witches) were lay healers serving the peasant population . . . The women's health movement today has ancient roots in the medieval covens, and its opponents have as their ancestors those who ruthlessly forced the elimination of the witches.

The emerging male medical profession, they argue, sought the suppression of female healers in competition with them. They argue that the witch was a practical scientist, experimenting with herbal drugs and learning from her results.

The idea of woman as especially suited to, and skilled in, the healing arts is taken up by other writers. Shuttle and Redgrove take it to extremes in *The Wise Wound*, (1978), where they argue that:

In the Middle Ages it has been estimated that nine million women were burned as witches for exercising their natural crafts of midwifery, hypnotism, healing, dowsing, dream-study and sexual fulfillment.

Mary Daly talks in *Gyn/Ecology* (1978) of the "native talent and superiority of women" in healing, and considers the Witchcraze as an attack by patriarchy on: ". . . a spiritual/moral/knowing elite cross-section of the female population of Europe."



CATH JACKSON

In the first issue of the French literary review *Sorcières*, (1976), Xaviere Gauthier takes up the same line:

In real, direct contact with nature, they breathed, touched, learned each flower, each plant, each herb . . . They (the witches) were the caretakers, the healers of the people.

Some of these authors make a claim for special female powers, which they say lay behind the witches' abilities. For Shuttle and Redgrove it is the power of menstruation: "It seems likely" they conclude "that the persecution of the Witches in the Middle Ages was one enormous menstrual taboo." For Gauthier it is sexual: "It has been said that the witches possessed a magic power. In fact, this was sexual . . . the Force of the body." For Daly the Witches were: ". . . the possessors of (unlegitimated) higher learning, that is, spiritual wisdom."

None of these authors gives their evidence for these claims in any detail. I find them problematic, as I am unable to accept that women are biologically destined to be the healers and spiritual leaders of the race, any more than I can accept the concept of 'maternal instinct'.

Shaky ground

Looking at the literature that I have been discussing, one can find claims that the witches were revolutionaries, proto-feminists, lesbians, pagan priestesses, alternative medical practitioners, experimental scientists and general super-women. The Witchcraze is explained in terms of sexual politics, religious struggle, the control of knowledge, and class war. The historic basis for many of these interpretations seems to rest on a few 19th century sources. Does it matter?

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The historic basis for many of these interpretations seems to rest on a few 19th century sources. Does it matter?

Xavier Gauthier wrote in 1976 that she chose *Witches* as a title for her magazine because: "... this word also resonates strongly in other women. But differently for each one." The image of the witch is very powerful, and a fertile source of inspiration for feminist writers. Surely it is legitimate to make what we want of it?

I think, however, that the authors I have referred to were interested in more than a folk-image. They refer back to the Witchcraze in order to prove something about the present. They are arguing upon historical precedent. They infer that history has a sort of factual reality which makes it a touchstone against which to test their views. So it should matter to them that their historical evidence is as good as possible.

Yet we find Mary Daly quoting with approval Monique Wittig's words: "Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent", as a motto for feminist researchers. Dale Spender meanwhile recommends a "knowledge strike", and argues that feminist historians have a duty to write selectively, presenting only positive views of women's achievements, because patriarchy makes: "... valuable use of any negative evidence we may construct about other women." (1982).

Should I not then gladly accept all the possible positive interpretations of the Witchcraze on offer? Does it matter that the small study I have made brings up a picture of women's lives in one obscure corner of 17th century Lancashire which conflicts with the claims made by these authors? Perhaps I have stumbled upon an exceptional case?

I am not at all sure of the answers, but I think the question matters. When we are arguing political conclusions from historical precedent our evidence ought to be investigated all along the line; if we come to believe in myths we may miss a more valuable insight into our own condition.

It matters to me that as feminists we should share what we find out about women's history with other women honestly, not over-simplifying and not glossing over our areas of ignorance. It is not in our interests to sell short the complex history we have — in fact we should be telling other historians that their level of awareness on women's history just isn't good enough.

It also seems extremely short-sighted to attempt any deliberate bias in handling the evidence we do find. In time such manipulations will be discovered, and feminism in general discredited through our work. (The story of Margaret Murray could serve as a warning here. Her use of selective quotation to prove her points having been exposed by Norman Cohn, her work has ceased to receive serious consideration.)

The difference in a feminist analysis of historical evidence must lie elsewhere than in the subject matter itself. I would suggest it might be in the value placed on the subject, and the relative importance given to issues within it. In the case of the Witchcraze this might involve asking not: "What did witches do?" but "Why did men engage in a witch-hunt?" Initially it might seem that attention was being shifted away from women here, but in fact the answer to the second question might tell us more about the nature of women's oppression.

The witches have been described as revolutionaries and guerrilla fighters, but I have yet to see the evidence to convince me of this. Undoubtedly women were among the surgeons and healers of their day, but many practised medicine without being accused of witchcraft, while very poor and ignorant women, (no threat to male doctors) were prosecuted. We do not even begin to have enough information on which to base an explanation of witch-hunting; but meanwhile a comforting belief in a group of super-women gets us nowhere, nor will a sentimental piety for "the smoke of our 9 million martyrs" bring the end of patriarchy one step nearer.

Victims or heroines

The literature I have been looking at seems to me often to imply a sense of choice and independence among women in the periods under discussion which seems out of place. One gets the impression that many accused witches had made a clear choice to struggle against patriarchal society. The horrifying thing to me, by contrast, was to see witch persecution as something that happened to perfectly ordinary women, not because they chose to fight, but because they were powerless to stop it. To me witchcraft was a symptom of women's weak position in society, not of some special strength.

I believe it is only by allowing ourselves to see the real nature and depth of oppression in the past and present that we can realistically hope to end it.

The victims and heroines approach, (which might be dubbed the Judy Chicago's Dinner Party school of women's history), will not help us here. I do not dispute the need to reclaim the names and deeds of women for the historical record, but the way in which individual women are ripped from their context to stand as models, for uncritically accepted virtues such as being a powerful ruler, or even worse, for the extreme quality of their suffering. (Lynnette Mitchell has written perceptively on the masochism that often seems to lurk in accounts of the torture and execution of witches.)

By concentrating on the victims and heroines we run the risk of missing valuable information about the ways in which women have survived. We might look harder at women's strategies of resistance within a hostile society.

To some extent this is already happening. Christina Larner's books on Scottish witchcraft trials are superb examples of detailed and critical attention to the evidence. There is, however, an immense amount of catching up to do, and meanwhile I would argue that we have a right to ask each other to take great care over the use of historical material in the service of political analysis. If there is to be a feminist history it will have to start from a profound distrust of accepted sources. □

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Thicker than water?

Women are challenging the concept of fatherhood by having and bringing up children outside the control of men. But divisions between mothers and non-mothers remain. Ruth Wallsgrove describes some of her own experiences of non-biological parenting and asks how far feminists have really gone towards abandoning patriarchal assumptions of parental power and ownership.

Children and motherhood — how much I've puzzled over them, though I've never wanted to give birth myself. I've always liked children, and believed I could work out some sort of relationship with them outside of motherhood. At one point I would say, if anyone asked, that I wanted to be an aunt. Beyond that I didn't think particularly theoretically, just assumed we should work out alternative ways of bringing up children, and that my part in this would be to commit myself to children who weren't 'mine'.

When I got out of college and began to meet feminist mothers of small children, I kept my eye out for possible ways to become involved — a search for compatible children and (more tricky) compatible mothers. I'd be the first to admit that I was young and foolish, not offering very much more than babysitting, but everyone was happy enough with that.

When challenged some years later to make more of a commitment, to do more real sharing, I was actually thrilled. Over time I'd come to appreciate what children require and began to adjust my life — the box of toys, the changes of clothes, the potty and nappies, the routine procedures of feeding and cleaning, the regularity of time, all those things I acquired. I didn't make speeches about my 'rights', but I also wouldn't have tolerated anyone making speeches about my irresponsibility as a non-mother, unless it was for practical purposes and intended to make things work better for everyone.

I ended up deciding — in a crisis — to take on two children full-time, when their mother felt she couldn't cope with them anymore. Or, rather, I have ended up losing altogether those children, just about the two human beings I cared most about in the world.

My situation was not, in fact, very unusual: it has happened to several other working class mothers and middle class non-mothers in the women's movement that I know of. The crucial problem was that the circumstance that made life so difficult for the mother in the first place, and that probably forced her to seek other carers for her children — her poverty as an extremely oppressed working class woman — was precisely the issue that blew up in both our faces. It's partly a dependency that doesn't feel entirely chosen; partly, I think, a matter of two different sorts of power balancing uneasily or not at all. I



PADDY STAMP

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can't feel blameless in or oppressed by that situation, however angry and hurt I was. What made me very much more cynical politically was the attitude of other, *middle class* feminist mothers at the time. Some of them knew instantly who to support when I lost access to the two I'd lived with — and it wasn't me. Whatever my experiences or commitment, I was a Non-Mother, on the other side from them.

It's not that I think non-mothers have done everything right. I do realise that those of us who get involved with children in ways other than giving birth to them have the freedom to be irresponsible, to leave, to cause trouble by going on about the right-on-ness of sharing and of mothers giving up certain things without understanding that lectures do not instantly alter feelings — and that the mother only has their word that they'll keep their side of the bargain. I've seen all that happen. I *can* get lost whenever I choose. And that's one of the reasons I'm not a mother. I don't really want sole responsibility for a child every day. But I *don't* get lost. I don't interfere, in the name of some higher political good, between the children I look after and their mothers. I do try to make the mothers' lives a little more pleasant, not less so, because helping lift the burden of work and exhaustion off mothers is a large part of the whole point for me.

And I do take it very, very personally every time a feminist mother complains about how non-mothers are oppressive, never give any support to mothers, and how children aren't taken seriously as an issue. You could say they don't mean *me*, really, but I don't know any more. I know that the fact that the mothers whose children I have looked after didn't want me being any closer than I was doesn't prove that there aren't others who'd appreciate sharing more. But I almost feel that the extent of my commitment is precisely what most feminist mothers don't want. They want support, on their terms, but they don't want to share.

Retaining the barriers

Does that sound horrible? I don't think it is — or it is only if we all believe that shared childcare, to the extent that the boundaries between being a mother and not being a mother become blurred, is the

feminist way forward. But who now wants that? Not those who are choosing to be mothers, obviously.

I know there is the line that no-one really chooses to have children; I suppose in many senses none of us *choose* to do anything. But if we don't accept that women, in certain privileged circumstances — such as being in the women's liberation movement — can make a choice to have children, aren't we claiming we're entirely passive, entirely without control of our lives? That women who do think very hard about the issue before they get pregnant are entirely misled in believing they are making a positive choice?

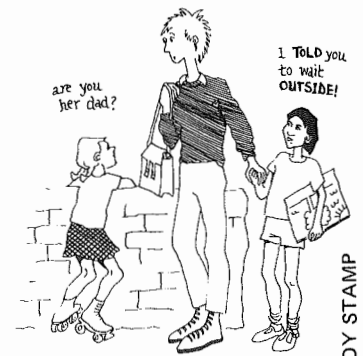
The argument that women don't choose, while intended to silence ridiculous liberal nonsense about how women who have children should have to suffer the consequences of society's poor treatment of them, can end up sounding suspiciously mystical. That there's something about giving birth, about making a baby with some bits of the same genetic material as yourself that is so different from — what? adoption? — as to make any comparisons between 'before' and 'after' meaningless (and conversation between mothers and non-mothers impossible?) Or that women don't choose, it's something spiritual moving in us... Excuse me, I've heard this one before somewhere.

Of course looking after a baby for one hour isn't the same as looking after it for 168 hours a week, but that's clear to anyone with any imagination, and surely both those of us who choose not to bear children and those who do can understand that equally.

Insisting that women don't 'choose' can sound like an insistence on a definite boundary — a statement not so much that women can't make sensible choices, but that motherhood is in itself qualitatively and intrinsically quite different from *any* other way of being involved with children. Perhaps that's what we all believe.

An informed choice

I'm going to take it that some of the women around me *are* making an informed choice to become mothers, without necessarily believing they know exactly what it will be like — they wouldn't need to experience it if they did, I suppose. (Well, I feel that way myself about most things I think



PADDY STAMP

On the issue of what it feels like to see lots of the lesbian feminists around you getting pregnant, please see Sheila Shulman's "Lesbian Feminists and the Great Baby Con" in *Spinster* issue no. 3.

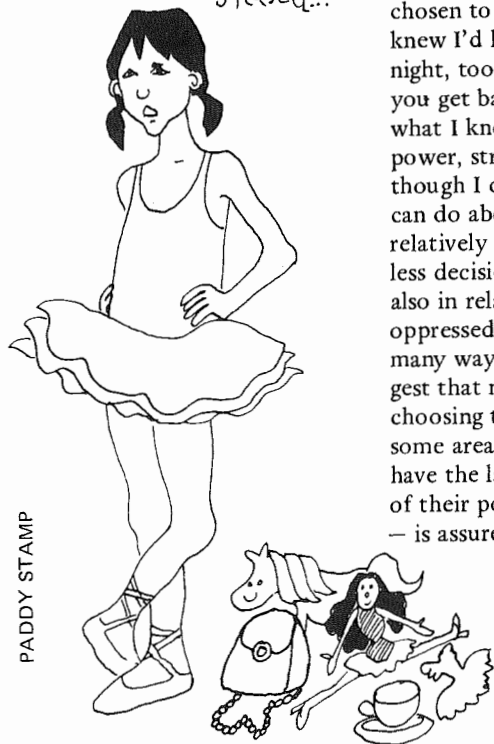
Spinster is available from 40 St Lawrence Terrace, London W10. 75p plus p+p.

about doing — the point is to do things that you can learn from, not things you already know everything about.) What is it that they are choosing?

Some of them, I know are choosing to become mothers because shared childcare didn't work out for them — they were never given enough time or say with children that didn't 'belong' to them, and sometimes even lost them, as I did. They have come to feel the only way to make sure of a secure relationship with a child is to have one of their own. Of course I understand that. I felt, for the only time in my life, that I wanted a child just after I'd lost all access to the two I'd been parenting. But I couldn't do it, mostly because I knew no child of my own would ever substitute for them. But other women feeling they have to have one of their own is accepting the division between mothers and non-mothers. A division, ultimately, of control?

Women I know — feminists, mostly lesbians — who are choosing to have babies want to be mothers, not non-biologically-determined parents. They want to *have* a baby, not access to someone else's. They want it to know they are its mother; to be identified as mothers socially; yes, even to be the one who *has* to get up in the middle of the night. If that sounds crazy to some non-mothers, it doesn't to me. I've chosen to put myself into situations where I knew I'd have to get up in the middle of the night, too. I know something about what you get back for doing that; and part of what I know is that you get a sense of power, strangely. Not just over the child, though I do think there's nothing adults can do about the fact that children are relatively helpless and dependent on countless decisions we must make for them, but also in relation to other adults. Mothers are oppressed by male-dominated society in so many ways, as are non-mothers. But I suggest that many feminists who are now choosing to have children want to have some area of life, childcare, where they'll have the last word, where the importance of their position — as one and only Mum — is assured.

well, I don't
want to be
shared...



Control

They know, of course, that they'll have to struggle for control with schools and other institutions, particularly if they are Black, Jewish, working class, lesbian, and/or disabled. But they can choose, using self-insemination, not to set up any struggle for control with individuals, with fathers — or female non-mothers, either. If they are doubly oppressed, they may well want to bring up children to identify with their culture and not be swamped with the external ruling culture, whether that's transmitted by institutions or by other feminists, which is a good reason for working class or Black or Jewish women to be wary of sharing with WASP or middle class women. But the issue for everyone is surely still control.

I don't want to sound cynical, let alone hopelessly bitter about mothers. I'm trying to let go of bitterness. I understand women are coming more and more to want to have their children without interference from any other adults. So many mothers around me, non-feminist as well as feminist, aren't looking for ways to off-load the caring for their children, but positively appreciating being the adult who's in control. What they want, and need, is more money, better housing, more and better childcare facilities — nurseries with parental control, schools with more parental say. And good creches at conferences and childcare for meetings and socials, as a matter of course. All that has to be a major priority of the women's liberation movement.

And yet, if I've stopped being angry at feminist mothers, individually and collectively, I think I'm still going to remain a little sad at it all. At the passing of my youthful idealism about new ways of bringing up children, I suppose — of breaking down society's divide-and-rule into mothers (Real Women, but ignored) and non-mothers (who don't even count as adults). What do we *mean* by 'motherhood' anyway? Is the only way to survive such a woman-hating, child-excluding culture to take the small power and status the label 'mother' gives us in return for the isolation? In which case, how can we prevent endless tension between mothers who feel unsupported — and non-mothers who feel betrayed? □

FEMINISM

MADE IN
JAPAN

In a country where 'feminist' means a man who likes women and the structure of the language itself effectively stops women getting close to each other, Japanese women are fighting to establish a women's liberation movement of their own. Amanda Hayman reports on three successful feminist projects in Tokyo.

I came to Japan in 1980 for no particular reason except that my sister was here and I fancied a change of scene. Having been involved with several feminist groups in Manchester where I lived, I immediately sought out contacts. There was (and still is) an English-speaking group called International Feminists of Japan (IFJ), which I promptly joined and was soon asking around about Japanese women's groups. The prospects for contact were not promising. I was told that, in addition to serious language problems, Japanese feminists were not interested in contact with western feminists, having enough to do fighting sexism, without dealing with racism and imperialism as well. Occasionally I met Japanese feminists and lesbians socially, and I knew of a few foreign women who were fluent in Japanese and worked with Japanese feminist groups. However as my Japanese was not up to any kind of lengthy conversation I knew I'd be a liability at political meetings.

Then, in May 1983, the first International Feminist Conference was held in Tokyo, sponsored jointly by IFJ and AGORA, a Japanese feminist group. All the workshops were presented in Japanese and English, and every comment made or opinion stated by the participants was conscientiously translated. Connections had been made. As a result of this conference I and three other western women started working with members of the LF (Lesbian Feminist) Centre,

who were soon to open the Rape Crisis Centre, and were eager to get information from abroad. Using both Japanese and English, halting and often unbearably frustrating though those meetings were, we managed some discussions on ideology and theory, as well as grass roots problem-solving sessions. From then on things snowballed, and I became involved with other Japanese women's groups, as my confidence in my ability to communicate in Japanese grew. And of course other women at the conference were starting different multilingual projects, such as TWIN, the Tokyo Women's Information Network, whose aim is to provide bilingual information about as wide a range of subjects as possible to women in Tokyo.

It is with some trepidation that I write this article on feminism in Japan, being aware of how easy it is for a white, middle class woman to be imperialistic. However, I've heard women exclaim in amazement, "You mean there are feminists in Japan", so I'm going to do my best to describe a few of the many many feminist groups that do exist. As I said before, language is a big stumbling block, and it is only due to the patience of the women I interviewed that I was able to write this at all. However, they too are anxious that their activities be more widely known and, after reading what I have written about their own group, feel that it is an accurate representation.

The Japanese character for 'woman'. Characters incorporating the symbol for 'woman' often have derogatory meanings.

The Tokyo Rape Crisis Centre



The Japanese character for 'disturbance, hindrance or obstruction'.

"Our aims for the future are the same as they have always been - to fight rape as defined by our twofold working definition:
Rape is a form of sexual violence through which women are controlled, conquered and possessed.
Rape is any sexual act which a woman does not want."
(Chiyuki Tada.)

Being the first Rape Crisis Centre in Japan isn't easy. There's no-one to turn to for advice, and no role models for the most effective way to operate alongside the Japanese culture. The originators of the Tokyo Rape Crisis Centre were two women who comprised the Lesbian Feminist Centre. For years they had been concerned about the growing pornography industry in Japan, and after showing a collection of slides from the US on the subject, the script for which they translated into Japanese, they felt they could no longer bear to be inactive. For them the connections between compulsory heterosexuality, pornography and rape were overwhelming, so they started the centre to provide a much needed service and raise public consciousness about women's position in society.

"The right to choose to be a Lesbian is diametrically opposed to a society where men use rape to impose enforced heterosexuality."
(Chiyuki Tada, Co-founder, Tokyo Rape Crisis Centre.)

In 1982 they began researching rape statistics, attending trials, and considering the problems that would be inherent in setting up such a centre. One of the biggest problems was money. No government grants are available for feminist groups, and Japan does not have a history of handouts from charitable foundations, so the initial financing came from the women themselves, who made loans to the centre. A centrally situated office where they could answer calls was also a high priority need. In western Rape Crisis Centres answering machines are used which give the home phone number of the woman on duty, but in Japan this system would not work. Apartments are small, with doors between rooms made literally of paper, and few women have any kind of privacy in their living



The Japanese character for 'wickedness, mischief or rudeness'.

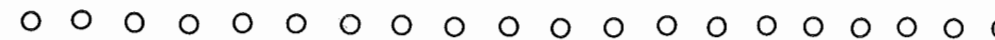
arrangements. And of course there was the issue of publicity. How would women know of their existence, and would they even understand that the centre was there to help them? The Chinese character for rape had (and still has) negative and indecent connotations and had to be reclaimed to define the experience of women.

On 1 September 1983, the lines were opened three nights a week from 7-10 pm. A tiny one room apartment had been found, ironically enough in an area of central Tokyo infamous for 'adult entertainment'. Their number had grown to five, but for safety reasons one woman couldn't be in the centre alone, which seriously taxed their limited resources. As a new venture several of the national daily newspapers and women's magazines wanted to interview them, and stickers were distributed throughout the Tokyo area, which resulted in calls coming in almost at once, from as far apart as Hokkaido in the North and Kyushu in the South. In October of the same year the first training course for women interested in becoming counsellors started, planned and led by the same five women who were answering the calls. By now they'd built up a team of advisors, including feminist counsellors, doctors and lawyers, and these professional women contributed to the training programme.

The relationship between the Rape Crisis Centre and the police is non-existent, because of their attitude regarding violence towards women. Recently a member of the centre was passing a police box outside which a woman was being beaten up. A policeman shouted to the male assailant not to beat the woman up outside the police box, but to go and do it at home. The Rape Crisis Centre member protested, both at the police box and the area police station, where she was told it was none of her business, and anyway the couple were married. And for a few days she and another RCC staff member were followed by plain-clothes policemen.

Whilst the general atmosphere towards Rape Crisis Centres is different in the West and in Japan, the statistics regarding rape - place, known or unknown attacker, frequency, etc, seem very similar. The same

myths abound, whilst the sexual exploitation of women in Japan, both native and foreign (particularly those from South East Asia) is notorious. At the time of writing, one year and two months from the initial opening of the centre, a total of 352 calls have been received. The third training course



Space Eiga Sai

Despite its location in an apartment building near the elevated motorway, Space Eiga Sai is a peaceful place for women to meet. One of the few women-only spaces in Tokyo, Space Eiga Sai (the name means Film Festival Space) is the office of the Women's International Film Festival group.

Space Eiga Sai isn't just an office, however. It is an informal meeting space for feminists (Japanese and foreign) from all over the country. For a charge of 300 yen (about £1) you can drop in anytime at the weekend and stay as long as you like drinking coffee, watching the wonderful selection of videos kept there on issues of interest to women, or join one of the informal discussion groups that are often happening. There is also an ongoing display and sale of women's arts and crafts - clothes, stationary and pottery are just a few examples. And all this in one room 30' by 12'!

It all started in 1978 when Japan's first International Women's Film Festival included films such as *Home Movie*, *Roll Over*, *Take it Like A Man*, *Ma'am* and *Never Give Up*, none of which had been seen before in Japan. Since that time the Women's International Film Festival group has rented films made by women from all over the world to various women's groups throughout Japan. These include individual women at University researching women's problems; working women, some connected to unions, looking into working conditions for their counterparts at home and abroad; and also a few housewives, though these are a tiny minority. Almost all the women who rent these films are middle class with at least two years' further education. The women gain more than the experience of just seeing the film, as Hiroko Uchida, the unpaid staff member explained. "Often the usual meeting places of these groups are coffee shops

is well under way, and the number of members has grown to 10.

Despite the hostile atmosphere of the surrounding society, the centre is determined to continue counselling and campaigning for women's freedom until no woman has to walk the streets in fear.

or classrooms, but when they rent a film they also have to find the space to show it and learn how to run the projector". The package the groups receive includes ideas for post-viewing discussions, so that women can consider the similarities between what they've just seen and their daily lives.

I asked Hiroko about their policy regarding men seeing the films. She smiled and told me, "Basically we rent only to women's groups, and though men are sometimes members it isn't a problem. They simply aren't interested enough in women-made films to attend". The group has films from Japan, Denmark, America, England and Germany, but before the foreign ones can be used in Japan their group members have the laborious and time-consuming task of making subtitles.

In 1984 their major event was the showing of *Germany Pale Mother*, directed by Helma Sanders-Brahms, at a downtown Tokyo cinema. It had a run of six weeks and was seen by 25,000 people. On each Saturday the film was followed by a symposium led by a prominent Japanese feminist, among them Chieko Kotoda, the much-respected critic of war films, and Yuko Tsushima. The latter is famous for her many books on the problems of mother-daughter relationships, which contain a feminist viewpoint unusual in Japanese literature, and for her often-made statement that 'motherhood is not a radical activity'. One of her most acclaimed books *Yama O Kakeru Onna* is published in English under the title *Running On the Mountain*. She is a 38 year old divorcee; in Japan publicly announcing this fact is in itself a statement of non-conformity. The aim of these symposiums was to make the connections between post-war lives of women in Germany, and the lifestyle of Japanese women today.

Contact the Tokyo Rape Crisis Centre at PO Box 7, Joto Post Office, Koto-ku, Tokyo 136. Their present financial situation is grim, so donations are desperately needed.



Another Japanese character for 'wickedness or mischief' As an adjective it means 'noisy or boisterous'.

The members of Space Eiga Sai are interested in hearing from women's film collectives and women film makers in the UK. You can contact them at: Space Eiga Sai, Toto Residence 401, Yoyogi 4-28-5, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo, Japan.

The Organisation for Creating Our Equal Employment Law



The Japanese character for 'repugnant, distasteful, offensive'.

I talked to Mariko Mitsui, who has been a member of this group since it began, at her home in West Tokyo.

A: *When did the group start?*

M: At the end of 1978, when we got the idea from some members of an international women's group who had been to Europe, and talked to a big meeting of Japanese women about European labour laws and women's situation there. We felt we had to press the government to do something about the employment law here.

A: *What were the first problems with starting the organisation?*

M: Lack of active members — the women who were actually interested in *doing* something were mostly those who were already active in other groups, such as the International Women's Year Action group.

A: *And what was the first action that the group organised?*

M: In January 1979 we had a meeting and over 1,000 women came, and we suggested that this name be used and everyone applauded, and so the group was officially started. Then we made our 'guidelines', covering every stage of employment from advertising and hiring to retirement, using language that everyone could understand, instead of legal terms. This was based on the Japan Socialist Party's draft for the Equal Employment Act.

A: *How is what the Government (The Liberal Democratic Party) is offering you different from what you want?*

M: Well, first there will be almost no legal redress for not obeying the law — it will, in fact, only be a recommendation that employers try to hire, place, pay, etc, men and women equally. The Japanese version of the Equal Opportunities Commission will be called the Arbitration Organisation, and it will be staffed by only three people. Women will not be able to go directly to this organisation, but must first try and work things out with their employers, who

can then approach the Arbitration Organisation if negotiations are unsuccessful. However, this committee will only have the role of arbitrator, and will be unable to force any employer to change discriminatory practices. We want non-compliance to be punishable by law.

We are also particularly anxious that the law have a very strict rule against sex discrimination at the advertising and hiring stage. Of companies surveyed in 1977 92% said that they had jobs that were not open to women, and by 1981 this figure was still 83.4%. This is true not only for white-collar workers, but in factories and department stores, where the promotion examinations may be taken only by men. The only place in the Government draft where legal action is recommended for violation is in the area of retirement age — this must be the same for men and women. However, ironically enough, the Supreme Court has already ruled that discrimination against women regarding retirement age is illegal, so this is nothing new. Retirement is also the only place in the draft where the words "sex discrimination" or "equal employment" are used. Another thing we are being 'offered' is menstrual leave (at present all Japanese women workers are allowed one day off a month by law). Again this is something we already have, which women in the labour unions fought hard to get.

And the Government is also trying to abolish the present Labour Law, which prevents women from working after 10 pm, and bring in new regulations, allowing factory workers to work 6 hours overtime a week, and female company workers will not have any regulations for overtime. We want to keep the law as it is now, adding supplementary articles making exceptions — for example television announcers or company workers.

A: *What actions has the group recently been involved in?*

M: All our actions are aimed at stopping the Government's draft from becoming law,

and to do that we need the support of public opinion, which can sometimes affect Government decisions. Next year being the final year of the United Nations International Women's Decade, the Government is very keen to show the world what Japan has achieved, whilst we are trying to slow down the process, so as to give the JSP's draft a chance to be introduced.

Last year women went to listen to the parliamentary debate after the draft had been introduced in the Lower House. Usually only 20 or 30 people go to listen, but on one occasion more than 300 women went, which caused terrific disruption, as the guard couldn't cope with body-checking all those women, and issuing them with entry passes. And on 24 July 1983, the day the Lower House passed the draft, more than 100 feminists demonstrated outside parliament dressed as ghosts, symbolizing the killing of our hopes and our draft. They marched wearing white kimonos and carrying a banner saying "Abolish advertising and hiring sex discrimination laws". The most recent action was in March 1984, when we had a hunger strike outside the Labour Ministry in Tokyo. Ten women were there for a total of four days, appealing for a 'true equal employment law'.

These actions are also significant because they are the first time that women in feminist groups and women in labour unions

have worked together. The latter had become disillusioned, because their unions were very slow at working for improvement in women's working conditions, and so they turned to our organisations. These women are very important to our group, and have enormous networking opportunities. Now we have a total of 400 members.

A: *How can women in other countries support you?*

M: By remembering the situation of Japanese women when they look at their cheap, efficient Japanese car or stereo, and talking to other people about this exploitation. They can also write letters to the English language newspapers printed in Japan (addresses from the Japanese Embassy), and we'd love to receive letters of support. Sometimes we feel isolated here, and get discouraged, which is why we need to hear from other women about how they organise and what is successful.

A: *Anything else you'd like to say?*

M: What happens in Japan could really affect conditions for women all over South East Asia — if Japan passes a miserable Equal Employment law, then it's possible other Asian countries will follow. On the other hand, if the Japanese law is good, then it could open up new possibilities for other Asian women.

The Organisation for Creating Our Equal Employment Law, JOKI, Nakazawa Bldg. 3F, Araki-cho 23, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo, Japan.



Even with these and other successful projects being carried out in the two or three largest cities it is hard to be optimistic about the future for feminism here. Women's Japanese, sharply distinguished from men's, rarely encompasses the informal ranges and prevents women from getting close to each other and exchanging confidences in the course of their daily life. And ordinary women (my students) I've tried talking to about feminism have, on the whole, shown only studied disinterest, thinly masked by 'polite attention'. The word 'feminist' is used in Japanese, but to the general public means a man who likes, or is nice to, women.

I don't go to the political meetings of

Japanese groups anymore though I hope to learn more about the latest developments at future conferences. I don't understand the cultural problems they are up against well enough to do more than tell them what I know or have read about similar groups/situations in the West. And even though they may want to hear, I'm reluctant to introduce ways of doing things that I'm not sure are successful in my own culture, let alone in a Japanese setting. If, however, I can help any woman or group by writing letters, reading and summarising articles or providing any kind of English language service I do so. I feel that this kind of help, and money, are the best contributions western women can make to furthering feminism in Japan. □



The Japanese character for 'jealousy, envy'.

Calligraphy by Lesley Hayman

FAIR MEANS



JUDY STEVENS

OR FOWLER

The recently published government Green Paper on social security contains a direct attack on women's rights. It will soon become a White Paper and then law. Hilary Land looks in detail at what it could mean for us.

"Social security must be designed to reinforce personal independence . . . to widen, not restrict, people's opportunity to make their own choices . . ." (Vol 1, para 1.6). This is what the Government say they believe, in the Green Paper on the *Reform of Social Security*, published in June 1985.

'People' does not include women for they are to be pushed more firmly back into dependence on the family, meaning men. On key issues affecting women's economic security the Green Paper is silent. Far from building on what has been achieved as the Green Paper claims to do, many of the modest gains women made as a result of the 1975 social security legislation, and later extended by the 1978 EEC directive requiring equal treatment for men and women, will be lost. The State Earnings Related Pension Scheme (SERPS) is to be abandoned. This favours the well paid and ignores those who care for them. Child benefit, is threatened with being gradually replaced by a new means-tested Family Credit paid not to women, but to men in their wage packets. In sum, the Green Paper represents a massive attack on the rights of all women.

This comes as no surprise, for this Government has shown scant regard for women or indeed children. The rhetoric about the importance of family life means women should put their responsibilities for caring for children, the sick, elderly and husbands first. This weakens their already marginal claims within a shrinking formal labour market and increases their dependence on men within the home. At the same time the dependence of women and children

on the male breadwinner serves to make men more 'responsible' workers. Nevertheless, reading the Green Paper and seeing the rhetoric translated into concrete proposals for reshaping our social security system is deeply shocking because if implemented, they spell deeper and more widespread poverty, particularly for women and children.

Child benefit and family credit

A year ago, when the Review teams were still taking evidence, it seemed possible that child benefit would be substantially modified, perhaps becoming means-tested, or at best subject to tax. However, the survey of public attitudes carried out by the Gallup Poll for the DHSS in the New Year showed that the majority thought that it was important that the State should give help to all families with children, irrespective of their income. The survey also

revealed strong support (71%) for the current child benefit arrangement of paying benefit to the mother rather than the previous system which involved a combination of tax and family allowances.

(Green Paper, Vol 3, 4.37)

Forced to recognise this widespread support, the Green Paper acknowledged that:

The case for changing it (child benefit) has not been made out. The Government do not therefore propose to alter its basis or structure. (Vol 2, 4.37)

However, less than two weeks after the publication of the Green Paper, the Government failed to uprate child benefit in line with inflation. Unable to cut child benefit outright, the government will try to kill it slowly by neglect. In the Green Paper's

discussion about Family Credits, a means-tested benefit to replace FIS in the short term (and child benefit in the long run) their true attitudes and objectives are revealed.

Family Credit is clearly an instrument to reduce demands for higher wages among low paid men. Norman Fowler learned during the health workers' strike that the existence of child benefit did not diminish demands for 'a family wage', because it did not show up in the wage packet. So, it is proposed that the family credit will be paid by the employer in the *man's* wage packet, (FIS and child benefit which is currently paid by order book, is usually claimed by the mother.) This, the Green Paper states will:

offer significant advantages for employers in ensuring that employees perceive more clearly the total net remuneration they receive rather than earnings net of tax and national insurance alone. (Vol 2, 4.50)

Those in receipt of Family Credit, unlike current recipients of FIS, will not get other benefits such as free school meals and welfare foods: these will be restricted to those on Income Support (supplementary benefit's successor). The proposals therefore "will prevent families in nearly all circumstances from facing a position in which there is little or no financial benefit to be gained from *continuing in lower paid jobs*". (My emphasis; Vol 2, para 4.53.)

The proposed changes in support for families also applies some of the lessons learnt during the miners' strike. Means-tested benefits are open to political manipulation in ways which benefits paid to everyone are not. Strikers have always been disqualified from receiving supplementary benefit for themselves except for once-off emergency payments. However, since 1971 strike pay has been taken into account when assessing the entitlement of a striker's wife and children. This rule applied to strike pay actually being paid. However under the Social Security Act 1980, even if *no* strike pay was being received "notional" strike pay could be deducted, thus reducing a wife's benefit by *two-thirds*. In addition all claims for Family Income Supplement from wives of strikers were refused on the grounds that their income during the strike was not "normal" (since November 1984, married

women have been able to claim FIS if they are the "breadwinner"). Thus, the rights of the wives and children of striking miners to a minimum income decreased as the strike progressed. In contrast, child benefit was not open to such manipulation and therefore indirectly helped to sustain the strike. Family Credit will be very easy to withhold during a strike and as it is administered by employers, the DHSS can distance itself from any decision to do so.

Provisions such as free school meals to low income families could not be manipulated because at present local authorities have the power to decide on who is eligible for them. The Green Paper contains proposals to remove this power, allowing local authorities to provide free meals *only* to those on Income Support. (Even the original 1906 legislation on school meals did not restrict eligibility for free meals to Poor Law children.) This further erodes what is left of the school meals service and withdraws school meals from 500,000 children currently receiving free meals whose parents are *not* on supplementary benefit. Such a measure will considerably reduce the number of children who will be fed adequately both during an industrial dispute and in its aftermath. Such assistance to striking miner's children was important. For example, during the first six months of the strike Rotherham Metropolitan District Council had spent over £200,000 on milk and meals (Sutcliffe and Hill, 1985, p37).

Maternity benefit

Further evidence of this Government's lack of concern for the welfare of mothers and children is provided by the proposal to cut maternity provisions. The universal £25 cash maternity grant is to go and is to be replaced by a means-tested grant from the Social Fund, worth, it is suggested, about £75. (The Social Fund will replace special needs payments and pay mainly means-tested *loans* not grants.) But even for the poorest mothers this represents a cut because in 1984/1985 one in four mothers received, on average, a £60 grant from supplementary benefit and for most this would have been in addition to the £25 maternity grant (Vol 2, para 5.12).

The weekly contributory maternity benefit is to be linked more firmly to

recent employment experience rather than to contributions paid perhaps eighteen months earlier. This makes some sense but the suggestion that maternity pay (which in 1984/85 only one in six of women having babies qualified for) should be increased in scope by reducing the qualifying period and making the right to it transferable between employers is rejected. Maternity pay it is argued is "a form of reward for continuous service with *one* employer for a period of years" (my emphasis; Vol 2, para 5.22). This is nonsense because all employers contribute to the cost of maternity pay. The real reason is that such a proposal "would, of course, add to public expenditure and to administrative and financial burdens on employers" (Vol 2, para 5.11).

Pensions

"We can act now so that virtually everyone retiring in the first part of the next century has *his* own pension" (my emphasis; Vol 1, para 6.2). Women's needs for an adequate income in old age get scant attention. The Green Paper's proposals to abolish SERPS and rely on the private sector to supplement the basic State pension will reverse many of the modest gains made in the 1975 legislation. The 1975 Social Security Pensions Act protected women's rights to a basic State pension while out of the labour market because of "home responsibilities" (ie caring for children or sick or elderly relatives). It also based the earnings related component of the pension on the best *twenty* years of paid work. This was a recognition that pension provisions based on the assumption that everyone has continuous and full-time paid employment throughout their working life would not keep most pensioners out of poverty. After all, among the pensioner population there are twice as many women as men (and among the over eighties, three times as many). Even the Green Paper notes it is widows and the very elderly who are currently disproportionately dependent on supplementary benefit (Vol 2, para 1.25).

The Green Paper's proposals if implemented will increase rather than decrease the probability that women will face poverty when they are old. At least one in four women currently marrying are

likely to experience divorce rather than widowhood if current trends continue. If the Government believes marriage can provide economic security for women even in old age, then the claims that former spouses can make on the pension entitlements of the other ought to be discussed. Currently a woman whose marriage ends in divorce is likely to lose any claim on her husband's occupational pension scheme. The Matrimonial and Family Proceedings Act 1984 made no specific mention of the allocation of pension rights on divorce although these may be as valuable an asset as the matrimonial home. The Green Paper does not discuss this issue at all.

This might matter less if women's rights and needs as workers were more fully recognised. The Green Paper does not do this, not least because the social security needs of part-time employees are not even mentioned. In 1982, the EEC published a draft directive proposing that part-time employees should get State and occupational benefits enjoyed by full-time employees on a pro-rata basis. The British Government is actively *opposing* this draft directive. Currently, women do not have equal access to occupational pension schemes because it is not unlawful to distinguish between part-time and full-time employees. Most schemes do so. This means that about one in six of all employees (nearly all of them women) have no opportunity to acquire an earnings related pension either through SERPS or their employer. The Green Paper's proposals will do nothing for them.

In any case occupational pension schemes cannot meet the needs of those whose earnings are interrupted. The new "portable" pensions, which can take the form either of a personal annuity or buying into a new employer's scheme, helps the workers who move from one paid job to another but does nothing for those who move from paid work to unpaid work in the home. While a money purchase scheme will provide a pension little different from SERPS for those who have continuous employment for 40 years, even if they only contribute at the proposed minimum rate, those with significant breaks in earnings will get much less.

One pensions expert, Sue Ward, has calculated that "a woman who brings up children will be rewarded with half the pensions of a man, *even when she is on the same earnings*" (my emphasis; NCCL, 1985, p3). But the situation is worse than that because most women will *not* be earning the same as a man on average. As Heather Joshi's analysis of the Department of Employment's 1980 data shows, women's different employment patterns seriously and permanently impair a woman's earning capacity. She calculated that "family formation has a lasting effect . . . it depresses women's *life-time earnings* on average between 25–50%" (my emphasis; Martin J and Roberts C; 1985, p99). Women are thus doubly penalised for taking breaks in paid employment in order to do the socially useful and necessary work of caring for children, the sick and the old. SERPS was at least an attempt to reduce this penalty – a little. (Some men of course then argued that it was *too generous* to women! See, for example, the Institute of Fiscal Studies (Hemming and Kay, 1982; p304).

Pensions for widows under retirement age are to be abolished if they have no dependent children on the grounds that most widows now have paid employment. This is true, although much of it is part-time and badly paid. Such a move is welcome in so far as it weakens the assumption that women are men's dependants but the lump sum that will replace it is hardly adequate for a widow to get a firmer foothold in the labour market. It will hit working class women harder because they marry and have their children younger. The £1,000 proposed will be sufficient to disqualify them from any help from the Social Fund. This includes help towards the cost of the funeral because this, like the maternity grant, will be a loan recoverable if necessary from the deceased person's estate.

What it's all about

The Green Paper's proposals of course are not really concerned with strengthening women's attachment to and rights within the labour market. Another example of this is the proposal to change the earnings disregard for those on Income Support. Although the proposal is to raise the disregard to £15, this means *gross earnings*. For

lone mothers, this will represent a cut because the current limit, although much lower, is based on *net earnings*, enabling child care expenses to be offset against them. Thus women on Income Support are likely to stay out of the labour market until they can get back to full-time work and off Income Support altogether. This, as we have seen, will not only mean women enduring poverty for longer but will also impair their earning capacity in the future. Marriage or remarriage may seem more attractive in economic terms.

This Government is clearly hoping there will be fewer lone parent households in future. There are other proposals in the Green Paper which will make it hard for women to live independently of men. It is proposed to stop paying the interest element of mortgage repayments to those on Income Support until they become long term claimants. This means that women who live in privately owned houses and who want to leave their husbands are going to face greater financial hardship, even if they manage to stay in the matrimonial home. There will be more pressure on them either to stay with their husbands or move in with another man. Either course may involve physical danger to the woman and her children.

Family support within the tax system, which favours men, whether or not they have dependent children, and benefits the higher income groups the most, has *increased*. Children's tax allowances disappeared with the introduction of child benefits, but as if to compensate men for the loss of child tax allowances, the married man's tax allowance is now 17% higher than if it had been increased by the statutory uprating formula since this Government came into office. Its abolition would generate resources which could be used to *double* child benefit; thus "targetting", to use the Green Paper's jargon, on those families needing help.

There are many other aspects of the Green Paper's proposals which fail to recognise women's needs. Our system of personal tax allowances costs a total of one and a half times as much as the whole of the social security budget. Both systems need reviewing *together* and the concept of women's dependency on men removed from *both*. □



Fast Food Feminism

'Fat is a Feminist Issue' was supposed to put bodysize on the political agenda. But does the book actually take a feminist approach to the issues of food and 'figure'? Cath Jackson takes a bite out of this classic and finds it a fast-food substitute for the real thing.

Fat is a feminist issue . . . is one of the most influential and widely-known books to have come out in the last ten years of feminist thought and writing. It sold millions when it was first published in Britain in 1978. It is still selling millions. When I went to my local library to get a copy for this review, the book was consistently out for several weeks and I had to make a special request for its return. *Womansize*, by Kim Chernin, was, however, there on the shelf, its spine barely creased. My copy of *Fat is a feminist issue* . . . when it finally arrived, was well-thumbed and heavily underlined at various key points (though predictably free of jam and marmalade stains).

"Fat is a feminist issue" is among the top ten favourite feminist slogans. It is a catchphrase for most western women, used freely in women's, health and diet magazines. Say the word FIFI and half the country's population knows exactly what you mean. There's FIFI One and FIFI Two and FIFI on tape; somewhere, no doubt, there's an enterprising fast-food emporium selling Fifi-burgers; a sesame-seeded lettuce leaf in a polystyrene box.

The Women's Therapy Centre in London, established by Orbach herself, still runs

regular courses for compulsive eaters, and self-help groups spring up year after year like mushrooms in the rain. *Spare Rib* is full of adverts for such groups and letters debating the issues of eating disorders and body size. I'm sure it would not be a gross generalisation to say that one of the first steps for a woman finding her way into feminist politics is to throw away her diet books and get a copy of FIFI. I went to an exhibition of home interiors through the ages and there, in the 20th century kitchen, next to the wire shopping basket laden with low-fat yoghurts and tins of baked beans, was a copy of FIFI.

So what was so new and revolutionary about Susie Orbach's book? What makes it still so influential today when so many other books on the same subject have sunk without trace or remain on the shelves, untouched by female hand? Why is it that women who haven't even read it assume it is a politically sound feminist analysis of women and bodysize? Why did we in the Women's Liberation Movement instantly claim it for our own and spend countless hours in innumerable consciousness-raising groups discussing it and its theories?

Fat is a feminist issue . . . (the dots are,

EOC, *Caring for the Elderly Handicapped*, 1982.
Martin J and Roberts C, *Women and Their Employment*, HMSO, 1984, p111.
NCCL, Rights for Women Unit, *Newsletter*, Vol 1, No 3, July 1985.
Sutcliffe L and Hill B, *Let Them Eat Coal*, Canary Press, 1985.
The Reform of Social Security, Vol 1 Cmnd, 9517, HMSO, 1985.
The Reform of Social Security, Vol 2 Cmnd, 9518, HMSO 1985.

Food, says Orbach, is a synthetic sweetener to conceal the bitterness and fury we feel over the denial of our status as equals with men.

I feel, important) was the first book to examine the issues of women, food and body size from a stated feminist perspective. No-one before had written and put into mass circulation a book which told us that fat women were not disgusting, greedy, weak-willed and repulsive. Susie Orbach brought the closet life of the compulsive eater out into the open. She named our problem, she even gave us a whole new vocabulary to describe it. By speaking of it, by encouraging us to speak to one another about it, she offered us a way out of the vicious circle of diet and binge within which we were trapped. It was not our fault, she said; society, conditioning, our oppression as women, these forces were to blame. She put what seemed to us to be some dreadful and disgusting personal failing into a social and political framework, on the basis that the personal is political, and gave us attention, consideration, understanding. Furthermore, she confessed to being one of us, a compulsive eater too. She told us how she had worked her way through it and was now cured. Now she was able to tell us her secret; for no more than the price of a week's supply of cottage cheese we could buy her book and learn to do it ourselves. FIFI has, in fact, many of the ingredients of a truly feminist book, written by one of us, for us, aiming at 'demystification' (Orbach's word) and self-help.

Fighting fat

Orbach's thesis is that women's problems with food, eating and body size are directly linked to our oppressed status in society. "Fat is an adaptation to the oppression of women . . ." (p35); "Fat is a social disease . . . Fat is *not* about lack of self control or lack of will power. Fat is about protection, sex, nurturance, strength, boundaries, mothering, substance, assertion and rage" (p18). "Feminism argues that being fat represents an attempt to break free of society's sex stereotypes . . . a directed, conscious or unconscious challenge to sex-role stereotyping and culturally defined experience of womanhood" (p12). According to Orbach, our continual battle against the encroaching pounds, the rolls of flab, our secret guzzling and furtive binges are, in fact, an expression of our suffering and

deprivation, an act of rebellion and a positive statement of our feelings. We eat, Orbach says, with the deliberate (conscious or unconscious) intention of becoming fat because we find safety, protection and consolation in being fat. It is a protection against the demands made upon us as wives, mothers, daughters, career-women. It is an excuse for our potential failure, a sop for our frustration. Food, says Orbach, is a synthetic sweetener to conceal the bitterness and fury we feel over the denial of our status as equals with men.

Orbach shows us how we are conned by the diet industry and the medical profession into submitting to harmful and expensive treatments. She tells us that this kind of external intervention is not necessary, that we can help each other and help ourselves. She also points out that words like 'greedy', 'self-indulgent' and 'weak' bear no relation to our actual experience and are simply imposed on us by an external, unchallenged moral code. An equally revolutionary statement is her assertion that, far from wanting to be thin, we are actually afraid of it. If we sat down to examine our feelings closely we would, she says, find that being thin represents insecurity, nakedness, exposure to outside attack. It would mean that we would have to conform to the superwoman stereotype, be successful, coping, sexually and socially competent; we would have no corner in which to hide from the hostile eyes of the world.

And the Orbach cure? Mutual and self-analysis within a sympathetic group of sister-sufferers, where we would have space to speak openly about our misery, where we could name our problem, compare our experiences, share our bad feelings and confront and challenge the unspoken motivations that keep us see-sawing between the cottage cheese and the cream buns. She suggests various exercises using fantasy, role-play and mirror work; she gives us practical guidance on how to go about evaluating our hunger, how to approach a plate of food, how to dress. She tells us how to recognise our real needs; tells us to learn to love ourselves and no longer be afraid to give ourselves what we want when we want. All sound practical advice. So far, so good.

Susie's tale

And having achieved all this, what then? Then . . . we will become THIN. No, no. Then we will become a weight that we find 'personally acceptable' (but as that's a rather bulky way to describe it, let's call it 'thin', or even 'normal'). Then, says Orbach, we will learn to eat like "normal" people; we will be able to slough off our fat personae and be reborn as our true, slender selves.

This is how it worked for Susie:

Susie registers for a women-only course on compulsive eating and self-image. Guided by the group leader Susie confronts her fears and challenges her motivations. The images of Susie's fat and thin personalities conflate. Susie begins to lose weight. Six months later, satisfied, Susie leaves the group. Susie no longer defines herself as a compulsive eater, Susie has stabilised at a weight she finds acceptable. Susie goes on to work with other women. Susie becomes a (thin) therapist. Susie writes a book, becomes a household name. Susie is cured. It's a miracle.

I remember the horror and outrage when the paperback edition of FIFI appeared in Britain with a typically sexist stereotype illustration on the cover; the ad-man's ideal slender, sexy woman bursting out of a cocoon of flesh, set against a lurid purple background. Here was a book that set out to challenge the objectification of women's bodies and just look at what the beastly male capitalist publishing industry was doing to it. We stuck disclaimers on the covers, we ripped off the offending jackets altogether, the publishers retreated (apparently) and the following editions came out with the same cover as the hard-back edition; plain white, bearing the immortal words "Fat is a feminist issue . . ." in black, and beneath, in red, "the anti-diet guide to permanent weight loss". We thought we'd won a major battle against commercialisation. What naives we were. Looking back at the two cover designs now, it seems obvious to me that the hard-back edition would be the first choice of an

astute commercial publisher, encapsulating as it does the message that all over-weight women want to hear. It's the same message that draws us to the new diet regimes, the powders, pills and operations. "Within this book lies the answer to all your problems. This book will tell you how to get thin and stay thin *painlessly*. No complicated diets, no mess, no unpleasant bending! Buy this book and change your life!"

But this isn't just the message that the wily publishers chose to put on the cover (we all know how publishers take and subvert feminist books for their own wicked ends). This is the message of FIFI itself. Cleverer still, the title and sub-title tap yet another lucrative book-buying market, the politicised feminist. The key words are printed sharp and clear: 'feminist' and 'permanent weight loss'. And (forgive the pun) we swallowed the bait whole.

Diet of words

FIFI is all about how to get thin and stay thin because thin is good and fat is bad. Take two chapters of FIFI every day, plenty of heterosexercise and the unwanted pounds will just melt away. You too can be the stream-lined feminist of the future, conversant in the art of group psychobabble, a wild success at consciousness-raising groups. You too can discover that your mother fed you too much (or too little), that you ate sweets at work to sugar your murderous inclinations towards your boss, that you compulsively ate when you left home because you really wanted to eat your mother in order to take her with you. You too can be 'normal' . . . you too can be thin.

And this is exactly what we want to hear. *Womansize*, an altogether more indigestible analysis of women's tortured relationship with food and body-size, remains on the shelf. FIFI, the fast-food feminist diet sheet, the quick snack choc-chip cookie revolution, offers us an apparently easy, politically right-on way out of our misery. What if it had been called "Food is a feminist issue" or "Fat is a social disease"? Would it have had the same appeal? I doubt it.

The average diet book sets up standards of success and failure, good and bad. A successful dieter is thin and good. A failed

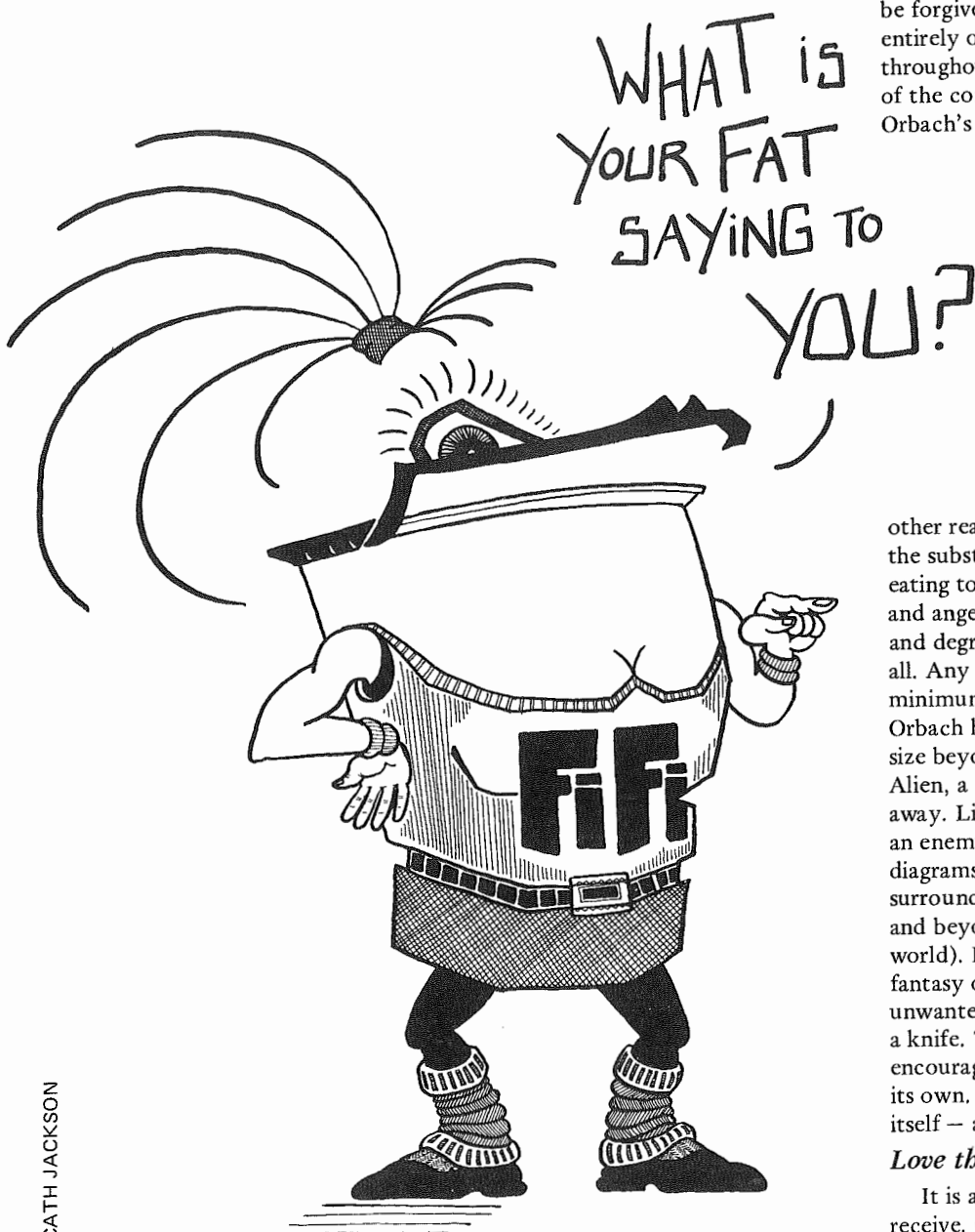
And what then? Then . . . we will become THIN. No, no. Then we will become a weight that we find 'personally acceptable'.

FIFI is all about how to get thin and stay thin because thin is good and fat is bad.

*"Sylvia, can you imagine a world without men?"
"No wars, and lots of fat, happy women".
Nicole Hollander.*

dieter is fat and bad. Susie Orbach makes the same assumptions, with a further refinement. The successful *feminist* is thin; she, lucky thing, has read FIFI, has learnt what her fat is saying for her and can now give up her pathetic need for this kind of prop. But what if we have read FIFI, spent hours challenging and confronting ourselves in our compulsive eating groups, plumbed the

depths of our oppression, yet still remain larger than we think we ought to be? What then? Then we are failed feminists too and doubly shameful and shamed. To be fair, Orbach does say: "It is important to remember that our goal is not primarily weight loss. *The goal for the compulsive eater is to break her addictive relationship towards food . . . The problem that we seek to solve is addiction to food*". But this is on page 126 of a 185 page book. Up till then we would be forgiven for believing that the focus was entirely on losing weight, on fat. For throughout the theme is the same. The Goal of the compulsive eater is to get fat; Orbach's goal is to help us get thin. Any



CATH JACKSON

other reason for compulsive eating, such as the substitution of eating for expression, eating to blunt the edge of our frustration and anger, eating as an act of self-punishment and degradation, comes last on the list, if at all. Any flesh that exceeds our self-defined minimum (or socially-defined minimum — Orbach herself offers no definition of body-size beyond "acceptable") is fat, Other, Alien, a coating to be peeled off and thrown away. Like any other diet book, FIFI makes an enemy of our bodies. It contains little diagrams showing us, the 'real' us, surrounded by a layer of grey fat (not us) and beyond that a blank white space (the world). I'm sure many women share my fantasy of seizing hold of hunks of my unwanted flesh and slicing them off with a knife. This is exactly the attitude Orbach encourages. She even gives the fat a life of its own. It speaks, it eats, it cries, it wets itself — and it must go.

Love thy weight loss

It is a contradictory message that we receive. On one page Orbach tells us to learn

to love and accept ourselves (not each other, mind — part of the point of losing weight is, after all, to become happier heterosexuals), and on the next she's telling us to live for tomorrow, to picture ourselves and behave as we would if we were thin. She tells us to throw away those clothes we're keeping for the day when we lose enough weight to fit into them. Then she tells us to dress as we would want to dress when thin. "The diet-binge syndrome can be broken", she writes, "when the compulsive eater begins to see herself as a 'normal' person, with fat being nothing more than a descriptive word, without connoting good or bad. If the compulsive eater can begin to experience herself as 'normal' then she can begin to eat like a 'normal' person" (p116). But fat is not merely a 'descriptive word' and nor does Orbach use it as such. It is too heavily overlaid with connotations of evil, bad, weakness, greed, self-indulgence. Such superimposed moralistic implications cannot be written away in one sentence on page 116, particularly when those implications clearly influence FIFI's scale of success and failure.

A book that challenges social and cultural definitions of acceptable body size has considerably less sales potential. Fat may well be about "protection, sex, nurturance, strength, boundaries, mothering, substance, assertion and rage". But before all that, fat is about size. Orbach tells us that we should aim to achieve a size that is acceptable to ourselves. But how can we make any realistic decision when the image of female acceptability thrown at us from every screen, magazine and bill-board is that of the slim, trim, adolescent woman-child? Orbach trivialises the issues of women and body-size. Her training as a therapist has made her glibly conversant in the stock phrases and techniques of psycho-therapy and she uses them to turn herself into a guru and us into her followers and clients. She never explains the dots that follow "Fat is a feminist issue", just as she never really explains the physical processes involved in her feminist "weight-reducing scheme". Her demystifying process becomes, in effect, quasi-mystical.

I wonder if Orbach has actually talked to a seriously bulimic or anorexic woman. The

terror and horror of the massive bingeing and purging sessions that some of us go through, often several times a day, is never allowed to sully FIFI's pages. The world she describes is sanitised, de-odourised never-never-land of fridges, freezers and home-baked cookies. In fact Orbach never mentions bulimia at all and her discussions of anorexia is brief and ill-informed. She refers to it as "the other side of the coin" to compulsive eating, but anorexia and bulimia are both very definitely part of the continuum.

Usually it is helpful to read examples of individual women's experiences. But with Orbach's therapeutic encouragement her clients come out with such astonishingly complicated psycho-babbling self-analysis that they seem to have lost touch with the reality of their lives altogether. It is amazing what we can discover about ourselves with a little encouragement and with the helpful interpretation of the all-knowing therapist. It is significant that the cases Orbach cites are all women who have been through individual therapy with Orbach herself. We begin to realise that the concept of self-help groups is simply a sop for those of us unable to find or afford a therapist of our own. And it seems to me that these psycho-analytical outpourings are just another cover-up, intellectualisations of the real pain beneath.

Knee-jerk solutions

It is tempting to condemn FIFI as a con, a rip-off, but I suspect Orbach is nothing more sinister than superficial. Her heart is in the right place, but she fails to see beyond the immediate problem. She sees women saying "I am fat, I eat too much, I am disgusting, help me" and she gives a knee-jerk response: "I will cure your fatness, I will give you an explanation, believe in me and all will be well". It is much easier to respond to immediate needs than to look at the truth of the situation; that women are slaves and prisoners within a land of plenty and we have nothing which is truly our own except ourselves.

It's important for me to say at this point that I'm writing this review from within the limitations of my own experience as a white, middle-class western woman. There are shops and restaurants all around me and I

It's the same message that draws us to the new diet regimes, the powders, pills and operations. 'This book will tell you how to get thin and stay thin painlessly. No complicated diets, no mess, no unpleasant bending!'

But what if we have read FIFI, spent hours challenging and confronting ourselves in our compulsive eating groups, plumbed the depths of our oppression, yet still remain larger than we think we ought to be?

Food is the feminist issue in this world when food means wealth means power means freedom.

So long as we believe happiness lies in being thin, we won't look for greater things.

Susie Orbach *Fat is a feminist issue* . . . (Paddington Press 1978).
Kim Chernin *Womansize* (Women's Press 1983).

have always had money to buy from them. I have never experienced food-rationing or famine and certain forms of food have never been denied me for cultural or religious reasons.

Food is the feminist issue in this world when food means wealth means power means freedom. Food also means giving, sharing, loving, but if you have nothing in the first place it is not possible to participate freely in this exchange. All that we women have has been either given or allowed us. Most of what we have is permitted us so that we can pass it on to someone else. In this world values are ranked according to power. Identity and worth is won by having more than someone else, living at other people's expense. Women, with all our nothing, do not even begin to figure in this competitive hierarchy. Our only domain is ourselves and here too we can exploit, reward, punish and rule in a microcosm of the outside world. Like creatures trapped in tiny, empty, single-cell cages, we turn our creativity and ability on the only materials available to us, our bodies. The real enemy is too unimaginably vast for most of us to tackle, so we turn to something more tangible; food and the flesh that comes from eating it become the enemy. We divide ourselves into two warring states: the 'real' thin self and the alien fat self, as so vividly described by Orbach. We reward, punish, deprive, humiliate ourselves with the over-allocation and over-deprivation of food and we do it secretly partly because we are ashamed but also because we do not want outside interference in our domain. I'm sure all women can understand, if they haven't actually experienced it themselves, the exhilaration of self-deprivation. To be able to go without is to rise above the common herd of humanity. To have no needs is to have no weaknesses and to have no need for that most fundamental need of all, nourishment, is the ultimate in invulnerability. And, in parallel, by refusing food, we are refusing to participate, we are going on strike. An anorexic woman is saying 'sod you' to the rest of the world. We have so much, apparently, but all that we have is given to us. If nothing is to be freely our own, we will have none of it.

By abusing our bodies by either over-

eating or under-feeding we are taking on board the values of this male world and using them against ourselves. The tragedy is that, just as man is slowly and surely destroying his domain, the world, we are destroying ourselves. I sometimes wonder what would happen if all the energy that women put into manipulating our bodies were turned outward to other things. Some women, like Kim Chernin, suggest a way forward is to concentrate on the one area that has potential to be ours alone, our so-called natural creativity, fecundity. Personally I see this as another form of restriction. Chernin tells us to accept and love our bodies because we need them to enable us to bear children. She wants us to reclaim our matriarchal, maternal creativity, but this simply binds us to our biological destiny. We have many abilities, but we have no space to use them.

So many women addicted to dieting, to drugs, to alcohol. So many women in therapy, in various religions, trying to find some external comfort and explanation for our despair. A whole industry thriving on the effects of man's industry. And, increasingly, women thriving off it too. So many therapists and gurus, like Orbach, plastering over the cracks with promises of magic formulae to repair the ruins beneath. Better, I suppose, that we should be able to turn to other women for help; better to be paying a woman therapist. But we should beware of simply transferring superior power, knowledge and authority from men to women and believing that this is a step towards freedom.

I am not saying that when the feminist revolution comes we will all be thin. I am trying to point out the central issue that Orbach ignores. Eating disorders, women's abuse of our bodies through food, are largely confined to women living in affluent societies. When we no longer have to struggle for our most basic needs we have time and energy to look for and work on other things. Finding this space and freedom denied us, we turn our energies back upon ourselves and it is in men's interests to keep it that way. So long as we believe happiness lies in being thin, we won't look for greater things. To put it simply; how can we fight when we're all on a diet? □

Gwen Coleman 1890-1985

Gwen Coleman was 86 when I first met her. She was living in a bungalow near Reading with her daughter Naomi, an assertively furry cat, and willows outside a picture window. She was surrounded by wonderful books. Here I got my first read of Edward Carpenter's gay liberation classic *Towards Democracy* and Agnes Smedley's still unobtainable memoir *Red Star Over China*; also my first taste of Nuttola loaf and gravy.

I lent her my recently reprinted copy of Smedley's *Daughter of Earth*, and was silenced by her judgement of an abortion episode I'd taken for granted. I was a three-meats-a-day, recently ex-separatist atheist of 27. Mrs Coleman (I never called her anything but that) had been with her husband for 54 years, a vegetarian for slightly longer, and the veteran of innumerable spiritual cults.

What we had in common, of course, was the women's movement. At the age of 19, in the same year she gave up eating meat, Gwen Coleman became western regional organiser for the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. This mass organisation with 100,000 members, committed to strictly constitutional lobbying, has come down to us with a more conservative image than the militant Pankhurst-led Women's Social and Political Union (perhaps 10,000 members) or the small and original break-away Women's Freedom League. Gwen Coleman's story fills out a much more interesting picture of the NUWSS.

Some of us were Socialists and some were good, deep-dyed Tories . . . At a little place near Bideford there was a tremendously wealthy woman who was a supporter of the suffrage but she only believed in women who paid rates and taxes having the vote and of course I was very opposed to that. The vote to me should go to the working woman. I invited a friend of mine who was a raving socialist to come and speak at this meeting. It was a tremendous mistake on my part!



MARION HOUGHTON

More dangerous clashes took place on the way to London for the huge and picturesque Hyde Park demonstrations of 1910.

We were two weeks on the Great March and we had a lorry to carry our suitcases and a little printing press. At Cambourne the crowd was against us and they rushed our lorry and the horse started to bolt. I think that was the most terrifying experience I ever had; because we were speaking from the lorry, and it just swayed on this crowd and if it had gone over not only would we have probably been killed but the crowd — and so many of them. Some soldiers managed to grab the horse and we took him into the yard of the hotel where we were staying. I barricaded the doors with the mob outside yelling for us. Two or three of us borrowed some of the young men's suits and we went out and mixed among the crowd and heard all they were saying about us . . .

But "working for the suffrage movement was child's play compared with working for peace during the First World War. I mean you were a traitor to your country, you should have been shot at dawn". Gwen Coleman was literally the only person in her whole university who opposed the fighting. "I was alone. They cut me dead".

From outcast to outlaw, she began working a few years later for the underground railroad that sprang Conscientious Objectors from the gaols where they were being savaged by a prison administration blooded on the pre-War suffragettes, Irish rebels and trades unionists. She became a trades unionist herself, and a member of the

Independent Labour party. Her class came between her and a paid union organisers' post; but she was offered an appointment in the ILP. And at the end of the war she was nominated MP for the Pudsey division of Yorkshire. She was under 30, though, and as women had not yet been granted the vote at 21 she was disqualified. She felt to the end of her life that she and not Lady Astor should have been the first woman MP. If only she had!

But in 1919 she went out to Rhodesia to marry a childhood friend.

My husband and I had left school together. If he had lived another year we should have been friends for 70 years. When war was declared over I was very weary – I think anybody who lived through that time became so utterly weary. In February after war ended we were living in Leeds, Mother and I, and things were pretty bad, we couldn't get any firewood or anything. I went for a walk on the moor, gathering firewood. I came to a wall, I stood by this wall and just the other side a lark went up singing. I put my head down on that wall and I sobbed and sobbed. It was just something that this lark had, you know, that we'd done without for so long.

So she set out for Africa with her mother, a progressive feminist and Theosophist, of Calvinist stock, who'd become the first woman Medical Officer of Health during the War. The journey through Lisbon and Mozambique was exhaustingly drawn out, and after Gwen arrived there seem to have been times when she felt it had all been a mistake. For a fearless organiser and a most charismatic speaker at the start of a public career, colonial family life must have been a very small stage. She retained a questing edge that often led her to journey off again after enlightenment. Theosophy was her first path, but visiting speakers of every spiritual direction would be invited back to her home.

The things she did do in the place where she found herself were impressive. She started a multi-racial theatre, and put on a black *Hamlet* that later toured to the capital; she conducted the escape of a woman whose husband had shut her in a mental hospital; she started one of the two secondary schools for Africans in the whole country; and she got turned out of her flat for having African visitors. "Even now, in Rhodesia", she said in 1974, "I know a lot of people who'd

cross the road rather than walk on the same pavement as me".

By the time the Colemans returned to England after World War II, Gwen realised that the Africans – like the trades union women 30 years earlier – no longer needed any help from her. She was hurt (she didn't have the modern idea of autonomous organising), but she recognised the truth and the reasons why. In fact she even made an exception of her lifelong condemnation of violence for the African struggle; and she recognised separate unions for Africans where she'd earlier opposed them for women.

Her stepson Basil Coleman, the TV and opera director who made the *Anna Karenina* serial and has been running the Aldborough Festival for the last three years, began his career as Cock Robin in one of her theatre productions. "She would have made the most wonderful actress herself. It was she who encouraged me to come to England, and get a scholarship to the Central School". Her elder daughter Betty is a sculptress who has now returned to Zimbabwe with her partner, a woman musician. Naomi, the 'handicapped' youngest, I remember for her keen interest and extensive historical memory bank. At the time we met she and Mrs Coleman were dividing the practical running of the household between them.

In the village where the Colemans retired – another small stage – Mrs Coleman inevitably made friends and fascinated people.

Although Mrs Coleman became deafer – and in the last year couldn't use her legs – she won through with Naomi's help and died this June in her own home. Naomi became more and more the practical partner in a coalition that saved them both from outside interference. As Mrs Coleman said, in an institution she wouldn't have lasted a week. And Naomi has won too – the right to live on in the same place by herself.

A lot of opportunities I missed keep pushing into my mind. But I think Gwen Coleman did know that no-one who met her was ever exactly the same afterwards.

Amanda Sebestyen

Writing Our Own History 7

"Between Marx, the border and the womb" ~ Irishwomen United

"It was one of the best times of my life" – "there's no better introduction to feminism than to feel you can change the world". Mary Jennings talks to Ruth Wallsgrove about Irishwomen United, which was for two years in the mid-seventies the group for women's liberation in the Republic.

Ruth: How did Irishwomen United start?

Mary: When I got involved in late 1975 IWU had been going for several months. As I understand it, there had been several groups of women meeting in Dublin for a while before IWU got established – Cambridge Terrace women, women in the universities and in left groups. In early 1975 a meeting was held to discuss setting up a common group to campaign for women in Ireland. A charter was proposed and taken away to be discussed and amended and was finally agreed in June '75, the official start date of Irishwomen United.

R: Was IWU conceived as an umbrella group?

M: By the time I became involved, the differences between the groups that had previously existed didn't come across to me. Irishwomen United was the only group there was. The rest was past history. Everyone mucked in, really, and worked for IWU. Everybody had fierce arguments on Sundays, and you had all the different strands of politics coming out, but you felt that if you organised something – outsiders couldn't take the name of IWU in vain. Radical lesbian separatists, vaguely wet liberal students, Republicans, socialists – regardless of what came out in a Sunday meeting you felt that on the street, at a demo, at the Forty Foot, everybody would be there. We were *the* group in Ireland that was fighting for women's liberation.

R: You met every Sunday?

M: Yes, religiously – my Sundays have never been the same since! We used to have the meeting at 4 o'clock. I wouldn't go to Mass. I'd get into my clean jeans, wash my hair . . . No, I wasn't an active lesbian at that time! I was into watching women, but not on that basis. So that was your whole Sunday: you got up late, had a shower, dress up nice. I used to cycle – I was very rarely late. Go to the meeting for 3 to 4 hours, go to the pub afterwards – that's where the socialising mostly happened – until the pubs close.

There were wild lesbian parties that I missed out on, but that I used to get women to tell me all about. The first 100% dyke party that I went to was *really* wild for me: I ended up with a really bad attack of asthma and had to be driven to hospital at three o'clock in the morning and stayed there for several days. I don't really believe in psychosomatic theories of asthma, but . . . I think that the lesbian separatists used to meet outside of IWU to discuss lesbian politics.

Because there was such a wide variety of political opinion in the group, lots of women were also involved in something else. Either in trade unions, either in groups around what was happening in the north, socialist groups. I suppose there was a feeling of 'where does Irish women's liberation stand in the midst of all these other political struggles?' Groups like Revolutionary

"1975 produced a wonderful emergence of feminist faces, hitherto not seen or heard by the women of Ireland"
June Levine, Sisters (Ward River Press, 1982).

Title quote from Nell McCafferty, In Dublin, 7 March 1985.

"The demands we made then with spectacular panache and insouciance would take your breath away. The demands were never met. What gives a person asthma is the realisation that there is no group in existence today which would even dream of making those demands now" — Nell McCafferty, In Dublin, 7 March 1985.

* Issued by the Irish Catholic Hierarchy, this opposed "the contraceptive mentality" that "contradicts the Christian understanding of family life" and stated that "money, alcohol, drugs and sex are being given a place and a status in modern secular society which is not too different from the place occupied by the gods of money, wine and sex in pagan times"

Struggle — no-one knew quite what they were up to! They were terribly secretive. They met downstairs in 12 Pembroke Street, where we met on Sundays. (It wasn't a women's centre — I'm not quite sure of its status.) One time the Revolutionary Struggle women came up to me and asked me to go along to their meetings — they must have thought I was a good bet.

The issue of 'dual membership' became quite heated. Women wanted everybody to declare their political loyalty, how committed they were to women's liberation, and what membership of another organisation meant — did it mean they were trying to coerce IWU into their line, were they trying to use IWU as a front or a recruiting ground? People were terribly suspicious of most women who had other commitments. But there were women that nobody mistrusted, because we knew where they stood in terms of IWU. They put a lot of hard work into it; they were honest. There was no question that IWU should be mixed. What IWU was asked to do was to support other struggles, as a feminist, women-only organisation. So we did go on things like the May Day marches. The issue was tactics — what you should put your energy into.

R: *What were the main issues for IWU?*

M: I think contraception was always the main issue — that and equal pay. They were our campaigns. Anything else — like education — never developed into a campaign, although we had an education workshop which produced a pamphlet.

R: *Not abortion?*

M: Nobody in Ireland talked about abortion. We didn't even talk much about abortion, even though IWU was composed of highly radical political activists. It really got to the roots of your psychology to talk about abortion. There were two things: one that it would be disadvantageous to the contraception campaign. But it was also personally difficult to talk about. We did have a discussion on abortion at a teach-in I helped to organise at Trinity College in Spring '76. There I can remember this really involved woman — who'd been in prison for throwing pigs' blood at the American embassy against Vietnam — when she talked about having had an abortion to all these feminists who supported her she was crying. It wasn't just a matter of strategy.

R: *So how did IWU campaign around contraception?*

M: During 1975 there were several demonstrations around contraception, particularly against the Pastoral Letter 'Human Life is Sacred'*. There was a picket outside the Pro-Cathedral on a Sunday, at the time of the reading of the Pastoral Letter from the pulpits, where there was a lot of hostility from mass-goers at the audacity of women who dared to question what the priests had to say. (It's the 'Pro-Cathedral' rather than the cathedral because in Ireland under British rule you couldn't actually have a proper catholic cathedral on the main street of Dublin. So it's instead of a cathedral, and on a small side street off the main street.) There were also pickets in O'Connell Street, and a demonstration outside the Archbishop's Palace.

There was also the Contraception Workshop, which I did work for, out of which came the Contraception Action Programme, initiated by IWU to be a broad based alliance between concerned groups, for example family planning groups. We were to work together under a common programme of action, which is opposite to spontaneous actions like IWU's response to the Pastoral Letter. You need both, I'm not arguing for either one or the other. The McGee case was also important, a court case where she argued that the law was unconstitutional, not to be allowed contraception. The law that ended up being passed, the 1979 Health (Family Planning) Act, was a crappy law, really — only 'married people' could ask for contraception from their doctor, and there was a let-out 'conscience' clause for doctors and chemists. The law's changed recently, to allow the sale of condoms without a prescription.

As regards equal pay, there were also both spontaneous actions — like the occupation of the Federated Union of Employers, the equivalent of the CBI — and an organised campaign around the implementation of the EEC Directive on Equal Pay when Ireland joined the Common Market. We collected around 40,000 signatures in support of changing the law. That was mostly before I got heavily involved, so I know less about it.

Most of this hard slog work happened during the winter months. When the summer came in IWU, when we thought it was going to be a nice Sunday — only when it was nice! — we'd say let's go to the Forty Foot. The Forty Foot is part of Irish culture, written about by James Joyce. On the south side of Dublin bay it's the only decent place for swimming, there's nice places to lie out naked in the sun. And it's for men only. We'd agree to meet there at a particular time, and I'd cycle out from Dublin — it's about an hour's cycle. I think they got used to the idea that we'd turn up some Sunday. The men would say it's disgusting, we shouldn't be there. And then of course we'd go home, watch the 9 o'clock news to see if we were on it, which we were. We'd sell *Banshee*, the magazine of IWU, round the pubs and everybody would know who

we were. It was good fun. There were certain pubs you could go to where they'd sell immediately around the Forty Foot. If you went over to a couple, the guy would always talk: I would always look at the woman and talk to her, and he'd answer the questions.

R: *'Banshee' wasn't women-only?*

M: No, it was intended to be sellable to a wide range of Irish women, it wasn't an internal newsletter. We used it as a way to reach women in Irish society. There wasn't another Irish magazine that would talk about the issues that were important to

WHAT IS IRISH WOMEN UNITED?

We are a group of Women's liberationists who believe that the best perspective for struggle against women's oppression in Ireland lies in an ongoing fight around the charter of demands printed here.

We came together originally in April 1975 as a few individual women interested in the idea of building a conference to discuss a charter; what its demands should be and how a campaign should be built.

At this conference on June 8th, attended by approx. 100 women we constituted ourselves as a separate group, Irishwomen United — the only criteria for joining to be agreement on the demands of the charter.

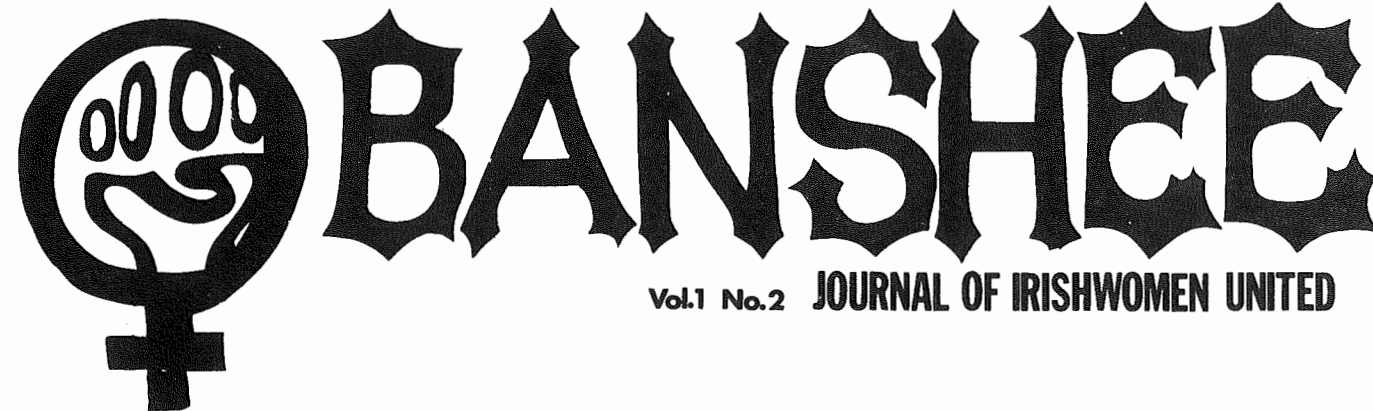
Irishwomen United works on the basis of general meetings (discussions and action planning, at present every week in Dublin), joint actions (e.g. pickets, public meetings, workshops, at present on women in trade unions, contraception, social welfare and political theory) and consciousness-raising groups.

women, like contraception, equal pay, Catholicism, feminism, lesbianism, social welfare, what was happening to women in other countries.

We got it into WH Smiths — I mean Easons, I've been in England too long! It was quite a coup for us. We did sell it on the streets — I sold it outside the GPO, in Henry Street, in the suburban shopping centres, down the country in Waterford. Most of our selling was in the streets and in the pubs.

I loved it, being on *Banshee*. I was quite in awe of the women who first worked on *Banshee*. When the next editorial group was being set up, one of them suggested I should be on it. I was quite astounded and pleased. They must have been impressed with all the

*from Irish Women United
Sisterhood is Powerful leaflet.*



Banshees I sold.

I do think we had quite an impact then because of our actions and the publicity we got, and *Banshee*. IWU wasn't just sitting around discussing with friends — the whole country, your aunt, your cousin down the country, your sisters, everybody was talking about it. We thought, really, we could change the world.

There's no better introduction to feminism than to feel you can change the

world. It stays with you forever: it runs into all your relationships, all the women you meet, 24 hours a day. If you haven't had that experience, even if you're a paid worker for a women's collective, it's not the same sense.

I think we did actually expose raw nerves in Irish society then. If you do the same thing here, now, people are so jaded. There's a sense that it's happened before, so if you do feel that exhilaration when you first come into a women's group everybody else is tired, old in the tooth about feminism, so you can't get anyone else to share it with you.

R: *So what do you think went wrong with IWU?*

M: Republicanism — I don't think that was what led to its demise. It's interesting, the issue of Republicanism, why it was never really discussed. People felt in some way that we should talk about it *some* time, but not *this* Sunday! Everybody felt that if we did, there really would be no feminism in Ireland. I felt the position was that you get so much of Irish nationalism all the way through your schooling, all through Irish society — about 1916, the Civil War, about Fianna Fail and which side they were on in the Civil War, how Fianna Gael go back to which side they were on*. You can't ever get away from it. There was a revolution in 1916, and where has that got Irish women today? Everybody felt it was important that there was a revolutionary situation in Northern Ireland and that women were involved, but we felt that IWU was the one place where we could talk about being women. I think everyone felt uneasy about not talking about the North, however.

IWU was a high, like a wave; and what do you do next? Other women heard about IWU; what do you do then? How do you make yourself into a group that's not just 50 or 60 women? How do you change from being activist, media-grabbing, spontaneous, exhilarating . . . It was a fantastic time, one of the best times of my life. I think I'll always look for that in every other group and I'll never find it. We didn't know what to do with women who were interested, who felt that they'd been reached in some way. I remember being scared at one meeting when we discussed dividing up into smaller

Preamble:

At this time, the women of Ireland are beginning to see the need for and are fighting for liberation. This is an inevitable step in the course of full human liberation. Although within the movement we form diverse groups with variant ways of approaching the problem, we have joined together around these basic issues. We pledge ourselves to challenge and fight sexism in all forms and oppose all forms of exploitation of women which keep them oppressed. These demands are all part of the essential right of women to self-determination of our own lives — equality in education and work; control of our own bodies; an adequate standard of living and freedom from sexist conditioning. We present these demands as the following women's charter.

1. The removal of all legal and bureaucratic obstacles to equality . . .
2. Free legal contraception . . .
3. The recognition of motherhood and parenthood as a social function with special provisions . . .
4. Equality in education — state-financed, secular, co-educational schools with full community control at all levels . . .
5. The male rate for the job where men and women are working together . . .
6. State provision of funds and premises for the establishment of women's centres in major population areas to be controlled by the women themselves . . .
7. The right of all women to a self-determined sexuality . . .

Summarised from the back page of Banshee.

groups, geographically — we felt that would dissipate the sense that we were together. But on the other hand we didn't know how to take in other women. IWU was getting quite big. We did go out to the housing estates, but we didn't have any kind of strategy for continuing and changing ourselves from how we had been.

You can't sustain that high level of activity and emotional energy — it was two years — after that you just need a break, really. So when the rest of us felt worn out, that we weren't getting anywhere, there was no-one to take over. All the tensions then, about lesbianism, about being involved in working class movements, about taking on campaigns that were important for Irish society, about Republicanism, came up. You can't identify any of those as being the cause. We were just worn out. We didn't know how to refuel our energy. It wasn't personality, and it wasn't politics.

R: *Why did 'Banshee' not survive?*

M: I'm not quite sure why *Banshee* didn't survive. There was a lot of interest in it. Well, I think it didn't survive because people didn't put enough effort into making it, getting it sold. It was hard bloody work. At one of the first discussions about *Banshee* someone said, "Look, we've really got to think about distribution." We thought, well what about distribution? All we've got to do

is produce the magazine and women will buy it. That's where we fell down. Finance, distribution, really hard practical, ground-work politicking. As a group we were more into how we ran the magazine. The women who started it had experience of printing and publishing, but there was this idea that there should be a transferring of skills. Lots of women were interested in doing it, so a collective would do it for three months and then another group would take it over. There were lots of ideas about what to do with it, but I think that having established what we wanted the magazine to do we should have concentrated on marketing it. I don't think we would have had to change the contents to sell more. There wasn't an alternative distributor then; we would have had to put a lot of work into getting it distributed. But collecting news and doing paste-up was so much more fun. We ended up being in debt to the printer.

There was a lot of tension between the *Banshee* editorial group and the Sunday meeting. Although there were other workshops, none of them reported as regularly back to the Sunday meetings as the *Banshee* group did, because of women's nervousness about what *Banshee* was up to. Maybe the women who were then running *Banshee* should have decided to run it as a separate group in the end, so that something concrete survived.

"These are some of the things we dreamed up on a sunny Sunday afternoon in Liberty Hall when Irishwomen United was founded, and the first thing on the agenda was agreement that no demand was too radical, and there'd be no split because every woman there could have her heart's desire inscribed on the tablets which we intended to hand down from the seventh storey of the building" — Nell McCafferty, In Dublin, 7 March 1985.

* 1916 — the Easter Rising against British rule. The Civil War in 1922 was fought around the issues of partition and the 1921 Treaty with Britain which made the 26 Counties a separate Commonwealth country — but still under the ultimate sovereignty of the British monarch. (The Irish Free State officially became a Republic in 1949.)

Fianna Fail and Fianna Gael are the two largest political parties in the 26 Counties. Fianna Gael is in power at the moment; Fianna Fail is more strongly nationalist.



Banshee cover showing demo at the Forty Foot

1975	
ACTIVITIES OF IRISHWOMEN UNITED — MAY 1975—MAY 1976	
MAY 1st	May Day March to the G.P.O.
MAY 12th	Picket on the British Embassy in protest at the new rape laws in Britain
MAY 24th	Picket on the Pro-Cathedral in protest at the pastoral letter — 'Human Life is Sacred'
JUNE 8th	Charter Convention in Liberty Hall
JUNE 27th	Picket on Contraception in O'Connell Street
JULY 4th	Protest at Fitzwilliam L.T.C. (men only)
JULY 6th	Protest at the 40-Foot (men only) bathing place
JULY 11th	Picket on contraception in O'Connell Street
JULY 12th	2nd protest at Fitzwilliam L.T.C.
JULY 13th	40-Foot invaded again
JULY 25th	Protest to central labour exchange at unequal social welfare benefits
JULY 26th	Journey to Limerick for IWU sponsored meeting on discrimination
SEPT. 15th	Picket on the IPA and protest (Pat Cobey) to Cosgrave
SEPT. 16th	IWU public meeting in Wynn's Hotel — 'Women and Trade Unions — The Right to Join?'
SEPT. 22nd	IPA — protest to the Minister for Justice, Patrick Cooney, by Mary Dorcey
OCT. 29th	Contraception Picket on the Archbishop's Palace, Drumcondra
NOV. 12th	Contraception Rally in Liberty Hall
DEC. 2nd	IWU meeting in Power's Hotel — Evelyn Reid on 'Women's Evolution and Human Nature'
DEC. 19th	Picket on the Dail over the postponement of Equal Pay
1976	
JAN. 21st	FUE offices picketed and occupied by IWU
FEB. 13th	IWU — Equal Pay Forum in the Mansion House
MARCH 6th	International Women's Day March
APRIL 7th	Picket on the Dail over the Contraception Debate
MAY 1st	May Day March
MAY 8th/9th	IWU Teach-in in TCD
JUNE 15th	Unemployment March in O'Connell St. to Dail Eireann

from *Banshee* vol.1, no.3

In the spring of '77 IWU did have this day workshop on where we are now, where are we going, and so on, because everybody knew that there was, not cracks, but exhaustion. Nobody knew what to do about it.

R: Was it that, for that age-group of women, economic factors were pulling them out of Ireland?

M: If IWU had been going the way it had been, the odd people would have left, but . . . I think what happened was that we went into this depression, there wasn't that pull there and so then economic factors began to come into it — what are you going to do with the rest of your life, if you're not heavily involved with someone you love in Ireland, if you don't have a good job, if there's nothing happening with feminism to put your whole life and soul into? Who wants to stay? Some women went to the country to recuperate. Others went abroad. There

* Unhappily, the Amendment was passed in 1983 after a referendum. There was a low turnout, but except in Dublin the vote was overwhelmingly for the Amendment, against abortion.

were very few women left around in Dublin who were the power-houses of IWU. I didn't have a lover, I had been living at home, I wanted to earn my living. I didn't especially want to go to England — it didn't have any attraction for me. If I could have gone to Boston, I would have jumped at the chance. London was just pragmatic.

R: When you see so many IWU women in London, what does that make you feel about Ireland?

M: Sometimes I feel that all the energy I put into women's liberation in London I should be putting into Irish feminism in Ireland. But there's no way now that I could live in Ireland. Other IWU women here are still quite active, too. They haven't done nothing since. And in Ireland — I think that there was a period when Irish feminism was going through a period of regrouping, nothing seemed to be happening when I'd go home at christmas time. But if you go back now, women who were in IWU are behind a lot of new things, like Irish Feminist Information, the women's centre in Dublin, the rape crisis centre, the Anti-Amendment Campaign (against the amendment to the constitution giving the unborn foetus an equal right to life to the mother)* The women I knew are still involved, still working hard.□

PS. These are just my personal recollections of that time. Each of us in IWU has her own story to tell. It's ten years ago now: I got a shock when I realised that. And also a sense of how important it is to collect together material about IWU so that it's not forgotten. So if anyone wants to send me her dusty old papers or be involved in this please write to me c/o *Trouble and Strife*.
Mary Jennings.

For some information on the history and current situation of women in Ireland:
Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries — Women and Irish Nationalism* (Pluto 1983).
Attic Press, *Who Owns Ireland — Who Owns You?* (1985) — Attic is a new feminist press in Dublin which has also published Nell McCafferty's *The Best of Nell*.
Women's Community Press, *The Irish Feminist Review 1984* (1985).
Eileen Fairweather et al, *Only The Rivers Run Free* (Pluto, 1984).
Mary Dorcey, *Kindling* (Onlywomen, 1983) — poetry by one of the radical lesbians in IWU.

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"BREAKING OUT — ASPECTS OF LESBIAN AND GAY LIFE IN IRELAND" The Dublin Lesbian and Gay collections in conjunction with Women's Community Press, plan to publish a book in March 1986. The material is almost ready. It will be the first book of its kind in Ireland. The only Lesbian and Gay literature available here is imported from Britain or the US, and often doesn't go through the censors. The importance of a book on the experiences and lifestyles of Irish Lesbians and Gay men cannot be underestimated. However, in order for this important book to see the light of day, we need money very badly — in fact about £5,000. Please send whatever you can to: The Dublin Lesbian/Gay Collections, c/o Women's Community Press, 44 East Essex St, Dublin 2, Ireland. And thank you.

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