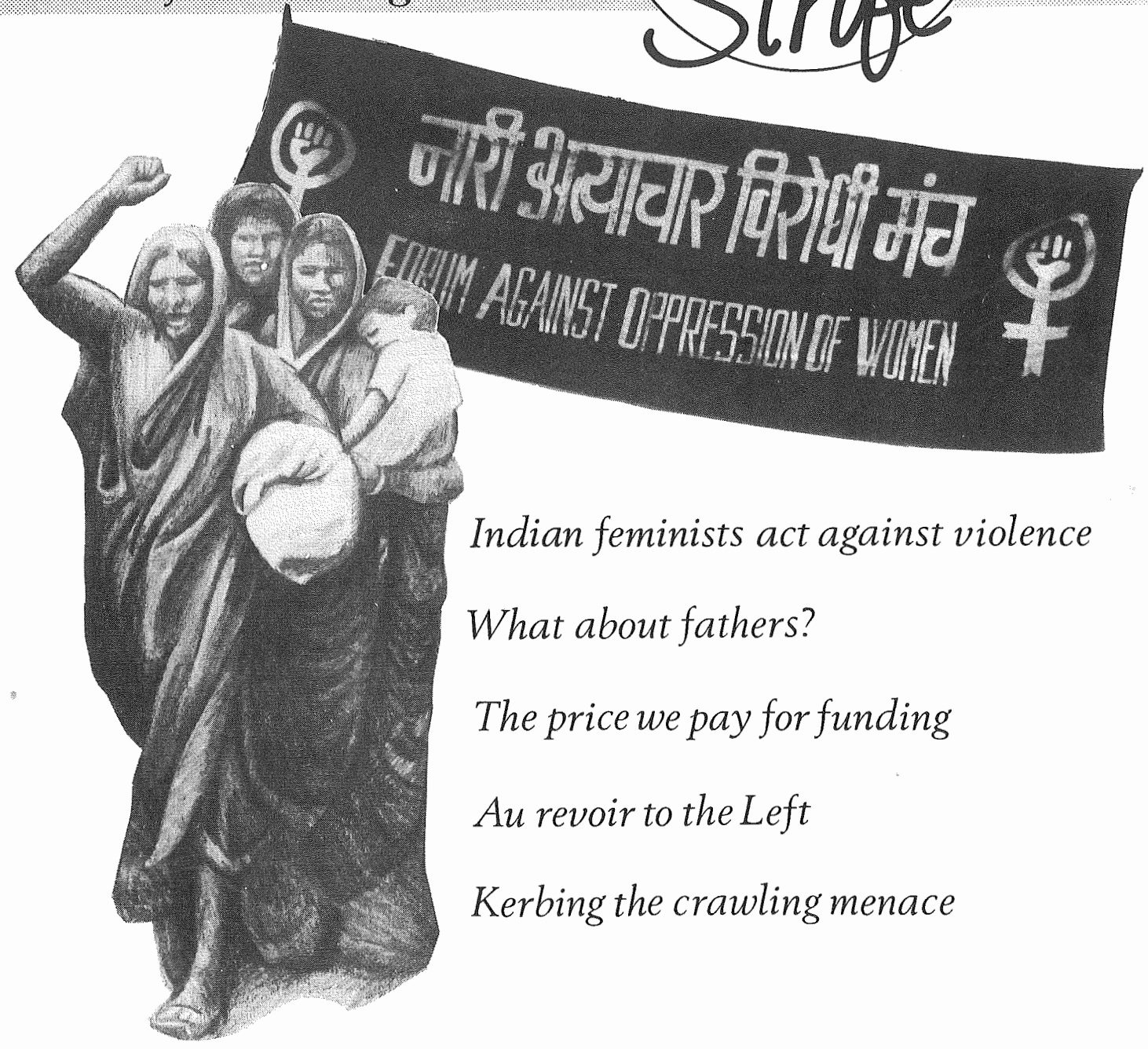
Trouble and Strife

a radical feminist magazine No.8 £1.95



Indian feminists act against violence

What about fathers?

The price we pay for funding

Au revoir to the Left

Kerbing the crawling menace

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.

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), Emma Kelly, Rose Ademulegan, Mary Jennings, Alice Henry, Carole Reeves. With many thanks to the Women's Reproductive Rights Information Centre and the Women's Health Information Centre for the use of their resources.

Our apologies to Jackie Layne, who helped with the interview with Jean Breeze in our last issue, for leaving her name off.

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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Trouble and Strife

Contents No. 8

Cover by Judy Stevens

LETTERS

Open letter from the Trouble and Strife collective

Dear sisters,

We at *Trouble and Strife* recently received a circular letter with a form attached, about a forthcoming event called "Women Alive". We wondered how many other women's liberation groups had received it, and what response we should make?

"Women Alive": what can it be? A dance class? Some kind of religious message? Yet another new magazine?

No, it's the insipid title of a new initiative from "a group of women in the Communist Party". They note that there has been "no national feminist event/conference for all women since 1979". The implication is clearly that "Women Alive" is to substitute for the old national women's liberation conferences.

They tell us that they have access to "resources etc" (etc??) and that they wish to put themselves at our service. On the next page they reserve the right to control the agenda: "We cannot guarantee to include all the sessions proposed. Some might overlap with other sessions, some might not fit into the event in other ways, but we will look at all suggestions". We find ourselves feeling ungrateful.

Please note that the words "women's liberation" appear nowhere in this communication. What an embarrassment that expression seems to be! Even the movement they especially wish to "draw in" (what a giveaway that old left rhetoric is) is referred to as the "women's movement". Those of us with the unpleasant trait of remembering ancient sectarian trivia well recall how the CP influenced the organising group of the 1977 National Women's Liberation conference (in London, the last but one), and produced a poster for that conference which also omitted the word 'liberation'. Liberation for women . . . freedom for women . . . power for women . . . hush, hush, dear, the brothers will hear you.

"Women Alive" is to be an "*event*", not a conference, they say. The examples they give of session formats read: "eg panel, interview (interview?!), performance, practical session". Open, workshop-style discussion is too stressful, too demanding? Too open-ended, perhaps? This is feminism for consumers. Painless, delicious, restrained. The menu on this occasion is to consist of "the fantastic diversity and richness of women's experiences and activities". Limitation, poverty, and oppression are so much less attractive, aren't they?

This liberal, slightly apologetic kind of approach seems particularly sad in a time when feminists so urgently need to meet, to consider where the movement is now. Essential institutions like WIRES, created by the national conferences are apparently collapsing, though at the same time there are new feminist initiatives, new issues being taken up, new groups of women organising. National conferences were hard work, a real effort to focus many female intelligences, to communicate across very serious differences. Though they were also, inevitably, a great celebration as well, they did not need to be sold as a funfair.

Everywhere, women seem to be offered great dollops of Everywoman, ANYwoman, Womenoutthere, Women are wonderful – now, "Women Alive". Even "Women Awake" would seem to be a stronger statement. Perhaps this endless celebration is supposed to soothe us out of the perception that the *change* which women's liberation requires has not occurred.

We remain, "Women dead Angry",
yours in sisterhood,
The *Trouble and Strife* Collective.

Wendy Kerrison

Full of interest

Dear Collective,

I don't know why I have never read *Trouble and Strife* before. I bought the summer number and was so impressed by it that I am sending you a subscription.

I am an elderly, white, middle class intellectual lesbian who hopes for a socialist /feminist revolution. I find my type of woman sneered at and even attacked in some left-feminist writing and maybe we deserve criticism but what is the meaning of 'sisterhood'? I was struck by the fact that you had given generous space to Teresa Thornhill to write about people not unlike me and her article made me think. So did Patricia Duncker's "Writing and Roaring" though I disagree with some of it. I've picked out those two articles because they happen to be very relevant to me, the way I live and to the way I write, but I found the whole number full of interest.

Yours in sisterhood,
Rosemary Manning,
London NW3.

Mothering is mothering, not power

Dear *Trouble and Strife*,

I am puzzled by various implications in Ruth Wallsgrove's article "Thicker than Water" and feel that she doesn't place "mothering" and "childcare" within the context in which we all live but rather into a sort of theoretical pawn game . . . . .

She describes "taking on" two children full-time in a time of crisis and implies that this should confer on her a mother right. The implication then, is that if the *state* had taken on the children full-time – as happens when children go 'into care' in the institutional sense – the *state* should then have mother right. Seen in this context (or substitute father for state for that matter) it becomes clear that in all cases it is the mother's rights which has been eroded and her gut feelings, unique feelings, which have been ignored, made light of.

Perhaps in the 'state' care another woman became fond of the children. Perhaps the father in this situation recognised his fondness, and Ruth Wallsgrove in her caring discovered a very valuable relationship and love with these children. But the implication is that as soon as a mother loses any sort of control over her surroundings – and RW states that social pressures can lead to this happening – then she risks losing her children or having to accede to 'demands'. This is such a real risk for many of the women Ruth is talking about – ie lesbian mothers, 'single' mothers – that it cannot be dealt with lightly.

Women who are mothers need support *on their terms* – there is nothing wrong with this. Their 'bargaining' power is so weak, they are so vulnerable in this society, hence the power of the state/father/freewheeler etc.

And what is 'mother right', 'motherhood' anyway? It is *not* a question of power and control. Her children are not objects over which power and control may be wilfully asserted – she is their carer in the most intimate and tender sense, she has been bound up with their lives physically, mentally, emotionally, she wants life *with* and *for* her children. Mothering is not *ownership* or sole control, it is *mothering* and if we want to know what this is we must ask mothers, who are themselves spoken of as objects in this article.

What I am writing is only a beginning and this is after five years of living with my lover and her two children. There is an immense and subtle difference in all kinds of ways in the relationship that she and I have to the children and to the world (I don't even like to say "the children" as if they are not individuals who have names, interests, passions, opinions . . .). Ultimately she, and not I, is responsible and she, not I, has their interests *unequivocally* at heart. For her that is an immense pressure, made worse by lack of understanding and, therefore, lack of support on the part of quite a lot of the rest of the world! And sadly this includes some trends in feminist thought. I must point out that this whole question of 'care' and 'share' arises at the point where there is no father around – isn't it ironic that as soon as a woman is in the position of being 'on her own' with children, not only the state, church, school, public opinion, press etc step into the breach to enact their experiments, expound their views or exert their will (in the absence of the ultimate and phallacious male authority, greater or lesser according to class/colour/race . . .) but also RW and some other

Wendy Kerrison

women see the mother's (a feminist mother, read lesbian mother/single mother) children as 'available' – provided they are compatible. As if one can make that sort of choice anyway in a relationship in which you have so much power and they (the children) have none. It doesn't actually matter whether you *like* or feel compatible with children, it doesn't alter their dependence on your good will and fairness.

How do you or I become a mother? By giving birth to a child, or by having a child given over to our care by a mother who wishes us to assume her caring – or by adopting a child out of institutional care (bearing in mind that sometimes a very heavy handed action has brought that child into 'care' in the first place). And as to *sharing*, that must absolutely, inevitably be on the mother's terms – and it is women who are mothers whose vision may shape a society in which children's interests and welfare are the responsibility of the larger community. Do you not trust mothers with this 'power'? It is surely not a 'power' anyway, but a creative, imaginative impulse born out of very particular insights and feelings – for goodness sake, if *anyone* knows the generosity of sharing it is mothers, which is precisely why they are so frequently taken advantage of.

The notion of *blood* relationship (see RW's title) is actually a very patriarchal one.

Women who are mothering are not necessarily related by blood but by a relationship of ultimate responsibility and love to the children in their care. Can there be shared mothering as well as shared caring for children? Perhaps, when there is an enormous and profound change in our society and an enormous and profound trust between the adults concerned, not mixed up in questions of power and control. Such changes cannot be *willed*. And in any case they will be brought about by mothers *on their terms*. Since when has a voice within the women's movement moved that oppressed groups of women should accept *anyone* else's terms in a move towards greater space, freedom and recognition?

Yours in sisterhood,
Vinty Hawkes.

Wendy Kerrison

Clearing the mist

Dear *Trouble and Strife*,

I was disappointed that Rachel Hasted could, in her article in *T&S7*, discuss the witch hunts and the current witch craze without dealing directly with the goddess of the priestesses. As I understand the evidence (and I agree with her recommendations about our treatment of fact – see my article about the Matriarchy Study Group papers in *Feminist Review 2*), the threat presented by the women murdered was primarily their BELIEF, only secondarily their power and latterly their social influence through the healing (and prophecying) of some of them. Recognising and more importantly honouring a goddess as the source of all life, today as well as in ancient times, undermines the ideological hold of the patriarchy on society regardless of who does the healing. For it changes the entire status of women and by implication of men too, in society.

Feminists today are trying to re-construct witches to suit their modern needs, but it won't work. We can be new kinds of womyn and claim the name witch for ourselves. But we do a disservice to our sisters of the past if we see the power of their spell-making which was rooted in their pagan faith in terms of 20th century political analyses. We can today achieve some of the power through manipulation of psychic forces, as ritual magicians like Marian Green demonstrate, but the challenge these women were will only be ours if we truly immerse ourselves in a radically different world view. The only area in which we are, in my opinion, beginning to approach this is in our re-evaluation of motherhood, mothering and The Mother. We have a lot more to do before the mist can clear.

Yours in sisterhood,
Carol Lee/Jean Freer,
Oxford.

In The Name Of The Father

How do we see our fathers? As oppressors? As oppressed? Margot Farnham explores her own relationship with her father, rejecting political over-simplifications and finding much with which to identify in fiction by working class and Black women.

Discussing this piece on fathers with my friends, eyes rolled heavenward to a woman. Having struggled for years to understand my dad – his uncontrollable temper in the early years; his sentimentality more lately – I certainly understand a reluctance to ponder over this relationship. Because my feelings were so bound up with the past and because my dad does not articulate his emotional life easily, to worry more seemed as pointless as contemplating the sound of one hand clapping.

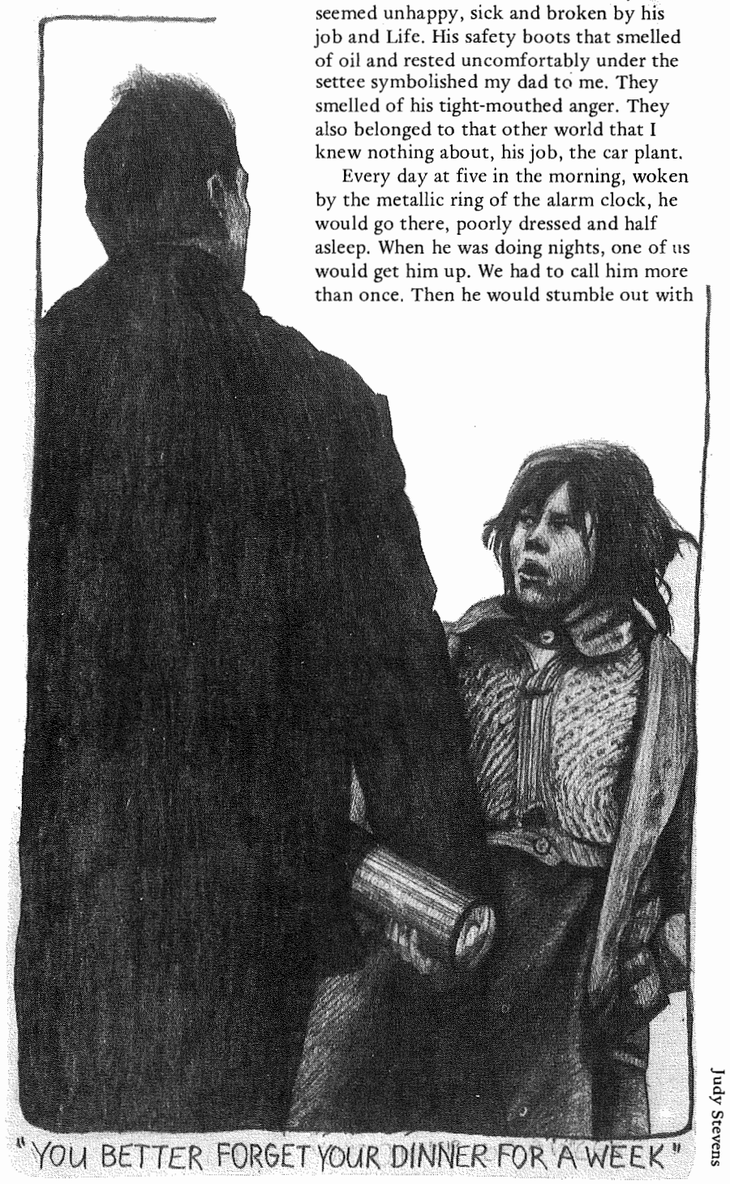
The matter of who my father was laid itself to rest; although impermanently, as an unstaked vampire. Like Transylvanian peasants, we maintain a hush about these men. The effect of this is, as Liz Kelly wrote in *TS3* that we have "almost without noticing, reinforced the idea . . . that mothers are the most important influence in our lives".

In some ways, fathers *are* discussed. It was a struggle for women to force the 'care' and control agencies of the state, and even ourselves, to talk about and blame fathers in cases of daughter abuse rather than the 'complicit' mothers of social workers' reports. Yet, still we talk more about mothers.

For some women, their feelings about their fathers are so bitter, it seems impossible to build more detailed theories out of that chaos and it is enough to hate. Other women say their fathers were safe havens away from extremely troubled relationships with their mothers, and even though they are critical of their fathers' other sexist assumptions, maintain tender feelings towards them. Some fathers, even before the recent brand of anti-sexist baby-harnessed men, nurtured their children. I have a clear memory of my father's clumsy attempt to nurse me through a fever, fighting it with ice-packs, heroically. I know I craved what I thought a proper father should be and wanted his love. My sister, reading Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* for CSE , wanted nothing more than to have a father like Atticus Finch, someone like Gregory Peck in a waistcoat who would show the world that courage wasn't "a man with a gun in his hand". With such a father it would be possible to be proud. How could it be possible to hold one's head high trailing alongside a man that in reality physically resembled more Robert Ewell, the poor trash villain of the novel? The tender scenes in that book are compelling, as rationed foods are, and many women cherish the random, isolated memories that say they were cared for, loved and good enough. Because we have so many idealised images of fathers, it is difficult not to resent women who claim to have had an experience like the ideal.

Daughter's dilemma

My attraction and resistance to feminism hung, when I was eighteen or so, upon my dad. I was attracted to feminism because he was a man with unpredictable bad tempers



"YOU BETTER FORGET YOUR DINNER FOR A WEEK"

Judy Stevens

who frightened me and oppressed and irritated my mum who I identified with. At the same time I resisted certain feminist proclamations, even though I mostly believed them to be true, because my dad seemed unhappy, sick and broken by his job and Life. His safety boots that smelled of oil and rested uncomfortably under the settee symbolished my dad to me. They smelled of his tight-mouthed anger. They also belonged to that other world that I knew nothing about, his job, the car plant.

Every day at five in the morning, woken by the metallic ring of the alarm clock, he would go there, poorly dressed and half asleep. When he was doing nights, one of us would get him up. We had to call him more than once. Then he would stumble out with his thermos of coffee. He would return at night or in the morning depending on his shift, grey faced and stooping, with the empty flask and a battered paper stuffed in his donkey jacket pocket. He had enough energy to watch TV or play a mindless card game on his own before he fell asleep on the carpet.

My dad ruled at home. At least that was how it seemed to me as a child. Many women remember that when their dad came in, he brought with him an 'atmosphere', the outside world coming indoors making everybody feel they were about to be inspected.

My dad, however, did not rule in the absolute way that many middle class women report of their fathers. My mum argued back, shouted and 'nagged' for what she considered her due. My mum and dad fought out a way to stay married together and my mother found more and more strength from Christianity, but my dad's anger was much louder and left a greater impression than my mum's. What I could not reconcile within myself was the truth that his power to dominate at home wasn't worth it. That power was all he had. What he lost or partly missed was the opportunity to be loved by his children.

It seemed to me that Henry Ford had stolen my father's soul. That people's hatefulness is based on an accumulation of poisonous factors, not just exploitative work, eluded me. The car plant, which seemed the source of my father's power, won. It dominated our cramped house; everything revolved around it, even our escapes to Girl Guides or church.

When once I forgot to wake my father for work, his parting words as he lurched out of the house were "You forget to get me up – you better forget your dinner for a week."

My father built his own mythology around himself – he was cast as a battle-weary warrior of an industrial tribe, defeated by life, but testing his remaining strength at home. My father's lungs are badly damaged because he worked in a sulphur plant and because he smoked for a long time. Because the car plant had his body and damaged his hearing, we ate and of that direct correlation we were constantly reminded.

That my mother did a double shift, taking an evening job so we could be fed; that we ate too, because she cooked the dinner, does not stick in my mind in the same way. When my mother got home at night, she returned to a messy house, my brother, a toddler, fallen asleep on the floor and my dad crashed out in the other room. My father's work was destructive; so was my mother's, but my father used the ugliness of his work to promote his power at home.

These are the scars. My father is hacking his lungs out in the toilet bowl. And down we go, too.

Class confusion

I think it is important to devote more attention to fathers because they figure so centrally in the conflicts that exist between women. I am concerned with the question of how working class fathers teach their children about class. It was my dad who introduced me to the idea of class. He used the word; my mum tried to deny it, probably because to talk so seemed to her like presenting oneself as a victim of circumstance. So, for me, it was a working class man who defined what being working class was. I remember around 1977 many debates and arguments in the WLM against the left tendency to define class through men. Women's class position could not be understood by using a model applied to men. Because it was so, some women argued that we shouldn't talk about women having a clear-cut class position at all. This confusion led women to gloss over differences, with middle class women not admitting to the advantages their fathers did give them. Because it seems a terrible thing to betray your class (in my case, my dad) I was aware of a temptation to romanticise my own class background or at least to defend it in the face of veiled class snobbery. I started reading because I wondered whether other working class women had experiences like this.

The Virago anthology *Fathers: Reflections by Daughters* (published in 1984) was not much help. Although it contains interesting accounts there is, in the way the collection is put together, an irritating lack of commitment. The book, which describes itself as a "collage of memoirs" manages more to camouflage the difference of culture and class. Finding a representative "cross section" of women is viewed as a "highly problematic task" – and abandoned. What is published instead is a form of coffee table feminism, with easily assimilated quotes from the Great Minds of European Culture, interspersed almost exclusively with articles by women whose work has been published before: Grace Paley; Adrienne Rich; Angela Carter; Doris Lessing.

What Virago dismisses as the "problematic task" is infact, the most important one to the WLM. Do Black women fear they are betraying their own history when they criticise their fathers? Do Jewish women or Irish women? What difference does class make?

One writer discusses sexual abuse by fathers. This "encounter", described in the introduction as "the darkest of them all, incest", is treated by the editorial as if it were a random event thrown in to show the diversity of women's experiences. The writer, Rose Rider's analysis that daughter abuse is the means and end of patriarchy is not taken any further by the collection. Eileen Fairweather, similarly raises important questions. She talks about her father's early deprivation and tries to connect this with his cruelty as a father: "And yet . . . I'm not sure that even the orange box and the dead bodies are excuses enough." (Her father was a policeman, who as a child slept in orange crates.) This desire, to find excuses for our working class fathers is a common one and I would like to hear it discussed by more than one voice.

Also I am surprised that women can still speak so insensitively. One writer describes herself as being "excessively well educated in expensive girls' schools." Did she ever question how this would read to other women?

Liberal feminism on the whole fails to deal with the complexities of race and class and cares too much about whether men cry, yet I feel that radical feminist theory doesn't deal with the differences in women's experiences sufficiently either. The complexities of women's social relationships need to be looked at more seriously if radical feminist theory is not to insult or simplify the experiences and emotions of

women whose lives are bound up with exploited men. Many women feel torn. They feel clear about male violence within their families and communities, but angry at having to compartmentalise their experience in inadequate ways. How do women react to a theory that argues the primacy of women's oppression when they have lived with a man who is oppressed and has the personal control and influence that fathers can have with their children?

Finding a voice in fiction

The insights about fathers that have struck me most have come from works of fiction. Because there is the opportunity in fictional work for women to use their imagination to explore many aspects of experience and inner life, it is those writings that have been most satisfying for me to read. It is not enough to assert the primacy of women's oppression without taking in that mesh of 'race', class, family background and nation. Otherwise there is a feeling of being divided from oneself. We need in our theoretical writings to include the complexity of individual experience and then to use those understandings tactically in our campaigns, slogans and alliances.

What I have drawn from my reading and discussion are a series of observations leading to a series of questions.

If we consider our father's place in a system based on power, class exploitation and racism, if we question who he is able to exploit, who oppresses and who exploits him, what do we do with our knowledge and understanding? How should we judge his behaviour as a man?

Why do so many women want to forgive so much?

I am amazed at how many excuses I can make for my father's random outbursts of violence and emotional cruelty. From personal experience I know what effect exhaustion, poor health, noise and overcrowding can have and I can maintain these excuses even though my mother never reacted in the way my father did. My father lashed out; my mother sometimes shouted but really turned inwards to depression and religious solace.

More serious in consequence is the void many women face when trying to explain incestuous rape. In *The Bluest Eye* Toni Morrison tries to illuminate the character, Cholly's rape of his daughter by talking about internalised shame and the sense of futility engendered by poverty. Joan Riley, who has dealt with incestuous rape in her novel, *The Unbelonging*; explains the apparent theme of abuse in Black women's writing by talking about the devastation of an uprooting made necessary by poverty and colonialism.

Why these excuses when on the whole we don't extend them to brothers, lovers, husbands, men on the street, bosses?

Do white working class women feel protective about our fathers, especially those who work in heavy industry, because we perceive the lack of first-hand understanding among more privileged women of the ways lives can be diminished by the stresses of deprivation and financial struggle?

To what extent have women of colour and other culturally oppressed women been forced into a protective attitude towards their fathers in the face of white ignorance of the effects of racism and uprooting on Black family life?

Inherited identity

Perhaps women do feel defensive of those ounces of approval bestowed by fathers, in the way that one appreciates the gestures of misers. Certainly fathers represent for many women the first taste of male approval and their early pronouncements on their daughters' characters can feel as weighty as holy judgements. Who are we if not who our fathers say we are: and what is our name if not his?

There is something too about the way that fathers establish their identity that consumes all the energies of everyone around them. If men claim their children, they literally join the Patriarchy, wear the uniform, have control over a new generation of human beings. When men who are exploited in a system founded on class oppression and racism become fathers, they become more powerful and also more vulnerable. Their manhood is being tested. How much can they earn for their families? When it becomes obvious that they are unable to effect justice for their children, who then are they?

There is something very destructive about male shame and men often seem to rope in their families with them. Sometimes this shame has a pernicious effect as the family takes on the shame of the father who has become demoralised, violent or ugly. There isalso a strong pressure, especially on daughters, to lie, to cover up the shame or desperately to encourage, sometimes with wild schemes, so that their father and his manhood remain afloat. In working class families, the power of the father is often precarious because women's mammouth contribution to family life is so obvious. Also the conflict between husbands and wives can seem very exposed. It is tempting then for daughters to want their mothers to lie as well and to blame their mothers if they don't.

Cultural conflicts

Other questions come to mind.

Do men's attempts to maintain a monopoly on, for example, Black cultural identity or working class credentials mean that daughters will feel they are betraying their class or culture if they criticise their fathers? How wrong is it to betray those identities? Would it seem less of a betrayal if both women's contributions and women's resistance to male arrogance were recognised?

How have women without fathers developed their identity as women and their sense of class, culture or nation? How do women who have experience of good fathering put that together with their analysis of men? What effect has mass unemployment had on men's relationships to their families?

I felt through my teenage years an alarming range of emotions about my father, from hatred to deepest remorse, harbouring at times fantasies about saving his life, and at others day-dreams about speeding his death.

At a distance I began to take cold comfort from the realisation that my own conflicts were partly a cultural problem.

Walking out on him this Christmas, refusing any longer to accept his abusive tirades, I realised, clutching my bag of presents, none of which he had personally bought me, that these conflicts could not be resolved within the walls of that small terraced house; but where do we go from there? □

Joan Riley *The Unbelonging* (Women's Press 1985).

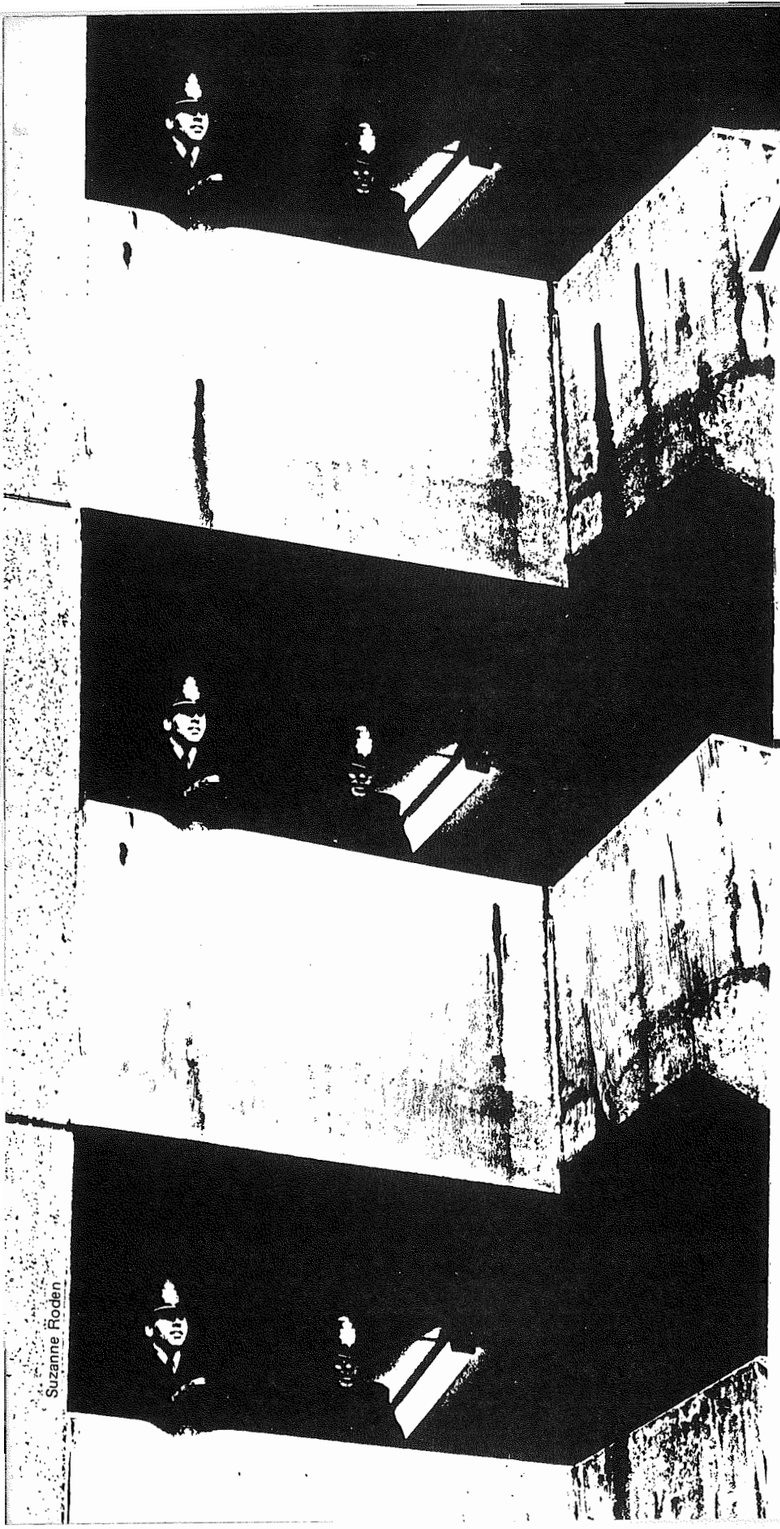
Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* insists that men, oppressed men, exploited men, Black men be accountable for their own soul.

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* was valuable to me because it spoke to me about the destructive quality of male shame. The novel partly deals with a father who reacts to an early humiliation by white men by turning his anger on his wife and children. The family become affected be a conviction that they are ugly, which leads the daughter, who is raped by her father, to ask, "How do you get somebody to love you?"

Manny Shirazi's *Javady Alley* deals with the use fathers make of their wage earning and cultural power to humiliate their dependents. The factory worker father, who has an allegiance to socialist and anti-imperialist resistance, beats his middle class wife. His vision of change does not include the freedom of women and his daughter grows to hate his big ideas: "He was just a bossy boots".

Rosa Guy's *The Friends* deals, as part of a complex theme, with the effect of British colonialism on an American/Trinidadian father/daughter relationship. The struggle of both daughters in this book involves reconciling their relationships with their father, Calvin, who brings them up alone following his wife's death. The older daughter needs to unlearn her automatic need to please; the younger to uncover her own snobbery. Her desire not to know about the sweat and vulgarity of her father's work involves her not seeing the reality of her close friend who is trapped by poverty.

Anzia Yezierska's *The Bread Givers* illustrates the cultural privilege men possess to impart knowledge and to have their knowledge sanctified. In this novel, the daughter of an impoverished Talmudic scholar in New York's Hester Street is led to conclude, "More and more I begin to see that Father in his innocent craziness to hold up the Light of the Law to his children was as a tyrant more terrible than the Tsar from Russia.



A DAY IN THE CITY

Women, policing and violence

Heather Brown reports on what she learnt at a GLC conference on women and policing, and on the big Anti-Apartheid demo the same day. She raises questions about the place of violence in political struggle and about women's special relationship to it.

MYTH:
The police are there to protect all of us.
FACT:
a) A South London survey found that 3 out of 4 women who suffer male violence do not report it to the police, and the ones who do, wish they hadn't.
b) The police have been proven to be racist, sexist, drunken, homophobic and a closed, mostly male institution – as shown by a study which they commissioned themselves (Policy Studies Institute 1983).
c) Police inaction is contributing to the outbreak of racist murders. They continually refuse to acknowledge the existence and extent of racism, as experienced daily with harassment and murders that are increasing on a massive scale.

MYTH:
At least the British police force don't carry guns.
FACT:
a) Only this August a five year old was shot dead while sleeping in his home. Then followed the shooting of Mrs Cherry Groce in Brixton.
b) Every police station has a stock of guns, which can be issued at any time.

The Theory

On Saturday 2 November 1985 350 women of many ages and races met at the County Hall to discuss our contributions to the policing debate'. The air of urgency and anger was unmistakeable. The conference started with an unforgettable address by a woman from the Asian Women's Refuge in London telling us of how a resident had been brutally murdered by her husband and other male relatives in front of her children and other women residents, in the refuge itself.

Then the daughter of the woman who died in the police raid in Tottenham told us in her own words what happened and how the police stood, impassive, on their doorstep watching her mother die in front of them and refused to even call an ambulance. A community worker on the Broadwater Farm Estate related the many ways in which the police have been exacting their revenge on the community ever since the riot: sledgehammering front doors; arresting dozens of young children; holding people for up to 56 hours without food, legal advice or contact outside, 'accidentally' gassing a man with carbon monoxide in a police van; removing the entire contents of houses without so much as an explanation.

An Irish woman reminded us that similar and even worse incidents were commonplace in Northern Ireland. She showed us a plastic bullet and told how many have died since their introduction. Their workshop would not be autonomous due to the need to wake up the British people to what was happening. Irish people are tired of being treated as stupid, warmongering and incapable of governing themselves.

Another woman asked us not to forget the women 'who have not survived policing' and to join her workshop on women in prison. The chairwoman then reminded us to be conscious of the presence of many different kinds of women at the conference and to be careful not to oppress other women in the workshops that followed.

I went to a large workshop on racial attacks. There was extreme dissatisfaction with the police action, or rather, inaction, following reports of racial attacks. Black people are often asked to produce their passports and are then investigated themselves. This type of response has resulted in a situation where there must now be several hundred racist firebombers and murderers walking free in London alone.

However, it is not just 'extremists' who are the problem but the climate of opinion that makes racial harassment so acceptable that dozens of even young children regularly harass and assault Black, particularly Asian women and children, on their estates. Some families have experienced up to 16 attacks, caught the people responsible and still the police refuse to take action.

There was general agreement that the police are so wholly racist in attitude and practise, that they must be bypassed and action taken by the communities themselves. One woman from the Campaign against Racist Attacks on Workers (CARAW) explained what direct action means to this group of Black and white people.

They identify those responsible for racial harassment on their estates and go to visit them. They argue that racism is dividing the working class and is against their best

interests. By scapegoating Black people for unemployment and other social problems the Government is conveniently relieved of its responsibility and continues its policies without an effective challenge.

They have found that many parents are not even aware of what their children are doing and that many of the harassers/attackers have done so unthinkingly, merely because it is seen as 'acceptable' behaviour. CARAW hope that by talking to people directly in this way they will begin to make racist behaviour less generally acceptable, reduce the support for the 'hardcore' racists and start to isolate them.

Women in South London are also taking action by trying to set up a Crisis Line for the victims of racial attacks but they are experiencing considerable difficulty. On the one hand people are afraid to come forward to join them and on the other money is not readily available. We discussed vigilante action and concluded that evening patrols by groups of men, as are happening in parts of London, offer little reassurance to women who are at home on their own most of the day, as many Asian women are.

We also discussed councils' housing policies and the new 'neighbourly conduct' clause that some have adopted, enabling tenants who persist in 'unneighbourly' conduct to be evicted. It was agreed that the definition of racially/sexually unacceptable behaviour was far too vague and could include acts of self-defence/resistance (by Black people and women) to racial and sexual assaults.

Some women felt that eviction was hypocrisy on the council's part as many have operated racialist housing policies for years (and still do). Others that it was singling out the individual for what is, in fact, endemic and institutionalised racism.

After lunch I joined the workshop on sexual offences. This was so large we split into two and one group dealt specifically with incest. I stayed to find out about 'The Met's' new initiatives in the treatment of women reporting rape. Eight new 'Victim Examination Suites' are to be set up around London, featuring showers, WPCs etc, and a woman from Women Against Violence Organisation (WAVO) had visited one in Brixton police station.

The police in these 'rape squads' will have three extra days' training and will make a first appointment for post-coital contraception and STD check-ups. However, there are no plans to monitor the impact of these changes, perhaps suggesting that the police are not very committed to taking seriously the many criticisms of their treatment of women reporting rape.

The woman from WAVO wondered if the police had missed the point – there are no signs that they have any intention of examining their institutionalised sexism and racism. It could be seen, cynically, as a good PR job. We spent some considerable time questioning whether faith in WPCs to improve the experience of reporting rape was misplaced, given the nature of police training and the fact that these women have 'opted in' to an essentially masculinist institution. On the other hand it is a small beginning. In America, the 'rape squads' have training that examines the various male myths about rape (including the ideas that women commonly 'provoke' rape and lie about it). The woman only has to tell her story once to a woman officer who then repeats it for her to other officers and in court. Rape Crisis counsellors are integrated into the process. 'Rape Trauma Syndrome' is recognised and women are allowed to go home after the initial report and recover before they give more detailed information.

Some felt strongly disinclined to 'congrat ulate' the police on anything following the shooting of Cherry Groce.

We pondered on whether it might make tactical sense to give the changes a guarded welcome but some felt strongly disinclined to 'congratulate' the police on anything following the shooting of Mrs Cherry Groce.

We all felt that the police were using their own 'Victim Support Scheme' (VSS) to avoid referring women to Rape Crisis Lines and other women's organisations. We agreed that they must be pressured to at least give women a choice and the number of their local Rape Crisis Line, particularly as VSS counsellors have very little training on rape (in Norwich, one whole day!).

Before the group on incest left us, the woman from Incest Survivors had stressed why she felt we must reject the police and take community action, in the face of the increasing collusion between police and Social Services who further oppress molested children under the guise of 'family therapy'.

Another interesting avenue explored in a separate workshop was that of 'community safety', which promotes the role of local government rather than the police in creating a safer environment. An example is the study of the incidence of attacks with a view to improving the design and layout of housing estates in such a way as to reduce the opportunities for assaults without creating a 'siege mentality' for residents.

Already under construction is the removal of the notorious elevated walkways between blocks, ironically because these were used to defend the Broadwater Farm Estate against the police during the riot. However limited the effects of such changes may be, given that most violence against women and girls occurs within the home, I see no reason not to demand that our need for safety be given due importance in the future design of housing estates, shopping precincts, street layouts and public transport facilities.

Before time ran out, we also started to discuss alternatives to reliance on the police for 'protection', some ideas were:
– to take action into our own hands (we did not elaborate on this),
– for women's organisations to support women taking private prosecutions where the police have refused to act,
– to pressure councils to provide funding for private prosecutions in the case of sexual/racial attacks,
– demand Legal Aid as a right in these cases.
– to take up self-defence (unanimous agreement!).

Unfortunately, I missed the 'plenary session' (summing up) due to the Anti-Apartheid rally, but the conference briefing papers were excellent and I'm sure the conference papers to follow will be as well.

The organisation of the conference was impeccable – the result of the GLC's unprecedented responsiveness and openness to the people of London and its policies on racism, sexism, heterosexism and disability over several years. There was no tokenism. At least a third of the women present were Black, the needs of the disabled and women with children were met and both Indian and vegetarian food was available free for lunch. I am pleased to report that translators were offered on the conference application forms, although I did not see any in action on the day.

Walking out through the halls hung with numerous oil paintings of white, upper class patriarchs, I was sad and angry to think of all the good work that will undoubtedly end with the GLC and wondered how long it will be before everything at County Hall gets back to 'normal'.

The Practice

It was 3.30 pm when I joined the march, militant but good-natured, into Trafalgar Square. A little after when the explosions started going off at intermittent intervals (during the speeches) from the direction of the South African embassy. Standing on tiptoes in the crush I could see the hail of sticks and missiles going on over there. The speakers continued. A man next to me said to his pregnant companion "The police are getting a beating", "Good thing too", she replied and we moved towards that side of the Square.

More explosions, more pigeons circling overhead. Worrying about the pigeonshit I turn to see a Class War anarchist beside me pulling on his face stocking and stamping on placard sticks to break them into projectiles. I can't help laughing – it's all coming true. The speakers continue.

A few minutes later a man rushes through the crowd, his face and eyes streaming with blood. A few more minutes and the police are charging into the square! People start to flee into the dense crowd, knocking into us and panic spreads. "Just

stand still. Everyone stand still", shouts another man near me. We do. Others don't. Soon I'm literally in the front line of a police charge and I turn to run like everyone else. Calming down, I work my way through the crowd, up the steps to the balcony area overlooking the Square to see what's happening.

There are three areas of confrontation: round the South African embassy, in the Square near the steps on the embassy side and further up past the embassy there is a huge mass of people only separated from lines of police by the London Anti-Apartheid banner, which the police snatch.

Joining the crowd at the steps I hear someone shout "They're beating him up!" and they are, quite openly. Later I see a Black man, carried through the crowd by four demonstrators, collapse on the pavement, bent double. They open open his shirt. An awkward, young-looking policeman approaches offering help which is loudly turned down.

A Black photographer asks me to give up my vantage point to him so I stroll around. The chanting rises and falls and the darkness gathers. The speaker is praying – a distraction. People are talking to each other, excited, reluctant to leave. Like the last night of Carnival. A middle-aged Black man sells me a copy of the *African Times*, then gives me half a dozen free when he learns I'm from Norwich. I decide to miss my coach.

The police seem to have decided on a strategy and are regularly moving barriers around us, bit by bit, in a determined way. I wish we had a strategy to outwit them, but that's a problem with spontaneous actions. We retreat haphazardly to avoid enclosure.

It's dark and the supply of ammunition has been exhausted. The Square is nearly empty and the South African embassy recaptured by the police but the huge static confrontation past the embassy is holdingon strong. I file past the barricades and lines of police towards Charing Cross underground. The Strand is packed with police vans and ambulances as far as the eye can see.

Victoria coach station is full of people who've missed their coach home. The luxury 'rapide' coach leaves at 6.30 pm. Surely they won't drive off, half empty, leaving us to wait 1½ hours in the cold, just because I've got an 'ordinary' ticket. They do. "Bash the rich", I say silently. "No pigs on the Farm! Class War!! Free Mandela!!!"

On the coach I realise with surprise that at no time during the afternoon did I feel alienated by what others may interpret as an aggressive male-initiated confrontation. The more permissable and circumscribed forms of protest still left to us cannot reflect my level of anger and disaffection with the direction of the Government, not only over the massive increase in police powers over the last two years, the policing tactics introduced during the miners' strike and the new proposals for a public order law, but in general.

The whole question of the widespread and to some, unqualified, commitment to non-violence in the women's movement re-opens for me. Is it always an appropriate political strategy? If non-violent resistance ultimately limits our effectiveness even in a 'liberal democracy' then how can we, as feminists committed to class struggle and anti-imperialism, advocate it when much of the world suffers under more repressive and even brutal regimes, often backed by our own?

The more permissable forms of protest still left to us cannot reflect my anger and disaffection with the Government.

The deep entrenchment of the state in Britain permits the playacting of democratic freedoms which disguise its nature. But who can doubt that those who benefit from the system in this country would go to the same extremes to defend their interests were the threat to them as great? The success of a non-violent strategy rests crucially on the possession of a conscience by those who oppress.

Should we decide we need to reserve the right to be violent in our various struggles then I believe we need to think carefully and discuss more fully the circumstances in which recourse to violence is politically (and morally) justifiable. □

India: action against violence

Sujata Gothoskat, a feminist from Bombay, was in England in October 1985 by invitation of Manchester's International Women's Group to make links with women involved in the women's liberation movement and as trade unionists. Here she talks to Sara Scott and Alison Dickens from Manchester Rape Crisis and Sylvia Tickle from the International Women's Group, about the growth of India's 'Forum Against Women's Oppression' and describes a number of women's campaigns against male violence.

Sara: *How did the Forum come together?*

Sujata: What happened was around the late 70s we had very small – around 5 to 10 women each – women's groups all over. They were very scattered and working on very different issues. Some were working on organizing with working class women, some Islam women and some of us were discussing the whole question of housework – whether it was productive or unproductive. This was the mid 70s. Most of us were women who had been involved in left groups. From June 1975 there was the Emergency for one and a half years. There was a crackdown on all political work, everyone was behind bars or underground. Except women's groups, because they were not a threat to the government and the state then. In fact most of our conferences that later developed into stable organisations took place around this period because that was the only thing most of us could do. We got more involved in discussing amongst ourselves what we had experienced. Also during this one and half years of the


Eleanor Kelly

Sujata Gothoskat (left), at a Forum conference

Emergency there were a lot of police rapes – just *enormous* amounts of gang rapes and police rapes. Rape was systematically used as a tool to break struggles of mine workers, rural workers, quarry workers.

Alison: Were they attacking the women to get at the men?

Su: Yes, and also in some areas women were working or on strike or in some sort of struggle.

Sa: *So were these rapes of women who had been arrested and were in custody?*

Su: No, not necessarily. For example in May 1974 there was the railway strike. There was a spate of strikes, I suppose it's internationally true that there was a lot of movement, activity going on. The entire atmosphere was charged with hope. The textile strike was crushed in January 74, and in May 74 the railway strike was crushed. It was a huge strike, all over India. The railway people have their quarters, which are railway quarters, so when they are on strike they are no longer employed by the railway and can be evicted. The men were nowhere in the picture because they were all either underground or in jail, it was the women who were living in the quarters. Even in Bombay where the forces of repression are not so in play as for example in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh, there were rapes by police of railway workers' wives. Also they evicted them, various other forms of harassment and intimidation. During the Emergency this increased just phenomenally, but nothing was in the press – there was press censorship. What a few papers did was whatever words were cut out, they put a blank there to say that this was cut by the censors, but that was the maximum they could do.

In 77 I was working in an organisation called Build, it was slum organisation and all of them were men except me. Around 55% of the Bombay population lives in slums. We were organising on the issue of evictions because the government and corporation can come and bulldoze the slums at any time. So we were trying to build resistance groups and I was working with women.

What happened was a pregnant woman in a slum in central Bombay was raped by four men. She was raped when she was going to the toilet. You see there are no toilets, so they have to go somewhere near the railway line or somewhere in the shade and there are no lights. Men – well men will go anytime of the day – but women go early in morning or when it's dark, late at night, because they feel awkward. This woman, was going to the toilet in a very isolated place when she was raped. She was bleeding, bruised all over, very bad. Some slum activists came and told us in the office so we went and talked to them. I rang up some friends and we came and talked together – we had never really thought about the issue of rape in terms of an analysis or anything like that. We sat together and wrote a leaflet about rape, starting off from this incident and why rapes take place, women in society, sex object. We hadn't really thought about it much. In the leaflet we said that the fact that she had to go so far away, to an isolated spot made her more vulnerable. It's not necessarily connected with rape, but it's decent human living to have a toilet and lights. Half a page was on slum conditions, half page was the incident and the other page was what we felt was an analysis of rape. The slum organisation, the men, were very unhappy but they didn't say anything when we were there. We went home and the next morning I came and saw the leaflets totally changed and the only argument in it was that because there were no toilets and lights she was raped! It was so silly, but it was argued like that though. And, in fact, the ironic thing was just the week before this a woman in a slum in Bombay was raped in a toilet under the lights! I mean it's *so ironic* and in the same area we were working – under the lights in the toilet she is raped and they were arguing for toilets and lights!

I still have the leaflets, after so many years, the one in my handwriting and the official one. We had an *enormous* fight, we were up till all hours . . . and then I left the organisation.

After the Emergency ended in 77 the new government came in, which was for the first time a non-Congress government, the Janata party. What had happened in the one and a half years began to come out in the press – mass rapes in Pilabadad, so many

Thanks to Eleanor Kelly of Manchester University Extra-Mural Studies for photograph and additional information.

mass rapes. The press was also very keen to have a clean image it had lost, so it started reporting women's struggles and women's oppression much more. At the same time a lot of these small groups were beginning to come together in some sorts of joint actions. So this bringing up the question of rape had this background of mass rapes, police rapes.

In 79 a 16 year old blind labourer, a tribal girl was raped by two policemen in the police station. A law had just been passed by the state saying that women should not be brought to the police station after sunset, that, if the police needed to ask women questions they should go to their house, or arrange somewhere else. This was because during the Emergency a lot of women were harassed at police stations, so the Janata party passed this rule. Despite that, Maturer, this girl, was taken there and raped in the toilet. The Supreme Court gave the verdict that the men were innocent and that basically she was a loose woman – a 16 year old blind woman!

Some lawyers involved in that case wrote an open letter to the Chief Justice in India saying that this was a gross violation of all possible rights – forget human, even legal rights. A lot of people saw this letter and were very agitated. All the other rapes had been happening but this was the height – it was so blatant, it was in the police station. So all the small groups that existed wrote to each other, we met and decided to work together. There were about 60 or 70 of us and we founded what was called the Forum Against Rape in January 80. One of our first things was that this case should be reopened; we had mass meetings in houses, in the street, in offices, residential areas.

Sa: *Was this throughout India?*

Su: This was mainly in Bombay but also to some extent in Delhi, Hyderabad and Bangalore. In Northern Maharashtra in the tribal area of Shahad women did not take up the campaign in this manner but, for example, a man tried to molest a woman, so they put him on a donkey backwards, with a garland of shoes and buckles, tarred his face and took him around. The tribal women were taking these actions against rape well before the Forum started its campaign. So these kinds of things were taking place; it was a fairly widespread campaign and it depended on the situation there; we had public meetings, they had the procession of donkeys.

Sylvia: *What do you mean when you say a tribal area?*

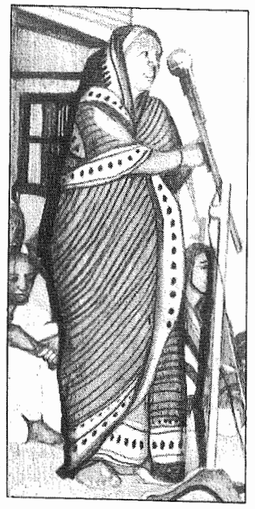
Su: They are people that have been living there for ages and were not under any of these established religions – Hindus, Muslims. They have a sort of religion of their own which is more close to nature. Another man, a rich farmer's son was tied to a pole on a very cold night, just with his underwear and made to stand there the whole day and night – 36 hours. People would go there and look at him and no-one had the guts, not even the police, to come and rescue him until later on.

A: *Was it women doing this?*

Su: Yes, mainly tribal women, labourers who work on village farms. So this was the general mood, three or four years of anger building up to this movement. Then we took up a campaign for change in rape law. One of the main things was that the burden of proof was on the woman, rather than the man. One of the slogans for example in the Maturer rape case was that she was raped first by the police and then by the law.

What the Forum used to do was that if there was a small press report about a woman being raped, we would follow it up. We would go to the area, talk to the woman and if she was keen on doing something about it we talked to the neighbouring women and then decided what to do. For example, a 14 or 15 year old girl who used to cut stones for pavements, she was raped by four policemen and a man from one of the Rightist parties which is very chauvinistic and fascist, Shiv Sena.

There was another girl who was working in a factory, a sweatshop, she was raped and killed by the owner of the place because she knew about certain tax problems. So we tried to take up the issues, have demonstrations at the police station, make them take up false information reports, issue warrants on the rapists. They wouldn't: the men got off scot free.



Judy Stevens

In the area where the girl stonecutter was raped, for example, we tried to form area level committees of women. We would put on skits and plays. One was about the divisions that exist between women. Just four or five sentences in the half hour play. One woman is beaten up and raped; she cries and falls down, the other women say "I'm not concerned, I'm a Hindu", "I'm not concerned, I'm a Muslim", etc, bringing out these class and caste differences. We are divided, yet we are each individually oppressed by the same forces.

Sa: *And did you get a lot of local women supporting you?*

Su: Yes, in fact the case I was talking about where the young girl was raped by four policemen there was a huge demonstration. This was in a village outside Bombay and all the women from the village came out for the demonstration and supported her. In fact, she marched at the head of it. We feel it is wrong to take it on if the woman is not prepared to.

Sa: *Was there much opposition from the husbands of women who wanted to take part?*

Su: They weren't married women, the rapes we took up, but there was opposition from the father in one case. Like he used to ask us, can't you get her married off, you shouldn't do such things. So we asked her and she said she would like to leave the locality. We arranged a hostel for her. The father was very violent and he would come and harass her. Eventually he took her off to the village so then we couldn't keep in touch with her.

A: *Apart from the relatives of the women who had been raped, was there any opposition from men in the communities to your plays or demonstrations?*

Su: Not in this instance, but later on there was an incident where one small mentally retarded girl was raped, a five year old. It was really very gruesome, the whole thing. They were from the Dalit class, originally called the untouchables but which they have renamed as oppressed. When this happened, one of the people who knew one of us rang us up and asked if we could come over. Five of us went and we talked to the girl. We couldn't say very much, she was not able to do that. The mother was very keen and said "You must do something about it". He was 30 years old, from the same slum but a little better off than this family. We decided to have a demonstration; the police had refused to do anything. We went to the police station and had a really bad time there, they were really very nasty. We refused to move, said we would sleep there until they wrote it down. After about two hours of haggling they wrote it down.

Next time we went there was a demonstration planned; we had talked to all the women in the community and they were very keen. The demonstration was planned for the Sunday. On the Saturday, we got a ring from one of the guys from the Busti the slum, saying "Don't come, the women aren't very eager". So we said we had already talked to lots of them and if they wouldn't come on the demonstration then we would come and talk to them. So we went, with placards on our backs. What had happened was the girl's father had taken money from the boy's father and he was pressurizing the mother not to say anything. They were really very poor but the mother had said, "I'll starve rather than sell my daughter like that". But the father had obviously had some dealings with the men in the Busti who had organised into a slum people's group to fight against evictions. They were fairly left wing, progressive speeches and whatever, and they were very threatened by all these women coming. They didn't want us to come. But we went, and we sat there, and there were too many of us for them not to notice us – about 70–80 women in a fairly small area. We talked to the women and then the story came out.

Sa: *More generally than that has there been support or opposition from left wing groups?*

Su: They have supported the anti-rape movement. In fact when the Forum was formed women from both the CPI and the CPM, the two communist parties, were there and were very active. A lot of men were supporting us because rape is an issue that no-one will refuse to support openly; whatever you feel, no-one is going to say

you must rape, or rape is good! Even the most right wing people supported us. But that didn't mean anything. These women would say we mustn't bring up the question of marital rape, that we would alienate people, lose the support we had. What had happened was that in 78/79 people used to talk about rape in whispers and gossip and by this time it was being openly discussed.

They argued that we mustn't take things too far. It was very difficult in the Forum. We felt rape must be dealt with entirely – by everyone; it's not a question of this or that section feeling bad. So in the booklet we brought out on changing rape law we did have suggestions about recognizing marital rape. That was resented very much by these people.

When a woman worker was raped and killed we felt it was not only a women's issue, but also a trade union issue. It took place on a huge industrial estate full of hundreds of factories. Ghatkapr, it's supposed to be the biggest in Asia. She was active in the union, she knew certain things and she was raped. So we should make connections with the trade union movement. The CPI and CPM women were still in the group at this point and we told them that we wanted to make these connections at a demonstration. All of us were in different organisations but we wouldn't bring our banners, just have the Forum banner, and our own slogans. But what happened was that as we were coming from this side road we saw a *big* demonstration of *men* with red flags and the hammer and sickle coming from the front. We wondered what this other demonstration was going on ahead – it was the same demonstration! So we said "Okay, you have brought your own banners, that's all right, but let the Forum banner go at the head and all of us will follow". We said, "This is our Forum not yours, we are all in other organisations", but they refused, they charged ahead.

Sy: *Just like the trade unions on the abortion demonstration in London in 1978!*

Su: That woman was dead, but the basic thing was that there were hundreds of women on these industrial estates who were going to be faced with the same situation. We did this to bring them out and to show our support. Women will not openly come because their jobs are at stake. They are all unorganised, non-unionised people, and we wanted to give them leaflets so that they could contact us anytime – just saying that we can help, nothing else. But the CMP leader gave a speech saying if he was elected again what he would do for the area and so on. That was the end – all the women, everyone felt that this was some claptrap and everybody walked off, they wouldn't take part in that. From that point on – well, we never told them not to come, but . . . . .

Sy: *So are you saying that because of these men's interference and because they took over the event that you lost the possibility of contacting the women that you wanted to contact?*

Su: Yes, these people had at least 50 banners, and we just got so fed up that we folded up the Forum banner. The whole exercise was pointless. A simple thing we could have done was to pull them down but there was a police cordon and we were held in that. After this we were so demoralised, there was no energy left. Also they were just talking about compensation for the mother, which is okay but one can't just talk about that. There were several instances like this.

That was in 1980. In December the Forum organized a conference, a national conference of all the women's groups in India.

Sa: *Was it a conference specifically on rape?*

Su: No. Some people approached us and said that a young 20 year old girl had been beaten to death by her husband. All of us went there, her neighbours were absolutely agitated, they wanted to kill that man, they were really angry. So we organized a meeting there and a march in the area, basically saying that this had happened and that it can happen, not only because the husband was brutal but also because the neighbours were insensitive. She would certainly have shouted when she was being beaten and it is pointless that we react angrily after the incident but do nothing when she was being harassed. This happened in November 80 and through discussions we felt that focusing

on rape was not enough. Because there was no other organisation we had to broaden it. We renamed it Forum Against the Oppression of Women in November, and we called the meeting in December.

A: *Was it still around violence against women?*

Su: Yes, it is still basically against violence against women. Just before the conference one woman was coming very consistently to Forum meetings, a new member. She was a middle aged, middle class woman, very active in all the actions. Slowly she began to talk to us and we realized that she was being beaten up every day by her husband for the last 13 years, she and her children. She was very independent and determined but she didn't have any support; she was absolutely uneducated, she didn't have parents or anything. So some of us got together and said if you want to move out, you can come and stay with any of us. She said she wanted to take her time because of the children, but during the Forum conference she didn't go home at all, she stayed on. That was the ultimate; he pushed her out and was very brutal towards her. He threatened to kill her, break the typewriter over her head. She and the two daughters – the eldest son was with the father – walked out and she stayed with some of us. She got work because of contacts with research institutes but there was the problem of the house. She had left her house without any clothes, without anything . . . but she had the key. About 10 of us decided to go back and get the clothes when her husband was working. When we got there, we realized that as well as clothes, there were other things . . . So, we got a fridge, just everything! Plus he had shares – sacks full – but there was no use in taking those because they were in his name and we would have been charged with theft. But because she was his lawful wife they couldn't charge us for the other things unless he had receipts to prove that he had bought them and not she. By this time we were absolutely fed up with the police, we just couldn't go to the police for anything, so we just went on our own. We felt that the shares might be important later on for the court case – to prove that he had property – and they were very useful! So we just took them out, got all of them photocopied and then put them back in his safe. None of us have very big houses, just very small rooms, so we distributed the furniture at various places until she got a room. She had to stay with lots of people and she really had lots of problems. We were not very organized, we didn't have resources or contacts. After about 6 months we got a room for her.

The Forum was basically a spontaneous group, it still doesn't have any structure, anyone could sign and say they were the Forum. That has been very good because we have taken whole lots of things from other people's houses, taking women's things from the husband, but nobody can pin us down because we don't have an address, we don't have an office, nobody is in charge, there is no trace of the Forum anywhere, so they can't do anything! But it has its bad points. For example, if someone like this woman wanted to contact us very desperately, they don't know where to look for us. For people like us who have sorted out certain things it's okay, but for those whose need is urgent it's a very negative structure to be in, and that's what this woman experienced. Through these discussions we realized that we needed something with a structure, but as well as the Forum because of its structurelessness and spontaneity was very important. So we decided to form a Women's Centre, a place with someone there so that people could come and talk. During this period we had also had a lot of agitations around wife murders. We were getting really tired out because we felt we were getting there too late; there was no-one there when a woman was actually struggling. There was a need for a centre which would be more stable and help women when they really needed it, not when it was too late.

That Women's Centre was formed in January 82. It began in a small storeroom of a friend's house because we didn't have a place. We worked there for two years. The woman who we had helped move out was a paid full-time worker.

Sa: *How did you find money to pay her?*

Su: There was an Institute for Social Research and Education in Bombay. They were basically a library and were getting funds from abroad, from War on Want and so on. They gave us one salary, so Flavia was getting the salary, she was the full-time person and we were volunteers coming twice a week or so. After about 8 to 10 months the money ran out and there was a real crisis. Also we couldn't function from this place, it was very dangerous for the woman living there. So we had a premiere showing of a film called *Subah* which means morning or dawn. We made a lot of money by bringing out a brochure with 200 to 300 advertisements, and they pay very well for them. There were also 20 pages about who we are; the other 100 pages were just nonsense. But that made a lot of money so we could buy a place.

Sa: *Briefly, what's the film about?*

Su: It's about a woman who goes to work in a women's refuge. Much of the film is about the refuge and the lives of the women in it. It's an absolutely bureaucratic refuge, a government refuge. She doesn't like this, and she tries to involve the women. There are a whole lot of corrupt practices going on. Like when she is sitting working at night there is a phone call from a minister who says "Are you the new Matron? Did the earlier Matron tell you about my needs?". She says, "What?". He says, "Send some women from the refuge over." So she says "What for, it's night I can't send them". He says "What's the point of sending them in the day, I want them at night".

Also it's about the aspirations of the women in the refuge. They don't like it, they don't like the rules, the food, the younger women want to do something else. One very bad thing in the film is their attitude to lesbianism. There are these two girls who love each other and they go onto the terrace and make love. They are basically totally disgraced and one girls says "You must understand there are mental problems". That is generally the attitude there, most people feel that there is something wrong with homosexual people.

Sa: *Have there been any campaigns within Indian feminism about sexuality, about lesbianism?*

Su: No, people don't talk about it. It's not that there aren't any in India; there are quite a few, but they wouldn't even tell their nearest friends.

Sa: *Is that true within women's groups as well, that women tend to be silent about it?*

Su: Within the Forum and within some of the Delhi groups there is not so much of a stigma. But within the other groups in Bombay, I don't think they ever talk about it. Within the Forum there is a lot of uneveness so some lesbians will tell perhaps five or ten women but not the others.

A: *So how do lesbian women manage to survive?*

Su: By hiding it. I mean they would tell their nearest friends who they know are sympathetic and would understand, but basically they hide it. It's not at all difficult to hide because people don't even imagine such a thing. Like, if there is a lesbian and a gay man staying in the same house others will say they are having an affair even if they don't touch each other, whereas if there are two women staying together there is no problem.

A: *Is it a crime in law?*

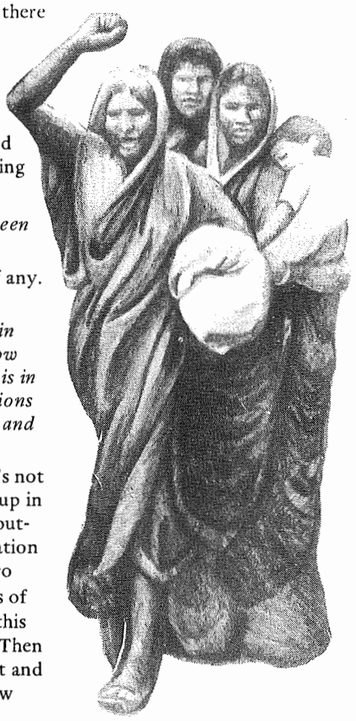
Su: Homosexuality gets seven years' imprisonment. I know this because a friend of mine was threatened by her husband who knew she was having a relationship with another woman.

Sa: *Do you know if a case has ever been brought against a woman?*

Su: I don't think so; I don't know of any. Basically I think this is old British law.

A: *The other thing I was interested in asking you about was pornography. How widespread do you think pornography is in India and have there been any connections made between violence against women and pornography?*

Su: There is a lot of pornography. It's not sold like here, publically; it's wrapped up in yellow paper and sold underhandedly outside the station. We had one demonstration against a film called *Red Rose*. The hero was a rapist who goes round raping lots of women and leaves a red rose. There is this woman who is in love with this rapist. Then they come to know that he is the rapist and there is this long explanation about how



his mother had neglected him, his sister had done something, his girlfriend had done something, etc. It ends with the heroine saying I'll wait for you, I understand you. So we had a demonstration, we called for a boycott of the film because it portrays the rapist as a hero. In fact we thought of the demonstration because a few days after the *Red Rose* film was released there were two murders in Bangalore. The two young guys who murdered the young girls said that they got the idea from the film; they said it in their testimony. So that really made us start to think maybe there is this link, maybe it is the spark for something already there.

We also did an action against a film that exposed women's bodies totally unecessarily and in a very vulgar manner. But no really systematic work; we've done one sideshow and an exhibition on how the media portrays women, but that was mainly women in advertising. In Bihar for example there was this thing of painting out the posters, with black paint, pornography type posters. We had a letter-writing campaign about particular ads., flooding all the newspapers with letters.

Actually something we did in 83 was very interesting; the train guarding campaign. In the local trains we have women's compartments and it is obviously very necessary because these compartments are packed. But after 8 o'clock, when there were not so many women, men used to get in and harass women. In fact, they would stand on the doors and not allow women to get in. So we went to the railway authorities, petitioned, demonstrated – as usual, nothing happened. So we said we would guard the trains ourselves. For three months, twice a week, we would board the train in groups of 8 or 10, and go from one end to the other. At 8 o'clock we would start and the men would start coming in after 4 or 5 stations, so we would tell them to leave because it was the women's compartment. Some would argue; to begin with they were very brazen. Then we would throw them out, all of us together, we would push them out. The women vegetable vendors and fish vendors who used to be very badly harassed before really got into it. They were very angry with us because they thought we weren't going far enough! We argued and said the trains were going very fast and just to push a fellow out was really very dangerous. This went on for three or four months and it really changed the whole picture. It was the only totally successful campaign the Forum has had.

A: *How did you get the money to travel on the train?*

Su: We went free. After two days the ticket checker wouldn't even look at us. We had all these huge badges and umbrellas, whether it was raining or not – very useful! The train authorities immediately got very scared. They contacted us. We said they must paint on it that it is for women only 24 hours a day. Now, even if the carriages are empty not a single guy gets in.

There was another issue we took up which was very different and that was this question of personal laws. In India the criminal procedure court holds for all of us while the civil courts hold only for people who want to. There is a Hindu court and a Muslim court plus a general civil court. Suppose I have a civil marriage, then I'm under civil law; if I get married the Hindu way, then I am under Hindu law. All the personal laws are very bad for women, some more so. So this woman challenged the Muslim personal law in the court because she was given a divorce by her husband saying "Talaq, Talaq, Talaq". Also her husband had not told her he had a first wife; they are allowed to marry four times but only with the consent of the wife. She went to the Supreme Court to challenge it. She did it on her own and then she came to the Forum basically for support. So we are arguing for a civil court for everybody. In Muslim law, if a woman says she wants a divorce she loses all her rights for maintenance. With child custody men have preference in personal law; men are supposed to be the natural guardian. That's really funny, how can men be the natural guardian? Inheritance is also a problem in the Surian christian community: women can only have one quarter of the property if there is a son and daughter. Half goes to the son, and one quarter to the daughter.

The argument of all these men has been that other people are trying to interfere in our religion. Which is all nonsense, because the state has already interfered in religion and they have welcomed it. If, for example, a man rapes, Muslim personal law says stone him to death. A Muslim man would never say stone me to death. A man steals something and his hand is supposed to be cut off – he doesn't want that, he only wants it when it concerns his wife. It's total hypocrisy from all the men of all the religions. The thing is that they are very well organized, especially the Muslims. The state is extremely cautious because of the votes. Most women, especially oppressed minority women, vote according to the men They cannot afford to antagonize the men, so they cannot afford to change personal laws. It is going to be a very difficult battle and there isn't much hope but we want to raise the issue.

I would just like to say one thing before we finish. You see all that I have said about the Forum, it is a very small group, even in Bombay, and the majority of women are still very unorganized. There are slum women facing enormous problems. There is a Supreme Court ruling which we are trying to fight. It has ruled that the corporation can bulldoze all the slums in Bombay. That is going to be *a total devastation*. The fascist party is gaining a lot of support and it's going to make living in Bombay impossible. There are people trying to organize women in the slums, but they feel quite hopeless.

Sy: *Do they have an obligation to rehouse?*

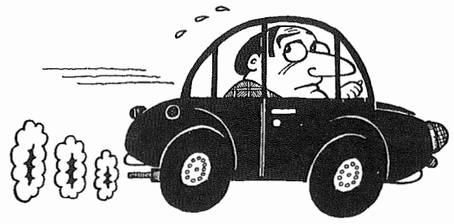
Su: No, nothing. This has been happening for years; huts are demolished and then rebuilt, but so much labour and money goes into it. They have hardly anything to eat and they have to build their huts over and over again.

Sy: *Does the corporation have to provide another site?*

Su: They say you can build anywhere outside Bombay, but inside Bombay, no. The main argument is that Bombay is overcrowded – which it is – but this is no solution. A simple thing like decentralizing industry would be an ideal solution. Right now all the offices are here, so people stay here. It is easier to go on reclaiming land and building offices, pulling the slums down and throwing them out. □

Judy Stevens

Protecting men ... from women



Janet Fookes' bill on kerb-crawling became law last year. Yet, in the eyes of the law, sexual nuisance is still apparently caused mainly by women. In this article Jane Calvert says why official double standards about prostitution made her change her mind about the latest Sexual Offences Act to hit the streets.

Legislation about prostitution poses a set of contradictions that are difficult for feminists to reconcile. The Fookes Bill, which has now become law, contains many of those contradictions.

These contradictions run very deep. Eileen McLeod and others have argued that prostitution offers women economic independence and "sexual autonomy"[1]. In a society in which women make up the majority of the poor and where state benefit for women especially as single parents is so low, prostitution provides a realistic solution for many women. The Law treats prostitutes very harshly and there is a strong case for establishing prostitutes' rights more clearly. Organised prostitutes' groups such as the English Collective of Prostitutes (connected to the Wages for Housework campaign) and PROS are campaigning for the decriminalisation of prostitution.

The experience of being a prostitute isn't one of glamorous independence. Of course it depends which end of the market you operate in. Life is always harsher at the lower end of the market – for the street prostitutes rather than those who work as call girls or through saunas and hotels. On this side prostitution can be seen very clearly as the exploitation and subjugation of women by and to men. Prostitutes offer their sexual services for the sole purpose of pleasing men and thus earn money. They are frequently on the receiving end of violence at the hands of pimps, clients and the police, and are often sexually exploited by these same groups. In short, prostitution involves the economic, sexual, and bodily exploitation of women by men and embodies all the worse aspects of women's lives in patriarchal society. Furthermore kerb crawling means that physical intimidation and fear become part of the day to day experience of all women living in a red light district. If you are female walking through an area rife with kerb crawlers, whatever your age or mode of dress, you become a victim. You are constantly subject to harassment by men walking, men driving, men always leering at you. Women learn to live in fear of that harassment, and often to blame themselves or other women for its occurrence.

Criticism of previous legislation has been on the grounds that it discriminates against the prostitute to the benefit of the client. One of the positive attributes of the Fookes Bill it seemed to me, was that it went some way towards changing this imbalance. By focusing on the kerb crawler it more genuinely addressed the issue of public nuisance. There also appeared to be some possibility that this legislation could be used as a means of giving women some form of protection or freedom on the streets, since it effectively made it a criminal offence for a man to solicit a woman on the street. For these reasons I found the prospect of this Bill very appealing and decided to look at it in some detail. In relation to other official discussions of prostitution and public nuisance it becomes clear that the aims of the legislation are far from those of promoting rights for or protecting women.

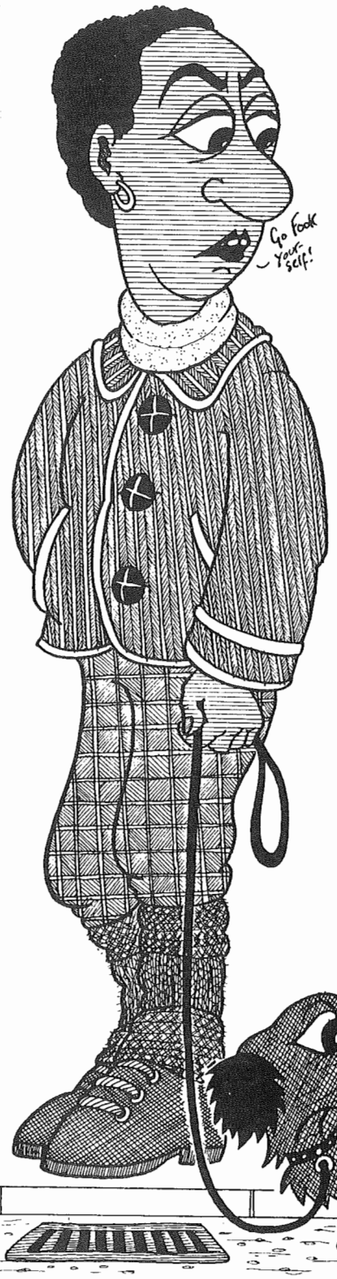
Under the 1959 Street Offences Act, it is not prostitution itself that is illegal, but loitering or soliciting for the purposes of prostitution. The Wolfenden Committee which recommended this legislation took great pains to claim that it was not the prostitutes themselves that were under attack, but only the public nuisance caused by their trade. Yet the legislation does focus on the prostitute and not on that which many see as the major nuisance – kerb crawling.

A woman soliciting or loitering for the purpose of prostitution can be cautioned by a police officer. After she has received two cautions, if she is apprehended loitering again she can be charged and taken to court. Here she is identified as a common prostitute having already received the two cautions – and is accused of soliciting for the purpose of prostitution. This is a complete reversal of the basic principle of British Justice, ie being seen as innocent until proven guilty. In other types of legal cases, reputation of past offences are strictly not allowed as evidence in court under the Judges Rules. It would be inconceivable for someone to be presented to the court as a common thief and then be accused in court of a specific theft. Evidence of previous offences is only permissable after conviction and before sentencing. Yet where prostitution is concerned this process is reversed. This is a basic injustice which is generally acknowledged to be unsatisfactory, even at an official level[2].

This procedure makes prostitutes very vulnerable. Once they've been cautioned they only have to be waiting for a bus or a friend to be charged with soliciting. If they live in the patch they work this makes everyday life impossible. Since the police are well aware of this vulnerability, this process also renders prostitutes open to exploitation. Individual police officers can, if they so choose, elicit sexual favours or information by threatening to charge the women already known to them.

Imprisonment

Although women are no longer imprisoned directly for prostitution, they continue to be imprisoned for non-payment of fines. Indeed the number of women being given a prison sentence for non-payment of fines has risen dramatically since 1982 (the year when the Criminal Justice Bill abolished imprisonment as a sentence for soliciting). In 1981, 54 prostitutes went to prison for not paying fines imposed under the 1959 Act. In 1982 the figure was 83. In 1983 it had risen to 172. But most staggeringly, in the first quarter of 1984, 81 prostitutes were imprisoned for fine default. In addition magistrates are increasingly 'binding women over' not to repeat their offence so that one more offence leads to immediate imprisonment for breach of the court order[3]. In order to pay the fine prostitutes are forced to earn more money so that penalising prostitutes in this way leads to an increase rather than a decrease in prostitution and consequently kerb crawling. This is clearly in the same tradition of other legislation on prostitution where the rhetoric is that of not harassing the prostitute but only of preventing public nuisance, whilst the practice increases nuisance and



penalises the prostitute.

The Janet Fookes Sexual Offence Act also purports to penalise kerb crawling rather than individual prostitutes. It is the kerb crawling which constantly intimidates women on the streets. There is a strong argument therefore for seeing any legislation that curtails this activity as protecting women's rights. Opponents of the Bill argued that this protection is at the cost of men's civil rights.

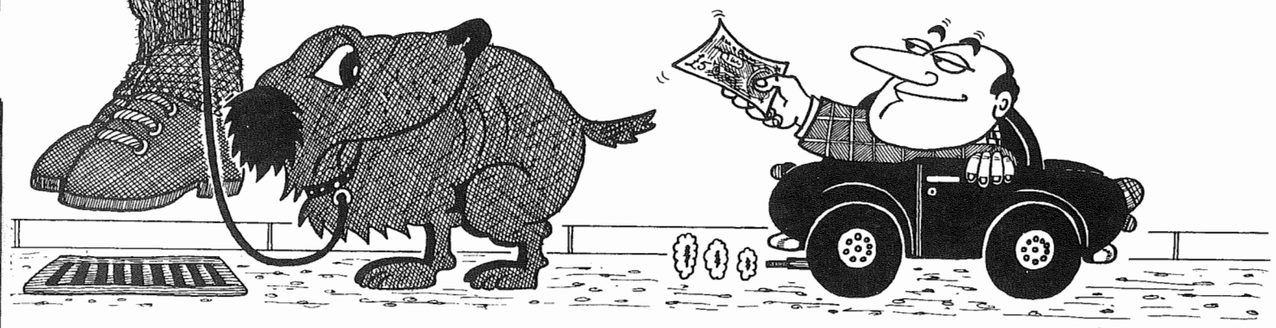
It is undoubtedly true that the legislation would undermine men's freedom on the streets. The Act makes it an offence for a man to solicit women for the purpose of prostitution from a motor vehicle or having just left one, if he does so persistently or in a manner or in circumstances likely to cause her annoyance or he causes nuisance to others in the neighbourhood. In practice this is likely to mean that a man can be brought in for questioning if he is seen to approach a woman on more than one occasion. This gives the police a good deal of discretion about how they proceed.

Men may have to be careful about how they approach women in public areas. But there are some distinct advantages to this. Women have always experienced harassment on the streets. Women live in fear of sexual attack, rape and violence. If we complain we are told we're asking for it, we shouldn't be provocative, we shouldn't go out unaccompanied (by a man) and so on. The 'advice' to women who are systematically harassed by men is to stay at home. When the women of Yorkshire were in fear of their lives every time they went out because the police were unable to catch the Ripper, they were advised to keep a curfew. Their right to work or pursue their own social lives was denied them. How these women must have interpreted the change of attitude in the police, when the issue was male rights to work in the form of working miners during the recent strike, I don't know. It seems that if women are intimidated, harassed, or put in fear of their lives they are advised to keep a curfew. But if men's freedom is threatened everyone rushes around in a panic saying it isn't fair. The tradition of Reclaim the Night Marches is a reaction to this double thinking. One *could* argue that the Fookes legislation is one step in the direction of reclaiming the night for women.

But . . . the legislation is far from an unquestionable victory for women's rights. One of the major objections to it is that it will simply be used as yet another law 'n' order device, a means of tightening the social control net, without actually improving the lives of ordinary women threatened by kerb crawling. By focusing on prostitution and kerb crawling police resources may be diverted away from the real threats of violence against women. The new legislation could be used like the old 'Sus' laws, giving the police the ability to arrest any man approaching a woman. As with other oppressive legislation, it will be Black and poor men who are in practice subject to the new powers of arrest[4].

Tightening legislation

In order to assess the likely effect of the legislation it is important to consider both the context in which this legislation occurs and also to look at the debates which led to this particular version of the legislation. In some areas women's rights have improved over the past 20 years, and there are clear



Cath Jackson

attempts to curtail many of those advances (see for example Micki David *T&S*1, Hilary Land (*T&S*7). In this climate of conflict new means of restricting prostitution have been hurried through the House of Commons, with government support. The last time legislation was tightened up in this area was also in an era when women's role was a controversial issue and when there were clear attempts on the part of the media, industry and the state to attract women away from the economic independence of paid work and into the world of home and motherhood. In the post-war 1950s it became very important to reinforce women's traditional roles. Bland et al[5] argue that the economic independence offered by prostitution was a threat to this trend and that it represented a "sexual autonomy" which undermined the myth of motherhood and feminine wifeliness that was being promoted by men.

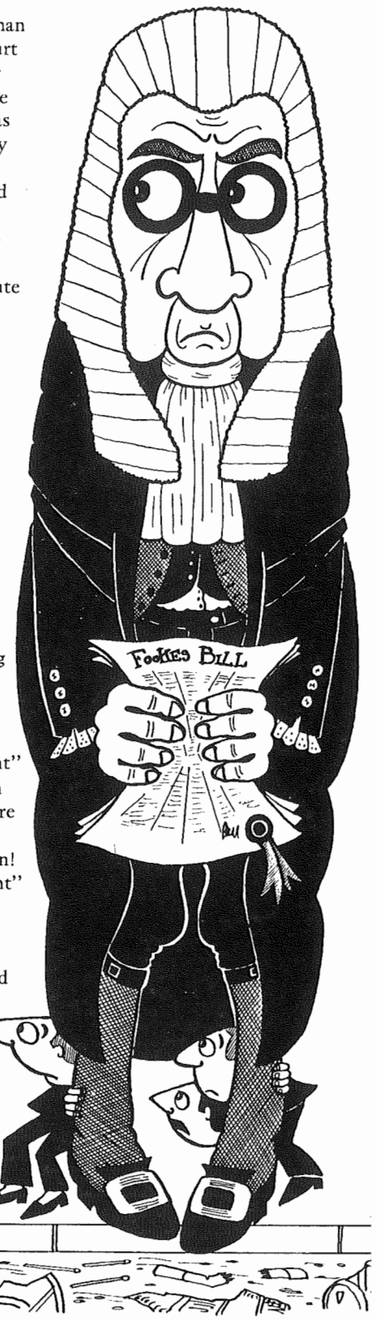
The Criminal Law Revision Committee (CLRC)[6] has been reviewing the legislation over the past ten years. One of the problems of the existing legislation – that it reverses the principle of British Justice by using the process of identifying the prostitute as a "common prostitute" – has been acknowledged by the committee as unjust. But the procedure has not been substantially changed and women will still be identified in court as "being a prostitute".

Despite its conclusion that this was the best procedure, the committee clearly felt uneasy about maintaining a process which is tantamount to declaring the woman guilty before the court proceeding begins. However it was felt necessary to establish that the soliciting was for the purpose of prostitution as opposed to some other goal. The committee was reluctant to see a woman who was possibly approaching a man for other purposes brought before the court by mistake. One alternative suggestion for avoiding this, interestingly enough, was the inclusion of the term "persistently". It was argued by some that a woman persistently soliciting could more easily be identified. This raised a good deal of controversy, and the committee concluded that this suggestion was not a helpful one. "It would considerably weaken the law if it has to be established in *every case* that *each* prostitute has caused nuisance by acts of persistent soliciting (para. 21, 16th Report – my emphasis.) In other words the right and protection of each individual prostitute can't be weighed against public nuisance and the necessity of clearing that up.

This argument is completely reversed where men are concerned. This is true whether the men are male prostitutes or clients. . . .

> The essence of the proposed new kerb crawling offences, as of the existing female offence of soliciting is that it creates a public nuisance. This element would be lacking in the proposed male offence of soliciting on foot unless there were a degree of persistence . . . . the man's conduct in soliciting the services of a prostitute on foot should only be treated as a criminal offence where there is a degree of persistence[7].

There seems to be great concern about protecting what are referred to as "innocent" men. This discrepancy seems odd. For men the term "persistent" is being used to ensure against mistaken arrests; for women the term is dropped for exactly the same reason! It would appear that safeguarding "innocent" women against the risk of unnecessary and publicly embarrassing arrest does not warrant the extra police resources needed. But where men are concerned this safeguard



is seen as of paramount importance. The public embarrassment of "innocent" men is clearly taken more seriously than that of women. The committee goes to great lengths to emphasise that it is only public nuisance and not the morality or lifestyle of prostitutes that they are concerned about. Perhaps then, the answer must lie in a belief that women cause greater public nuisance in their pursuance of their "sexual purposes" than do men? However if we look at both the Act itself and at the deliberations of the committee it becomes clear that men's sexual harassment of women *is* acknowledged as a regular public nuisance.

"Annoying"

The CLRC considered making it an offence for men to solicit women for sexual purposes in a manner likely to cause her fear. Indeed this was included in the original Fookes Bill. The committee did consider the wording "in a manner likely to cause her annoyance", but decided to reject it. The reason for its exclusion is that this would "spread the net too wide"![8] As the committee says, "Men often make sexual advances to women in streets and public places, as well as elsewhere, which may or may not be welcomed." Every woman knows this. It is a most unpleasant experience and women do find it intimidating. Whilst the CLRC admit that this behaviour causes annoyance they are unwilling to place it within the realm of criminal law. They go on to further explain their reasons behind not seeing annoyance as sufficient reason to warrant police intervention.

> The suggested offence of accosting a woman in a street or public place in such circumstances as to cause her annoyance might bring within the ambit of the criminal law the amorous advances which are often made by young men on *girls* in places where adolescents meet for the purpose of getting to know one another. The vocal reactions of the girls, which *could* be part of sexual play, *might* seem to police officers to be evidence of annoyance. (my emphasis)

But equally the woman or girl could be very annoyed. This sounds very much like the argument "She says no but really means yes" that has persistently been put to defend those who rape, sexually assault, and in other ways intimidate women. What does it mean when a woman only has to approach a man once for the purposes of prostitution without causing him any annoyance at all, to be criminally charged, yet a man *accosting* a woman for sexual purposes in a manner likely to cause her annoyance is seen as engaging in normal acceptable behaviour, which the CLRC at least, is willing to condone. During its reading in the House of Lords this whole clause was excluded from the Fookes' Bill so that now there is no reference at all to soliciting women for sexual purpose. Any reference to such activity was seen as going "too far".

The claim that the act is part of an attempt to uphold the rights of women to walk the streets peaceably and in particular to protect them from kerb crawlers is very hard to swallow. It is interesting to note that we already have a very clear offence on the statutes which outlaws men soliciting women. This is contained in the 1956 Sexual Offences Act section 32. It makes it an offence "for a man persistently to solicit or importune in a public place for immoral purposes". It has been argued that "possibly the sole, and certainly the main aim of the provision was to deal with soliciting of females"[9]. Yet by 1966 this interpretation of the legislation was literally ruled out of court, the Divisional Court holding that "it does not apply to the man who accosts women for sexual intercourse"[10]. From then on it has only been used in cases of homosexual soliciting. Had there been any genuine will to protect women then this clause could easily have been used.

It is clear, therefore, that the Act can in no way be seen as a feminist charter. The emphasis is on clamping down on prostitution rather than on bringing a notion of equality into the law. There is a general concern for the rights and protection of men not involved in prostitution. The same concern is not extended to women outside or inside the profession.

If the Fookes Bill isn't just going to become part of the tightening social control net women must affect how it is used in practice. If we report men who are kerb crawling or harassing women then arrests will be made as a direct response to women's demands. In this way we can direct the implementation of the law rather than allow it to be restricted to areas that the police can decide to "clean up". □

1. Eileen McLeod, *Women Working: Prostitution Now* (Croom Helm 1982).
2. Criminal Law Revision Committee (CLRC), *Prostitution on the Streets,* Command Paper 9329, 16th Report (HMSO 1984).
3. CLRC.
4. Nina Lopez Jones, 'Sexual Offences Bill, Protection for Women?' Spare Rib 153 1985.
5. Lucy Bland et al, 'Sexuality and Reproduction: Three Official Instances, in *Ideology and Cultural Reproduction* (Croom Helm 1979).
6. CLRC.
7. CLRC.
8. CLRC.
9. S Cohen, 'Soliciting by Men', Criminal Law Review 349, 1982.
10. Crook v Edmondson (1966) 2 QB 81.

THE WORK OF AN *un*COMMON WOMAN

The Common Woman speaks to us across barriers of race, class and sexual identity. Lesbians, feminists, dykes and straights, we are the Common Woman and she is us. Andrea Loewenstein reviews "The Work of a Common Woman".

My first reciprocated and consumated grand passion was for a woman who'd been committed to a mental hospital when she was seventeen for being caught with another girl. They gave her shock treatments that were supposed to make her forget the past and choose marriage. Instead she came out of there a year later and drove her motorcycle straight into a brick wall. When she came to she was still alive and there was a woman (a tall silver-haired woman with a British accent, was how she told it) holding her hand. It made a good story, but the scars took a long time to heal.

This was in a mid-western city in the US, about fifteen years ago. She and I used to hold hands and sometimes even kiss in the street and get yelled at a lot by men, "What you need is a good fuck, girls!". She wore her hair very short and a black leather jacket and looked like a butch dyke and the lesbian feminist proprietors of the local women's book store used to flinch when we came in and look the other way. We didn't like the store much, but that was where we first discovered Judy Grahn, who was our poet.

Even the title of the first Grahn poem I ever read, "Edward the Dyke", was significant; that was not the word you were supposed to use then. Written in 1964 and first published in 1969, it's the story, or poem (because, as Grahn explains, "by insisting that "Edward" was a poem, I was telling myself that women must define what our poetry is") of a dyke who falls into the clutches of the male psychiatric establishment. I remember my lover's reaction when she read it; the bitterness and pain of the memory, and then relief. "Yes. That's how it was. So I am not alone with it after all".

In the poem, Dr Knox tells Edward to trust him: ". . . we will cure you of this deadly affliction and before you know it you'll be all fluffy and wonderful with dear babies and a bridge club of your very own" (p27). This miracle will be accomplished "after only four years of intensive therapy and two years of anti-intensive therapy, plus a few minor physical changes" including "extracting approximately eight inches from each leg . . ." (p27).

In her introduction, Adrienne Rich gets very apologetic about this early poem, and about Edward herself. She says, "Because Edward has no sense of her love for women as anything but utopian, individual, and personal, she has no resistance to 'treatment'" (p14) and adds, "language is the key" (p14). I disagree. It is not Edward nor her language that is problematic, but Dr Knox and all he stands for. True, Edward is not a politically right-on feminist, but then neither are most of the women Judy Grahn writes about.

Not nice dykes

In her classic "Common Women" poems, written in 1969, most of the women are working class. Of the dykes, some are into roles and others aren't very nice and oppress other women. Still others, like "Ella, in a square apron, along Highway 80" (p63) or "Nadine, resting on her neighbor's stoop" (p65), are not dykes at all. I loved these portrait poems from the first, and appreciated them even more when I used them in my teaching and realized that they worked like no poems I'd yet encountered for women in prison and on the streets, Black and white, lesbian and straight, women who up to that point had always hated and feared poetry because it made them feel stupid, and modern poetry most of all because it didn't even sound good.

These poems did the opposite – they made my students feel seen. More, they sound good, and they sound like the women they're about, slicing and hissing and rhyming and asking to be chanted aloud. After reading them, lots of my students sat down and wrote their own "common women" poems. I know I did. Of these poems, Grahn writes:

> The Common Women Poems have more than fulfilled my idealistic expectation of art as a useful subject – as art as a doer, rather than a passive object to be admired. All by themselves they went around the country. Spurred by the enthusiasm of women hungry for realistic pictures, they were reprinted hundreds of thousands of times, were put to music, danced, used to name various women's projects, quoted and then misquoted in a watered-down fashion for use on posters and T-shirts. (p60).

It is easy to see (and hear) why this is so.

The longest poem in the book, "A Woman Is Talking to Death", is about common women too. It is also about men: two young white men, a middle aged Black man, a Puerto Rican, and lots of police. This is a poem that should be required reading for lots of today's feminists, who spend so much time deciding who should be excluded they sometimes end up in an empty room. "A Woman Is Talking to Death" isn't about excluding; it's about including and how impossible it is to cut off and separate (or make hierarchies of) oppression. In this poem the young man who called the narrator "names in Spanish/then he called me queer and slugged me" is not a faceless male oppressor. In the middle of the narrator's fantasy of revenge,

> . . . grabbing a chair
> and smashing it over the bastard's head,
> killing him. I called him a spic, and
> killed him . . .
> (p127)

she remembers the first woman she ever kissed; Josie, a brown girl who was forced out of school when she became pregnant at thirteen.

> now when I remember I think:
> maybe *he* was Josie's baby.
> all the chickens come home to roost.
> all of them.
> (p127)

'A Woman Is Talking To Death' has lots of strands, but they always connect and the connections are always concrete, painful, and accessible. There is one stanza, a part of the "Mock Interrogation" section, that I have often wanted to stand up and read in the middle of some meeting where women are debating which women are real feminists and which are not, which women are politically correct and which are not, who should be allowed and whom excluded. The question asked is "Have you ever committed any indecent acts with women?" and the answer is as follows.

> Yes, many. I am guilty of allowing suicidal women to die before my eyes or in my ears or under my hands because I thought I could do nothing. I am guilty of leaving a prostitute who held a knife to my friend's throat to keep us from leaving, because we would not sleep with her, we thought she was old and fat and ugly; I am guilty of not loving her who needed me; I regret all the women I have not slept with or comforted, who pulled themselves away from me for lack of something I had not the courage to fight for, for us, our life, our planet, our city, our meat and potatoes, our love. These are indecent acts, lacking courage, lacking a certain fire behind the eyes, which is the symbol, the raised fist, the sharing of resources, the resistance that tells death he will starve for lack of the fat of us, our extra. Yes I have committed acts of indecency with women and most of them were acts of omission. I regret them bitterly. (p125).

I think "A Woman Is Talking to Death" is one of the most powerful and important pieces of writing to come out of our women's movement. Reading it reminds me of the excitement and empowerment I felt in those early days.

Sound and ritual

I'm not as attached to the newer poems in this collection, partly because they're just not as accessible. My students who loved the "Common Women" poems shied away from the "She Who" poems which are more about sound and ritual than telling a story or painting a portrait. These poems do show Judy Grahn's diversity and wide-ranging ability as a poet, and a few of them, especially "A funeral/plainsong from a younger woman to an older woman" and "Slowly: a plainsong from an older woman to a younger woman", are wonderful ritual chants which beat like waves and keep coming back to sing in one's head at odd times. Grahn's (1978) commentary on these and all the poems adds a lot. Nothing is pre-chewed here, and one has the fresh impression of the author thinking aloud about her work.

Most of the other new poems, including almost all of the section "Confrontations with the devil in the form of love", don't make it for me in the same way. What they have to say about love is important, even revolutionary, but they lumber a little in saying it, which is the last thing Judy Grahn needs to do. As I mentioned before, I could do without Adrienne Rich's introduction, and the illustrations in the book, like so many illustrations for books of poetry, don't match the high quality of the written material, and detract a little from it.

But these are minor criticisms. Even the weakest of these poems is worth reading. So, if any of you women coming up in the movement now haven't yet encountered Judy Grahn, or if any of you old timers have missed her along the way, this book is a must. It's what the movement used to feel like a lot of the time, and reading it you start to believe that it still can. Go out and buy or borrow it, and lend it to your friends. You don't even have to like poetry. □

Judy Grahn, *The Work of a Common Woman* (£2.95. Onlywomen Press 1985).

WE ALL STOOD

November 23, 1909, New York City; tens of thousands of women waistmakers go on strike in one of the largest ever mass actions by women. Linda Pickard follows the course of the strike and examines its relevance to women's organisations today.

A MEETING OF GIRL STRIKERS AT THE UNION HEADQUARTERS ON CLINTON STREET

"I could not tell how many would go on strike in our factory . . . we stayed whispering and no-one knowing what the other would do, not making up our minds, for two hours. Then I started to get up . . . And at just the same minute all — we all got up together, in one second. No one after the other; no one before. And when I saw it — that time — oh, it excites me so yet, I can hardly talk about it. So we all stood up, and all walked out together." (Quoted by Sue Clark and Edith Wyatt, p81.)

So Natalya Urusova described how the general strike of waistmakers began in the factory where she worked. On the same day, November 23 1909, similar actions were taking place in most of the hundreds of New York City factories producing 'waists' (tailored-style shirts or blouses worn by women). Tens of thousands of women walked out of the shops on this and the following few days. "Never before", wrote a reporter at the time, "have so many working women quit work at one time in one place, and with such spontaneity and unanimity." (William Mailly, p1416).

The waistmakers' strike must be one of the most famous of all strikes of women workers in American labour history. It was the largest strike of women ever to have taken place until that time and, in the seventy-five years since the strike took place, it has been written about over and over again. But it is only in the last decade that it has been examined by feminists.

UP TOGETHER

Writers like Mary Jo Buhle, Nancy Dye and Meredith Tax have examined in particular the women in the Socialist Party and the Women's Trade Union League, and the relationships between them. They have therefore tended to focus on the women organisers and their part in the strike and not the women strikers themselves. The justification for this has been the argument that the women strikers were excluded from real participation in the strike by the domination of their trade union by men.

However, I believe that too much importance has been attached to men's control of the trade union. What this ignores is a feature of the strike which contemporaries regarded as one of its most important aspects: its spontaneity. The 'spontaneity' of the strike was important because it meant that the trade union did not control it. And if the men in the union did not control the strike, perhaps the women strikers played a more important part in it than has previously been recognised. Perhaps the women strikers were, in fact, able to organise *independently* of the union? That is what I want to look at here.

It may seem that a strike which took place in another country so long ago has no relevance for feminists in Britain today. But independent or autonomous organisation is relevant — since the early 1970s there has been a debate on the question of forms of organisation in British feminism, and this has extended to the work situation. Selma James, in her 1972 pamphlet *Women, The Unions and Work* argued for the importance of women's independent organisation at work in a situation where trade unions are dominated by men. In a different way, Sheila Rowbotham later drew a comparison between rank-and-file organising in the workplace and the ways women have organised in the women's movement. "Both emphasize autonomy against . . . central control . . . and self-activity against a leadership." (*Beyond the Fragments*, p95). But, while the potential importance of self-organisation for women at work has been recognised, there has been very little research on it. One of my aims, in re-examining the waistmakers' strike, has been to contribute to the study of women's autonomous organisation more generally.

The Waistmakers' Strike

Before the general strike of 1909, the conditions of the women who worked in the waist trade were far worse than those of the men. It is true that all the workers in the trade suffered from long hours of work, seasonal employment and falling wages. But there was one condition which affected the women quite differently from the men: the 'subcontracting' system. Under this system, the employers did not employ all the workers in the factory directly. Instead they subcontracted the work to a small proportion of directly-employed workers. They were almost all men. They in turn employed others to 'help' them — almost invariably young women.

The male subcontractors profited from the labour of the women they employed. They controlled the allocation of the earnings of the team and paid themselves far more than they paid their workers. One subcontractor admitted that he averaged $28 to $30 a week himself but paid his "girls" as little as $4 a week (Constance Leupp, p384), far below what they needed to live on. In 1909, the wages of the women under subcontractors were never more than $6 a week, at a time when it was estimated

that a single woman needed at least $9 a week to live on (Woods Hutchinson p544; New York *Call* December 5 1909, p14).

The domination of the male subcontractors within the factories was carried over into a domination by men of the trade union. The Waistmakers' Union, Local 25 of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, was led by men. Though as many as 85% of the workers in the trade were estimated to be women, the secretary of the local union was a man and men formed a majority on the executive committee (Louis Levine, p150n, 152n). In addition, the subcontractors themselves played an important role in the union and were in fact, instrumental in establishing it in the first place. As Meredith Tax has so succinctly put it, "The women workers, the most exploited section of the workforce, had their bosses as their union leaders" (p211).

But in November 1909 the nature of collective organisation among the waistmakers was dramatically altered. When the general strike began, the union was completely overwhelmed by the waistmakers' response. Even though it had been the union organisers who had originally called for a strike, they had expected four or five thousand workers to strike and instead between twenty and thirty thousand did so. Only a small minority were union members.

The 'spontaneous' nature of the strike meant that, initially, the union leaders lost control over it. The first few days "all was pandemonium at union headquarters," the union's official history records, while a contemporary report, written five days after the strike began, said that "the executive machinery of the (union) organisation was menaced" (New York *Call*, November 28 1909, p2). "It was several days before some semblance of order was secured," wrote a socialist reporter (William Mailly, p1418).

GIRL STRIKERS ON GRAND STREET, READING REPORTS OF THE SHIRTWAIST STRIKE

Judy Stevens

At the same time, there was a dramatic turnabout in the normal relations between men and women in the collective organisation of the waistmakers: men's control of the union was rendered unimportant and women took control over their own affairs. "It was not an easy matter to handle the business, especially in the first few days, when those in charge were overpowered, as it were, by a flood of feminine strikers (85 per cent of the trade are women) asking a thousand questions and urging a number of demands", the socialist daily *Call* reported at the end of the first week (New York *Call*, November 28 1909, p2).

It is unlikely that the women could have taken control over the strike to such an extent unless they had been in some sense organised. In itself, the mass walk-out implied some degree of collective organisation. The decision to strike does not seem to have been made individually but collectively. As the quotation at the beginning of this article indicates, the level at which the waistmakers organised collectively was in each of the hundreds of factories in the trade. It was here that the decision to strike was made and it was here women were participating most directly. As a reporter observed five days after the strike began, "Every hall in the building, every inch of space, all the halls, on the stairs, in the elevator women, mostly young girls, are seen talking, arranging and deciding upon plans and conditions for their individual shops" (New York *Call*, November 28 1909, p2).

From the start, then, there was a dual nature to the collective organisation of the general strike and it was a duality that reflected gender. On the one hand, there was the trade union – and here though women joined in their thousands men remained in the leadership positions. But, on the other hand, there was the shop level of organisation and here women were doing the "talking, arranging and deciding". In this sense the waistmakers' strike included a form of organisation by women autonomous of the union.

The Women's Demand

Autonomous organisation in the waist shops was not just important because it was the level at which the women actually participated in the 1909 general strike. It was also important because, as I now want to show, it enabled the women strikers to defend their interests as women in a way the union did not.

In one of the statements from contemporary newspapers just quoted, there was a reference to the "feminine strikers" overpowering the union leaders in the first few days of the strike and urging them on a "number of demands". The report did not state the nature of the women's demands, but these can be identified by examining new issues that arose in the early days of the strike.

Prior to November 23 1909, a number of demands had already been put forward. In the preceding fall season, there had been a wave of shop strikes, to a large extent led by the subcontractors, and these had raised demands for wage increases and for union recognition (Louis Levine, p149–151). In addition, on November 21, a day before the general strike was called, local and national union officers met in a Special Meeting of the General Executive Board of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. At the meeting, a comprehensive list of eleven demands was agreed. The list included the union shop, 52-hour week, restrictions on overtime and provisions for machinery to be supplied by the employers (ILGWU Archives).

However, three days after the mass walk-out had begun, a new demand appeared: the abolition of the subcontracting system. The *Call* listed this demand for the first time on November 26 1909. It stated that one of the demands of the strike was for the direct and individual payment of wages. The reporter found it necessary to explain that this was "a blow at the contracting system" (New York *Call*, November 26 1909, p1). Indeed subcontracting was described as "the central grievance of the strike" and even as the most important single cause of the strike (Woods Huchinson p545).

The evidence strongly suggests that the demand to abolish subcontracting was, in the context of the waist trade in 1909, a women's demand. It emerged at precisely the same time as the women strikers stood together so effectively in the shops and overturned male control in the union. Subcontracting was also the one issue in the waist trade which affected the women differently from the men. It was the women who had the greatest interest in seeing the system abolished. Reports at the time of the strike support this interpretation. They invariably presented the subcontracting system from the viewpoint of the women as a system of "extortion and exploitation" and the subcontractor as a slave-driver who represented "an extra profit, the burden of which falls on the operator" (Wood Hutchinson, p546; Constance Leupp, p384). Consistent with this the men in charge of the union adopted a somewhat ambiguous attitude towards the demand to abolish subcontracting. Though sometimes listed as one of the union's demands, there is little evidence that the leaders pursued the issue with much vigour. There was no provision for the end to subcontracting in the collective agreement presented by the union to the strikers at the end of December 1909. (New York *Call*, December 28 1909, p1–2). The official union history contains an entire chapter on the waistmakers' strike which nowhere mentions that the demand to abolish subcontracting was ever made! (Levine Chapter XXI).

The evidence therefore strongly suggests that in addition to union organising the women strikers organised autonomously on a shop level, and drew up their own demands when they walked out of the shops. One of these was for the abolition of subcontracting. The demand would not have been raised if the union leadership had kept control over the strike because the union was itself led by male subcontractors. Autonomous organisation then played a crucial role in enabling *women* to challenge *men's* economic

domination in the shops.

However, though the evidence is suggestive, it is not conclusive. The demand to abolish the system emerged at a time when no one group or individual was in control of the strike or could state definitively what was happening. This inconclusiveness is then in itself a consequence of the fact that the strike was, in important respects, self-organised rather than directed from above.

Challenging the power of the father

It is possible to point to evidence of a rather different kind to support the view that the struggle against subcontracting was the result of women's collective action, for the opposition to the subcontractor in the factory exactly mirrored a wider conflict against male domination in which many of the women who worked in the waist trade were engaged at this time.

A SHIRTWAIST OPERATIVE DISTRIBUTING STRIKE LITERATURE ON THE STREET

Judy Stevens

The majority of the waist strikers were Jewish immigrants, and in the Jewish community in New York City precisely at this time there was an often intense struggle between young women and their fathers. Even in Russia, where most of the immigrants had come from, many of the young women had rebelled against the limitations to their independence put on them by their traditional culture. Women like Rose Pesotta, who was to become a labour organiser in the garment trade, refused to accept an arranged marriage and in fact rejected the prospect of marriage altogether and felt so intensely that she threatened suicide if she was not allowed to leave Russia and go to America. Her older sister, Esther, had already made a similar rebellion a few years before and was in New York City in 1909 when she was one of the hundreds of women arrested on the picket lines in the general strike (Rose Pesotta, p164–9, 217–24).

The rejection of aspects of their traditional culture exacerbated the conflict those young women had with their fathers. Whereas young men's struggle against the father has often been documented, far less attention has been given to a similar struggle by young women. Clara Lemlich, the woman who had put the motion for a general strike on November 22 1909 (and so in a sense started the waistmakers' strike), was later described as "the rebellious daughter of an orthodox Jewish scholar". Her conflict with her father had begun in the Ukraine when, despite her father's prohibition and to his intense anger, she had learnt Russian and read Russian books (Paula Scheier, p8–9).

In America, such conflicts were often intensified. Anzia Yezierska described the bitter "struggle between a father of the Old World and a daughter of the New" in her autobiographical novel, *The Bread Givers*. As Alice Kessler-Harris points out in her introduction to the novel, such a conflict was by no means unique but was in part generated by the undermining of traditional male authority in the secular environment of America. "In the old country strong community sanctions and religious edict kept women in their place . . . . But now, without the protective cloak of persistent religious observance, women's secondary position in the new world seemed anachronistic: a matter of outmoded custom and tradition" (pviii). And the result could be a rejection not just of traditional male authority but of men's domination in general. "In America," Anzia Yezierska says through Sara Smolinsky, the central character in *The Bread Givers*, "women don't need men to boss them" (p137).

The conflict between young women and their fathers distinguished the Jewish community from the other main immigrant group whose daughters worked in the waist trade, the Italians. Italian women were a minority of the waistmakers and they were said to have been less committed to the general strike in 1909. Observers linked this to their subordination in the family. "The Italian girls and women . . . are the oppressed of the race, absolutely under the dominance of the men of their family and heavily shackled by old customs and traditions," a report for the Women's Trade Union League observed (quoted by Meredith Tax, p223). The position of the Jewish women was very different. Even in histories written by men, the rebelliousness of the "girls in the ghetto" of New York City has been observed. And as Irving Howe points out in *The Immigrant Jews of New York* this rebelliousness was also associated with a particular time-period. It did not characterise the early Jewish immigrants who came in the 1880s and 1890s, but rather the later immigrants who came after the turn of the century (p265–6) coinciding with the time of the 1909 waistmakers' strike.

The fact that there was already a struggle between young women and older men in the Jewish community supports the view that a similar struggle took place within the waist factories. For the women's challenge to the subcontractor was a challenge to male domination in a similar way as the struggle against the "Old World" father had been. Indeed, it is likely that the resistance of young women to the authority of older men had become transplanted from the family to the factory. But in the process, this challenge had been collectivised for it was now set in the context of the factory where the isolated struggles of the individual daughters suddenly assumed a more general form, setting women workers against male subcontractors. The struggle against subcontracting was, in this sense, part of a more general struggle against patriarchy.

Victory

The waistmakers did not just raise the demand to abolish subcontracting in 1909. They also had an important measure of success in winning it. Though the subcontractors remained in a few shops after the strike, they were, as one report put it "largely done away with" (Pearl Goodman and Elsa Ueland, p816). The abolition of subcontracting by most manufacturers was particularly remarkable when it is remembered that this was an issue that the union never formally pursued. In fact, it seems to have been conceded only because the union did not fully control the negotiations that ended the strike. The shop level of organisation, in which the women participated so actively, remained important throughout the strike and although the union leaders wanted to make a collective settlement on behalf of the strikers in all the shops, they were unable to do so. Instead the settlements were all made on a shop-by-shop basis. Though this method of settlement has certain disadvantages, it seems to have ensured that the women strikers retained some control over the negotiations and so were able to ensure that the end to subcontracting was a condition for their return to work. Moreover, this gain was not whittled away in the period after the strike was over. In 1912, the proportion of workers employed under the subcontracting system seems to have been only around 5% (Norman Stone, p22, 153).

The decline of the subcontracting system after the general strike was not a panacea for the women in the waist trade but their success in removing the system was still an important challenge to patriarchy. It is true that some manufacturers claimed to welcome the removal of the subcontractors, who they regarded as troublemakers, and were anxious to deal with the women operators directly (Woods Hutchinson, p546). But the abolition of subcontracting was by no means in the interests of most manufacturers. The use of the sytem had, after all, been increasing before the 1909

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general strike and the manufacturers relied on it more and more for the organisation of production in their factories (Jewish *Daily Forward*, December 3 1909). Nor did the removal of the subcontractors mean the end of 'trouble' in the shops. Within months of the end of the general strike, there were again frequent shop strikes in the trade and the waistmakers were once more described as infected by "strike fever". The abolition of subcontracting did not, on the whole, serve the employers. What it did do was remove the direct exploitation of women by male workers.

Autonomy and the challenge to patriarchy

Autonomous organisation was closely linked to the challenge to patriarchy in the waist factories. It is therefore not surprising to find that the omission of automous organisation from previous histories of the strike has also meant that women's challenge to patriarchy has been omitted. Ann Schofield recently carried out a survey of the different accounts that have been written about the waistmakers' strike and she concluded that "its underlying historical messages are somber ones" (p180). She quoted from Meredith Tax's observation that, in the waistmakers' labour 'army', "the generals were men and the soldiers were women. Only certain kinds of wars can be won by such an army, and a war for women's liberation is not among them" (Meredith Tax p240).

Yet, as I have argued here, the waistmakers' strike *was* a war for women's liberation. It was a war in which the central battle was fought over the men's economic domination in the subcontracting system. But it was a war which has been hidden from history. This is not just because the facts about women's challenge to patriarchy have sometimes been omitted. The older labour histories did indeed leave out the demand to abolish subcontracting, but feminist histories have not left it out. They have treated the demand as simply one of the issues raised in the strike, its origins no different from any of the union's demands. They have not, in other words, seen the challenge to subcontracting as a challenge to patriarchy. And this is perhaps because such a challenge is inexplicable unless autonomous organisation is taken into account. Only then is it clear that, despite the men's control of the union, the women organised independently and so they were able to challenge the men's domination over them.

The waistmakers' experience has a more general significance. It is not only about the waistmakers that "somber" historical conclusions have been drawn. Men's control of trade unions have made such conclusions quite general. In the mid 1970s, Heidi Hartmann for example concluded that women were caught in a "vicious circle" of patriarchy and capitalism. Patriarchy, she argued, was not going to simply disappear with the development of capitalism, as some nineteenth century Marxists had assumed, because women had to face a *partnership* of patriarchy and capital which male dominated trade unions had not only not challenged, but had helped to create. It is not clear in Heidi Hartmann's work how if at all women have resisted this dual tyranny. If the waistmakers resisted patriarchy in the very core of capitalism and this can go undetected, even by feminist historians, perhaps other women at work have also undermined the 'vicious circle' in similar ways.

A careful examination of autonomous organisation among other groups of women workers might well reveal that the waistmakers' challenge to patriarchy was not an isolated incident. The strike was not of course an everyday, common event. It was dramatic, unusual, on a massive scale. But it did share an important feature with more common forms of collective action: it was like a mass of simultaneous shop strikes. And shop level organisation is quite frequently mentioned in women's workplace histories, even when the women concerned have either not been in a union or have not participated in it. Examination of such shop disputes might reveal that many workplaces reproduce not just patriarchy, but women's resistance to patriarchy. The capitalist workplace may, then, eventually see the erosion of women's subordination to men, but only because it offers women an arena where they can organise collectively against patriarchy. □

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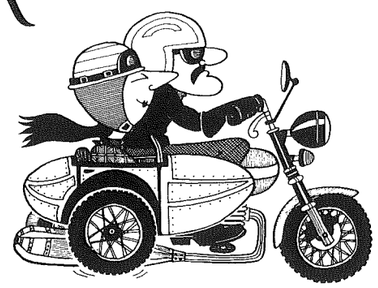
AU REVOIR TO ALL THAT



Wherever feminists have tried to work inside political parties, they seem to end up either giving up on the party – or giving up on feminism. Having left the Left, Eliane Viennot exposes the four phases of this process, as she has seen it at work in France.

Over the last ten years, many women have felt that it might be possible to produce a feminist transformation within one or other of the left political groups. So far, though wherever this attempt has been made, these hopes have been dashed, and the feminists have ended up being 'pushed out'. It seems to me that this failure is related to some insuperable structural obstacles in the nature of mixed groups. I'll come to these later. First I'd like to shed some light on the process through which women involved in left groups become radicalised, so as to show that part of the mistrust that women in the Women's Liberation Movement (Movement pour la Liberation des Femmes, MLF) feel towards them results from an oversimplification of their experience or from simply not understanding it. MLF women tend to identify these women with their parties . . . in other words they tend to refuse to deal with them as 'women like ourselves', with their own contradictions.

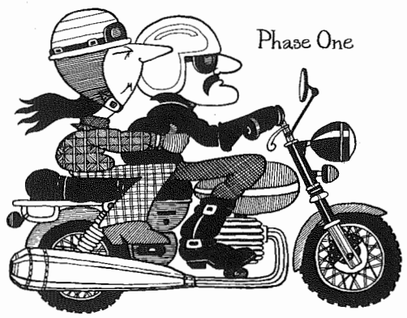
I would like to show that this process of becoming radicalised involves a certain dynamic of confrontation with the political group – a dynamic which follows certain patterns common to a number of political parties. To do this, I will use my own experience in a political group ("Revolution"). This, like a number of other far left groups, can be said to have both an official line on women's oppression and on the need for their liberation; and a policy of direct intervention inside the women's movement.

"Revolution" is a group which was relatively close to the MLF, ideologically and physically (it was one of the more 'libertarian' of the far-left groups) and so it experienced a particularly rapid and intense development of the contradictions associated with feminism. However, although different political parties and organisations may go through this process with more or less speed and more or less difficulty, I think that once this process is underway it always passes through the same phases in its development; produces the same modifications of the political principles which determine the level of women's participation in high-ranking posts; and finally leads women to the same impossible situations, in any left wing party.

Phase One: The era of the 'capable women', or the Dream of High Office

This is the golden age of egalitarianism. In their struggle against the old world and against reactionaries, progressives assert that: "Women are equal to men. They are socially and culturally disadvantaged, of course, but to use this to justify women's absence from

important political positions would be simply reactionary." These words ring pleasantly in women's ears. They are not identified with their social handicap, they are like everyone else. The women still don't realise that "like everyone else" means "like men": they look to the human, the universal. Women are equal to men . . .



Cath Jackson

This principle might seem a little stale these days . . . we can see that only the least disadvantaged women got anywhere: single women, intellectuals, impeccable May '68 credentials. Most of the time, the fact that such individuals are women is forgotten. They have the same strident tones, the same self-confidence, the same ease in using abstract concepts as men. Some of them are beautiful, brilliant – they might even have the edge over the (not always so brilliant) men they are up against. Yes, indeed, these women are equal to men.

And the others? The others don't count. 'Women', as before, are a vast, anonymous, shapeless, transparent group. Only these few women are visible – which is proof enough of *their* equality. Exceptional women, women who have got ahead, women who are also indispensible, beacons in the emptiness, proving to the others that the 'natural lack of ability' that keeps them down is not inevitable for women. *These* women can do it, therefore 'women' can do it, therefore you or I can do it. I can become visible, be a leader, whenever I want, I just have to want to enough.

Those with enough confidence try it. They reject the 'woman's place' and throw themselves into the fray, trying to change things immediately, now, this minute. This is the route that feminism takes. Others do the opposite. They entrench themselves in a principled withdrawal. This is *also* a route that feminism takes. But because they have not understood that women's oppression *does* exist, and takes many forms, or because they haven't understood that women political activists are still women, the various women judge each other unmercifully. They call those who refuse responsibility, cowards, and those who take it on, sell-outs.

And men still rule OK, satisfied to hold on to a principle that gives them a clear conscience without making them share their power. "Equal responsibility for equal ability", they never tire of saying, but they never really worry that only 5–10% of women seem to have "equal ability".

This was the general position of all left-wing political parties and all far-left organisations before the MLF began to make itself felt.

Phase Two: From the Dream to Reality

In fact, if the movement hadn't been pushing from behind, there is no doubt that this situation could have lasted for years, centuries. But the MLF does exist. It questions, challenges, and gives us energy. Women who are not content with recognition from the men inside their party, go and look for something more in the MLF, and come back completely shaken up. For a while, they participate in both the MLF and the left group, each insulated from the other, parallel. But ideas and doubts both take root. Women begin to wonder about the purpose of women leaders – don't they merely serve to conceal the oppression of other women? And women realise that it isn't enough to decree that men and women are equal, for reality to change. Women's oppression has to be taken seriously into account; and for that to happen, it has to be defined, put into words, by those it concerns – by women themselves!

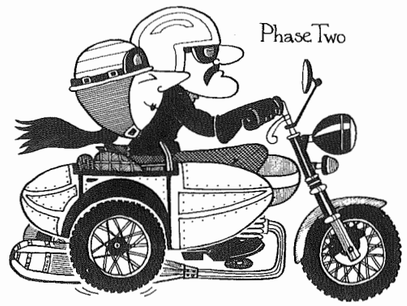
But then something curious – and yet banal – happens. Quickly, those who sought and found their confidence and their courage in the MLF, find themselves rewarded and promoted to positions of responsibility in their mixed organisations. It isn't quite a strategy to shut them up, although some cynical male leaders find the situation amusing. No, it's more simple than that. The organisation needs people with determination to train other activists, those who have enough consciousness of 'long term interests' to accept administering the daily shit. Rebels are always good at that. . .

The MLF then becomes an important 'front for intervention' for the organisation, which is incapable of letting a social movement develop without sending in its troops in order to 'take it over'. Women's status in the organisation suddenly rises. Women must be given the tools for their work, trained and accustomed to leadership.

At this point, a misunderstanding arises. What the organisation wants is for its women activists to infiltrate the MLF, to spread the correct political line, to keep out other left groups – in short, to recruit. And, whether this is explicitly said or not, they want the women to form a 'women's section' linked to the organisation in the great Leninist tradition. The Women's Movement (the word 'Liberation' has disappeared) is seen as a historical opportunity, as a gift given by the political situation, which permits the organisation to strengthen its 'foothold' in society, to widen its base. The women activists try hard, but it doesn't work very well – though they do bring back some new (feminist) recruits from the MLF, as well as new ideas and the habit of collective working. Emboldened by their newly-acquired importance, they write, they talk: about their comrades' macho behaviour, about sexism throughout society, about outrageous discrimination against women. They talk about 'women's oppression', but never mention their own.

It is a long time before women leaders talk about their own oppression. They don't dare. They don't dare even *think* about it. For the moment they *represent* the other women in the organisation, they are the spokeswomen of the revolt. Unlike the women of the previous generation, they have been promoted *because of* their feminism, and their presence in responsible office keeps that particular torch burning. This is the phase when, spurred on by feminists, the organisation makes some women specialise in this one task: watching out for signs of contradictions between men and women, centralising 'work on women', making all activists aware of this work and making them take it on board. This is the era when the organisation adopts the principle that "Where there is equal ability, priority should go to women".

It is the era of good intentions . . . .



Phase Three: From Oppression to Struggle

Feminists are gradually gaining ground, rank and file women here, well-known women there. Women leaders who had not spoken up till now join them. But the organisation can absorb all this.

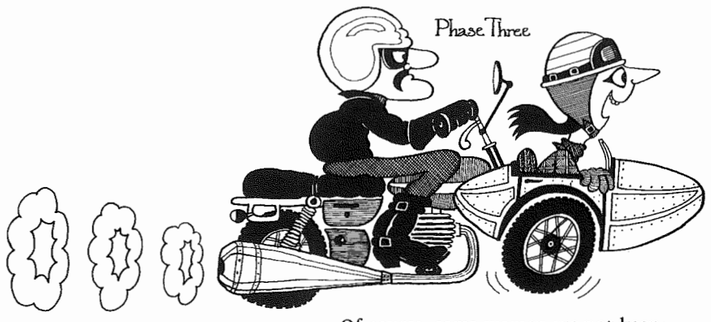
After the speakers have finished their speeches at meetings, the token feminist will be asked politely to give the 'feminist point of view' on the question being discussed. No-one works out what's going on, least of all the women. They oblige, uneasily; glad to be useful but also irritated. Why does the speaker not bother to think about this point of view himself in his little speech? Yet when some of the men try, they don't quite get the point; or else they're paternalistic; or they distort the meaning of what feminists say. It is impossible. Unbearable.

Whole sections of the organisation go on ignoring feminism, joking about what they (men and women) blithely call a cultural-movement-of-Parisian-middle-class-intellectuals, without stopping to think about the way they are repeating word for word right-wing abuse. It is at national party conferences that women become aware of how isolated, marginalised, how barely tolerated they are. Feminists are ghosts, work on feminist issues stagnates.

There is no shortage of articles, directives, and circulars, nor of anger. But the organisation resists, like a large solid immobile lump . . . Feminists are not up against "lack of

understanding". Rather it is a question of conflicting political and social interests. Feminism disturbs ways of thinking: it questions political 'lines', questions attitudes which had previously been taken for granted.

For feminists, the time for talking and explaining is over, it is time to gather the troops. It is no longer a time for complaining, but for counter-attack. Using their recently-acquired authority, learned in the organisation, women call for women-only meetings, and form groups, not for discussion, but to act directly as pressure groups.



Of course, some women are not keen; many are half-hearted. But most feminists in the organisation (those who form the bulk of the organisation's 'intervention' in the MLF, who were despairing that any wind of change arise from the polite discussions about feminism between the leaders) throw themselves into the fight. They suddenly feel invincible. This is the era of the putsch, of bombshells dropped in the middle of conferences, of virulent, disrespectful leaflets: "Where there is equal ability, priority should go to women" – what does 'equal ability' mean anyway? Male criteria! Women do things differently. Women talk and plan in a different way, engage in politics differently. The socialism women dream of is warmer, more inventive. Women are the true revolutionaries . . ..

This is the era of intense mobilisation, when new groups are formed at every level, women speak freely, and the unsayable is said. The oppression felt by women activists, only this time by all of them, is now identified and exposed. It overflows among single mothers, stuck with their childcare problems; among single women without children who are not treated as real women; among working-class women who just want to escape from their lives; among intellectuals called upon by the organisation to 'enter' factories; among leaders' wives; among those confined to the role of 'right-on-feminists'; among those whose rebellion is often ignored – women immigrants, older women, schoolgirls. All these women outline a many-sided vision of women's oppression. They re-examine, explosively, the extent of the divisions between women.

This is the time of the greatest illusion of all. They throw everything into the wildest gamble – to make a political party feminist. This is a fight to the death: all or nothing.

Phase Four: Back to Oppression

Moments of intense debate are always also moments where there is a power vacuum. But these vacuums never last very long and men have their own accounts to settle, their positions to fight over, their power to regain. At this point, feminists begin to understand that there is no point in fighting for two or three more women in positions of power, but that they must demand numerical equality with men at every level in the hierarchy. And 50% more women means 50% fewer men, if I'm not mistaken. Women's Leninist convictions have been shaken, their lives have been shaken by their experience in the women's liberation movement, and they now look critically at the need for a vanguard to lead 'the masses' at all.

The leaders are furious. If they let this go on, their beloved toy will be broken. Between the troubled waters of the private and these blows below the belt in the political sphere, they try to regain lost ground. And institutions, even revolutionary ones, never get tired of bringing out the same old chestnuts when they need them. To your left, *the labour movement*: "Feminists are just intellectuals, all they ever do is criticise, criticise everything without getting their hands dirty. They want to destroy the party. They are the henchmen of the bourgeoisie – and besides, they are all middle-class themselves." (Howls, here, in the name of the working-class, from the self-appointed middle-men, the party leaders.) To your right, *division*: "Feminists want to speak on behalf of all women. They want to get elected on the backs of women; all they want is power."

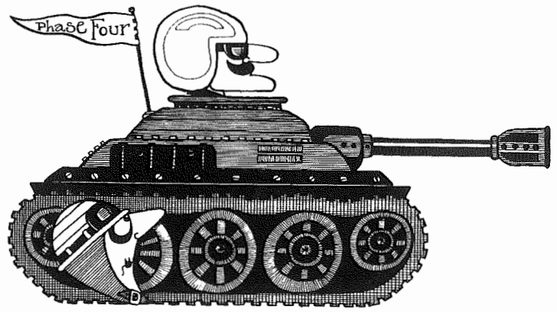
These blows hurt. Many women, who hadn't been happy about the fuss made by feminists, see this as the moment to express their disagreement. They say they don't want to be thought of primarily as 'women'. They want to be thought of as individuals, to be recognised as such, to be judged on their ability, elected because they are right for the job and not because they are women. (Go back to square one, do not pass GO.) They are alienated by the feminist monopoly over everything concerning "women's issues", by the models of liberation that feminists unwittingly provide and men support. They say they don't identify with these women who claim to speak for all women.

All the organisation needs now, for its tactical ends, is to find two or three working-class women to launch an offensive, two or three guilt-ridden intellectuals to support their attack, and it's in the bag.

The phase of polite indifference is over. Now it's war. Feminists must be crushed. They are a public danger, scapegoats to blame for everything that's wrong. The joyful feminist advance is abruptly cut short. But – crushing feminists also means the end of the democratic conception of political struggle. There are no more chinks in the armour of dogmatism, no hope of seeing imagination win out over the party machine . . . It is an ideological, political, out-and-out struggle, which sets up two opposing camps, with men and women lining up on both sides.

The trap closes. Men on both sides, both the allies and enemies of feminism, engage in a general political debate, using feminism as an example. Women's real oppression is swept under the carpet, forgotten by some, unmentioned by others, because any weaknesses must be concealed from the other side. Misogyny blossoms once again, unopposed, in both camps. Once again there is the doublethink, the denial of oneself 'for the cause' – again the sacred union . . . with the oppressor!
Did we fight so hard to end up like this?

I would like to draw out from my own particular experience some lessons which may have some general bearing on the conditions of the feminist struggle inside political parties and organisations.



Different patterns in different parties

1. My first point is that the ways in which feminist demands are first made and how they evolve varies in different types of party. Those parties and organisations which, in various ways, claim to be feminist, must be distinguished from those which don't breathe a word on the subject.

Let us look first at those parties which, while recognising that women are subject to a specific oppression, and accepting the need to do something about it, don't know about (or pretend not to know about) the MLF, or who treat it as an enemy. These parties (the French Socialist Party and the United Socialist Party in the first case, the French Communist Party in the second) have seen the growth of feminist demands inside the party, usually in the form of isolated individual criticisms which are at first only aired inside the party. While these challenges may develop and link up with the women's movement, they generally fall into a vacuum in so far as the parties these women belong to have no policy towards the MLF, and the MLF has no strategy towards women in political parties. Women involved in such double-fronted activism feel 'outsiders' in both the places they supposedly belong to – they have a kind of exotic identity which applies to them alone . . . until they organise, in whichever group, to actually *do* something.

That such a situation cannot last is proved by the fact that most feminists who were in the French Communist and Socialist

Parties have left their parties. Two-thirds of the *Women See Red* collective in the Communist Party, for example, did not renew their party membership after they had produced their magazine for two years.

On the other hand we have women whose group claims to have a strategy in relation to the MLF, who do not simply leave their parties, because they become the direct agents of this strategy. This particular situation is extraordinarily confusing. Feminists are:

a) invested, in their group, with a mission to accomplish in the women's movement;

b) they are rejected, in the MLF, as pawns in an outsider's bid to take over the movement; and

c) they are held in suspicion by their fellow party members as a destabilising influence.

The constant encroachment of territory from one group to the other, and the split loyalties that this involves, means that feminists must continually affirm and reaffirm their priorities (what comes first? Are we feminists working in a left group, or group activists representing our group in the MLF?). The answers will vary according to how far the organisation pushes both its right to intervene in mass movements, and insists on its political priority over such movements.

Although this situation involves apparently impossible contradictions, it seems paradoxically to be more solid and lasting than the first one. Participation in the MLF is, for these women, both their personal choice and the organisation's wish. Any contradiction they experience can quickly be called "objective" and blamed on the difficulties caused by the overall political climate. The contradictory nature of belonging both to a movement that insists on its political independence and to an organisation which wants to take it over, is practically institutionalised. It is even theorised into a concept of "dual loyalties" (double bind?) by some women. It is clear that these contradictions can only get worse, and then the solution is to stop being a feminist. Which is why the great majority of feminists in far-left revolutionary organisations, who did in fact insist on remaining feminists, no matter what shape their particular battle took, have only ever found one direction, one way to go: OUT.

The history of the last ten years has thus shown us that, while we have an independent and aggressive feminist movement, there is no way that women who start to develop a feminist consciousness can stay comfortable in their involvement in mixed political groups. Whether it's out of weariness with being in parties that pay no attention to their feminism (as long as it remains unobtrustive), or out of rebellion against parties which constantly call on them to account for themselves, feminists always end up leaving. It's only a matter of time.

Divisions between women

2. The second point I want to make concerns the division between feminist women and non-feminist women within mixed groups. In our society at large, all the varying degrees of feminist consciousness or absence of feminist consciousness can co-exist freely. Feminists get together out of political affinity, act together, and each woman who is not part of a group is alone (or I would rather say free) to respond to feminism as she chooses. She is free to listen, to come and see, to turn away from it, to wait, or to let things 'mature'. In political parties too, as long as feminism remains marginal, and is espoused by only a certain number of women and develops more or less underground, other non-feminist women have the time and space to make up their own minds individually. For those who don't feel concerned or affected by feminism, there is still no problem.

However, when feminists organise as a *group* (phase three), other women are necessarily called upon to define themselves in relation to feminism. Men's interference – political and personal – is crucial at this point. As women are forced to choose sides, they choose their position according to their own past, their emotional ties, their loves, their political preferences, either *in* the feminist camp, or *outside* it. 'Outside' the feminist group has not yet become an opposing camp, but once the organisation decides not to tolerate feminists inside its ranks, and not to take their critique seriously (that is, as soon as the organisation realises that its survival is at stake, phase four) then it formulates an opposition argument, *against* feminists – and it is usually a very anti-feminist argument, of course.

Alliances with men

3. Finally I would like to raise the problem of alliances. Women's oppression isn't just a detail in the social landscape, but one of its most basic features. Feminist struggles therefore always go beyond the issues of practice and behaviour, etc, which they usually take up initially. In fact, they usually end up bringing out the fundamental political problems contained within these issues. This is why almost all feminist groups end up questioning hierarchy, manipulation, differing ideas about power and how you win it, etc, etc. *These* issues, discussed by feminists but not specifically feminist issues, inevitably receive on the one hand a positive response from some men who agree with the general problems raised but who (inevitably) are not feminist; and on the other, a negative response from some women who disagree with the issues raised. So that every feminist revolt eventually finds itself forced to form alliances with men against other women. Feminism is thus transformed into a *discourse on* women, losing its real content, which is above all, and beyond everything else, *a practice of solidarity with all women*, whatever their political opinion.

Ultimately, women in mixed political groups have to face the following dilemma:

– either they have to limit their demands to the "defence of specific (women's) interests", so that they can go on addressing all women, and thereby become a kind of trade union; in short, *give up feminism;*

– or they can accept the political consequences of their questions and demands, thereby running the risk of cutting themselves off from some women, or even finding themselves pitted against each other; in short, *stop acting as feminists.*

Whichever way you look at it, you can't get round it

The contradictions I have just discussed lead me to draw the following, perhaps provisional, conclusions:

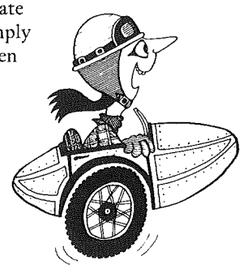
1) It is inevitable, at this time, that women will go on fighting feminist battles within political groups. They will also continue participating in the women's liberation movement in increasing numbers, as they have done since 1970.

2) Participation in a mixed group can only ever be damaging and contradictory for feminists (which doesn't always mean that it is impossible or inappropriate). It is most destructive in the more structured groups, whose goals are all-encompassing.

But however flexible a group may be, and however limited its activities, there is yet another reason why participation in a mixed group is destructive and contradictory. This is that ideas always circulate via men because of the socially dominant position they hold, and their numerical superiority in most groups, which make them the most important people. Once women become aware of this, they create 'women-only spaces', which are in fact enclaves within the territory of the dominant group. This allows them to react to male excesses, to challenge politically incorrect behaviour, etc – but it also in fact limits them to reacting to what the others do. Pressures, deadlines, and continual confrontation with men preclude the possibility of doing really radical work.

For all these reasons, I believe that even if we in the movement still need to learn how to act politically on all levels, even if we don't know how to intervene in some spheres of life, nor how to think about them, this is what we should be aiming for in our work, as a women-only movement. Being women-only is no guarantee against many of the bad practices of traditional politics. There are in-groups, groups which want to take over, politically ambitious women, and 'party' practices inside a women-only movement: these are unfortunately as much the prerogative of politically-organised women as of anyone else.

It seems to me, however, that if the question of divisions between women is to be addressed in accurate and appropriate terms, a women-only movement is simply the essential condition. But it has taken me years to get to that "simply". □



This is a translation, edited for *Trouble and Strife* by Sophie Laws, of "Feminisme et partis politiques: une greffe impossible", which first appeared in *Nouvelles Questions Feministes* 2, October 1981. Many thanks are due to Claire Duchen, whose original translation of this article will soon appear, with others from the same French journal, in a collection she has edited for Explorations in Feminism, Hutchinson Education, entitled *French Connections*

Class, Control and Cocoa

When and how did middle-class women first escape from their roles as daughter, wife or maiden aunt? Where did they live and what new relationships did they form? Catriona Blake discusses the achievements and limitations of some "Independent Women" as described in a new book by Martha Vicinus.

This book is about the first two or three generations of English middle-class women to live on their own earnings outside heterosexuality. For this particular group of women the late nineteenth century saw an explosion of opportunities which made autonomous lives possible – lives independent of family, independent of the Church, independent of men.

The history of this 'revolution' has tended to concentrate on leaders, personalities, and the history of institutions. Martha Vicinus is not interested in a gallery of cardboard heroines but rather in the creation of a specifically women's culture in the new communities where women lived and worked together. She explores the fabric of women's lives in seven different communities: religious sisterhoods; reformed nursing; the new women's colleges; girls' boarding schools; women's settlements in working class areas of London; and the militant suffragette movement. We learn about their daily routines, their physical surroundings, their diet, and their rituals. By the end of each section, I felt I had some idea of what their daily lives were like.

Vicinus gives us some wonderful vignettes of these women's lives. A common feature of the early women's colleges was bad food and bare rooms. One graduate remembered the following of her time at St Hugh's Hall, Oxford:

> Like many women of her age and class, our Principal had no conception of either comfort or beauty . . . our rooms were deplorably furnished, and our food ordered without intelligence and cooked without care or supervision . . . Never in my life have I eaten so much reasty ham and over-salt salt beef, more wooden carrots and more tasteless milk puddings, than under her regime; and there was a mysterious sweet that appeared on Sunday evenings, apparently made from the remains of other puddings stuck together with custard, that the whole college knew as the Ancient of Days.

However, there were compensations for the relative discomfort of college life. One of the most important features of the students' new freedom from family was their personal relationships with each other. Vicinus describes in detail the formalities of the process of making friends:

> A series of written invitations to cocoa or coffee from second and first years to freshers opened the fall term. A fresher could not invite anyone above her to cocoa until her second and third term, when she busily repaid all the hospitality she had received. While cocoa in the evening was de rigeur for second years, third years were expected to serve coffee on Saturday afternoons. After a decent interval a friend might 'prop', that is, propose to call you by your first name, if you would do the same to her. This was done only in the privacy of one's rooms and very rarely between first and third years.

Despite the overbearing military-style discipline within nursing, individual nurses seem to have found ways of subverting the system. Vicinus describes life in the nurses' home as a "combination of boot camp and boarding school":

> Looking back, old nurses remembered midnight feasts of tinned sardines and cake from home, washed down with milk and tea stolen from the ward. A St Thomas' nurse remembered fifty years later her horror at meeting the matron late one night when she was carrying a teapot of milk back to her room.

Another opportunity for subversion came with the annual counting of supplies, "reminiscent of spring cleaning in a large country home":

> An elaborate system of borrowing and re-marking kept the required number of items on hand for the matron's inspection. Wards were generally in pairs, so that if Ward A's utensils were marked in red, the sister could negotiate with Ward B to change a few items temporarily from green to red.

Hierarchy and discipline: the price of independence?

One recurring feature of these women's communities was their hierarchical structure and often severe internal discipline. Vicinus refuses to gloss over this and other unattractive aspects of her material but instead seeks to explain these in terms of the vulnerability of the communities. They were desperate to gain validation for their ventures from a sceptical and sneering male middle-class world and to be taken seriously as individual women who wanted useful work and an independent income. As Vicinus shows us again and again, they were under intense pressure to succeed and were haunted by the possibility of personal failure or the collapse of their community: discipline and structure must have contributed to a desperately needed feeling of security and self-confidence. In the face of potential hostility and derision from outside, it is no wonder they felt the need to create a strict internal organisation that ensured the hard work, obedience and proper behaviour of the members. Only by guaranteeing such high standards could they safely demand the right to their own internal autonomy.

Although these women do not seem to have talked publicly about their fears and insecurities, I came away from this book with insights into what these must have been. In a middle-class Victorian world where women only 'existed' in relation to a family, as a daughter, wife or spinster aunt, these women were choosing a life where they had no such identity and as such

Royal Holloway College cocoa party, c1910.

Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community, 1850–1920,* Virago, 1985. Illustrations are taken from the book.

were deliberately placing themselves outside society. They also, of course, were in some cases cutting themselves off from any further contact with their families at all. They were swopping this security for the support of a very new and unproven women's culture. Another source of insecurity for these women must certainly have been the absence of any role model for their own personal and professional behaviour. What should they wear? How should they spend their leisure time? How should they relate to each other, at work and at home? Also they had nothing on which to model their communities. They were creating these from scratch and were constantly making decisions (under public and often dismissive scrutiny) for which they had little or no guidelines.

'Raves' and metaphors of marriage

In particular, Vicinus explores in some detail the personal relationship between these women and the whole issue of the sexuality of single Victorian women. In a culture without a lesbian 'presence', celibacy must be seen as a rejection of marriage and sex with men rather than of relationships and sexuality itself. Vicinus has a long section on 'raves' between older and younger girls at boarding school and goes into some detail on one or two passionate friendships between adult women. She describes these relationships as "an effort to balance three problematic areas: sexuality, spirituality, and power". I would have liked more explanation of what exactly she means by this and a more general overview of friendships, passionate and otherwise, between these women.

Instead we are left with very strong images of one or two specific relationships, such as that between Louisa Lumsden, the first headmistress of St Leonards, one of the first 'reformed' boarding schools for girls, and Constance Maynard, then a teacher at the school. Their relationship was marred by the power differential between them, translated by them into metaphors of marriage, and their religious differences. In her diary, Maynard refers to her hope that she will succeed in converting the agnostic Lumsden and quotes from the Bible: "The unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife." The following extract from Maynard's diary shows the strong sexual element in her later relationship with Frances Ralph Gray:

> [Ralph] was not well, and I went up to see that she was rightly attended to. As I left she said with gentle hesitation, "You never bite my fingers now, as you used to do." "Oh no, never," I replied lightly. "And you never snarl and growl like a jaguar when you can't express yourself. I never heard anyone growl as well as you." "No," I said, "it's useless. I've been cured of that." The sweet low voice went on, "And you never rock me in your arms and call me your baby." "No," I said in the same even tone, "I've been cured of that too." "Oh!" she said, with quite a new meaning, "oh, I see." Here was a spot too painful to be touched, and I said, "Goodbye, dear," and left the room.

It is interesting and perhaps not surprising that the two strongest metaphors for the new women's communities were religion and family. These had traditionally been two of the major sources of limited power for women in English middle-class society and provided two areas of permitted activity for women. The strong image of the family in the new communities helped to counter suspicions that these women were rejecting their natural instincts and often must have reassured parents that it was safe for their daughter to go to boarding school, college or to do nurses' training as these would provide a substitute family setting. For instance, the new women's colleges, with the exception perhaps of Girton, presented a strong image of domesticity, with activities such as Christmas parties and jam-making, and used meal times and common rooms to emphasise the similarities to middle-class family life. Religion, too, provided an acceptable framework within which women could do paid work, live outside marriage, and enjoy limited autonomy.

On one level this reliance on religious and family metaphors can simply be seen as seeking liberation only through an *extension* of women's oppression and therefore not radical. However, Vicinus offers a sophisticated analysis of how, with limited power at their disposal, women on the one hand exploited these metaphors as a means of achieving autonomy but on the other hand were limited and ultimately defeated by them. Somehow they managed to build their personal autonomy and the independence of their communities on the basis of ideals and self-sacrifice and service to others, but seem to have been unable to make the all-important leap from there to a woman's right to happiness, self-fulfillment and personal success.

A marginal and vulnerable 'revolution'

It appears from the evidence in this book that we are talking about a relatively small number of women in these communities: Vicinus estimates that in 1901 there were about 5,000 middle-class women trained as nurses; in 1897 there were a total of 784 students at the women's colleges, only some of whom would go on to pursue a career. Larger numbers, of course, were on the periphery of this world of professional women, volunteers in the settlements, those who dropped out of nursing training or subsequently married, and women involved in the suffrage movement and other political campaigns. But the women who trained in a particular skill, followed that career all their lives and never married must have been quite a small percentage of all middle-class women.

Vicinus finishes the book with an epilogue on what happened to feminism after the first world war. At first I was disappointed with this, as I wanted some rousing conclusion summing up the achievements of the women's communities. However, I then came to see the danger of focusing exclusively on the communities themselves and how important it is to talk about the decline of this phase of feminism. To examine the decline puts into focus how peripheral and temporary these achievements were and by extension how vulnerable women's achievements always are in a patriarchal society. Although many women today benefit in different ways from the women's communities of the late nineteenth century, this 'revolution' in middle-class women's lives was extremely limited. This book gives us a good idea of the strengths and weaknesses of the women's communities and an explanation for their eclipse.

The book is very dense, packed full of ideas and examples. Although I am familiar with the history of women in this period, I found I was having to (but also wanting to) read it quite slowly and with concentration. As with most books on women's history, I am afraid that the general reader might be put off either by the price or by the fact that it is not an easy read. However, this richness is also one of the main things that attracted me to it, that it is both a *descriptive* history with a wealth of detail about these different women's communities and an *analytical* history. Vicinus is interested in power, in the complicated picture of these women's power and their powerlessness. They achieved a position of having a fair degree of control over their own lives and yet remained marginal within a male-dominated world. Also, in the process of becoming themselves empowered, they exerted power and control over working-class women in all sorts of ways.

It is a political book by a woman who manages to be both a historian, interested in seeing these middle-class women in their own terms, and a feminist, who wants both to measure the degrees of autonomy achieved and to state at what cost, particularly to working-class women. I think this 'double identity' is crucial if we want a politically useful women's history. We want to measure the achievements of these women against the politics of the current women's movement but we do not want our present concerns to distort the past and invent a totally fictitious history. We need to be *both* historians and feminist revolutionaries.

Students at Westfield College, University of London, 1889.

Missionaries to the working-class

One of the most difficult areas in which to do this is, I think, in the area of class. It is vital to document the pervasive classism of

these middle-class women, their privileges, their prejudices and the way they often used their class power to control the lives of working-class women in order to gain autonomy for themselves. At each stage Vicinus does make it clear whether she is talking about working-class or middle-class women and does not make the mistake of making statements about 'women' when what is meant is 'middle-class women'. She also gives full details of the extensive and often ridiculous measures taken to ensure the rigid class stratification of the communities and of the deeply classist attitudes shown by professional middle-class women when they came into contact with working-class women.

With painful insight, Vicinus shows how the colonialism of middle-class women who were bringing Christianity and 'civilisation' to working-class families in England mirrored that of their middle-class fathers and brothers who were carrying out a similar programme in the British Empire. She points out the irony of how much fuss the middle-class made about the plight of unprovided-for single middle-class women when *all* working-class women had to survive on or near the breadline. Middle-class women were demanding the right to work, and to useful, satisfying work, without recognising that working-class women always worked out of necessity and in boring, exhausting jobs.

It is important to say all this about the classism of that wave of the women's movement and yet at the same time still to recognise the particular oppression of these middle-class women. We have enough evidence to show how middle-class women's lives were often tedious and totally dependent and how this led in many cases to long term invalidity and mental illness. We know how difficult it was for even the most strong-minded to resist marriage and assert their independence from their families: it was not until she was 33 that Florence Nightingale was able to make the break, after years of frustration and despair. We need to find a framework within which we can validate the experiences of both working-class *and* middle-class women, and their different oppressions, without denying the enormous gap in their material positions or the oppressiveness of middle-class towards working-class women. We have to state clearly how the intentions and actions of radical middle-class women, such as those Vicinus writes about, excluded working-class women and made their lives invisible. I also think that, as feminist historians, we have to examine more closely how writing histories exclusively about middle-class women's lives contributes to this process. □

A dance at the Honor Club, Fitzroy Square, 1903. (G R SIMS, "LIVING IN LONDON", 1903)

NOT FUNDED BY THE GLC

Spend, spend, spent ?

What are the implications of local authority funding for feminist organisations? As the Metropolitan Councils shut up shop, Frances Carter, feminist activist and long-time Labour Party member, talks with Liz Kelly about what the Women's Liberation Movement has lost and gained from five years on the municipal gravy train.

Liz: *Why, in the early 80s, did the setting up of women's committees and the funding of feminist organisations begin happening on a much wider scale than ever before?*

Frances: I don't think the Labour Party centrally had or has any commitment to women's committees or women's units. I think it happened for almost negative reasons; because a few women, like Valerie Wise of the Greater London Council (GLC) and a few women councillors in Camden and elsewhere wanted to do it and because there wasn't any acceptable way that male councillors could say it shouldn't happen. I don't think it was any more positive and thought-out than that. And they were given ridiculously tiny budgets to set up the women's units, enough for two or three women. The pattern seemed to be that Labour councils wanted to be seen to have a women's committee or Equal Opportunities Committee, but weren't prepared to allocate them a budget which was in any way meaningful.

L: *So originally it was down to certain individual women who'd come up through the Labour Party?*

F: Yes. And also there was a band-wagon effect. There's a lot of both formal and informal contact between Labour local authorities because they meet at conferences. So when one local authority seizes on what seems to be a good idea, the others tend to catch on. I suspect that if the GLC hadn't done it, nobody else would have done it either.

I think how it happened is also important in terms of what has developed since. Many of the women councillors who set up and are running women's committees have no experience of working within any women's movement organisation. Their experience mostly comes from the Labour Party or trade unions. And this, I think, accounts for the lack, in many cases, of an overall perspective, the lack of a determined, clear aim and the tendency to latch onto issues which may not be mainstream women's issues.

L: *They have also tended to lack an understanding of the way in which women's groups work. Feminist groups have had to adapt to very bureaucratic and rigid ways of working, very different from the feminist principle of working on something until you feel as though you've got a clear idea of what it is you want to do and how you're going to do it.*

F: Yes, and there is also the emphasis on constitutions, hierarchies and elected officers. Though, to be fair, I do think many Labour local authorities have bent over backwards to bend all their traditional grant-giving methods, largely as a result of pressure from the groups applying for funding who simply couldn't fill in forms because they didn't fit in with any of their ways of working.

L: *It seems to me that in the euphoria of being able to pay ourselves and other women to work on feminist projects the whole issue of the connection of feminism to the State has been totally lost. It was a huge issue in*

the mid 70s. Certainly a lot of groups which now have funding from the GLC were very critical of Women's Aid because it had a relationship to the State which was less than totally hostile.

F: Yes, and that debate has conveniently stopped. Groups have seen what other groups could get by not holding out about it. Things got a lot easier once you'd got your funding and stopped having the debate. But State funding has weakened the fighting position of women, the challenge we can make. It's more complicated than the issue of accepting money and so being in collusion. It's about accepting the funding body's version of a feminist approach, adopting a municipal feminism if you like, but not participating in the kind of political challenge that women's committees and women's units are supposedly trying to make.

Women's groups have lost the sense of being *outside*. I think Women's Aid has always taken the money on its own terms and then tried to get away with it. But other organisations have been inhibited in the challenges they've made — not consciously, but unconsciously, everybody's worried about the next chunk of funding.

On the positive side, a huge number of groups have been able to do things they wouldn't otherwise. Child-care projects, women's centres, Women's Aid groups where there was no local authority funding, all sorts of new and interesting women and health issues, women's reproductive rights issues. Women have been able to do important research proving points that we've all been saying we had to prove without being able to, such as the work on lesbian custody at Rights of Women. Funding of political campaigns (although obviously a lot of feminist 'service' organisations and research groups also campaign so the two overlap), is a more complicated issue. One thing is that campaigning groups that have chosen to go for funding have been able to take on a much higher profile. They've been able to produce glossy leaflets and organise expensive conferences, make videos and move into a whole different style of campaigning.

But this has made it very difficult to get a clear picture of how the women's committees selected certain groups for funding because the poorer, unfunded groups have got over-shadowed by the others. This style of campaigning has also taken away the sense of issues being kept going by gut women's commitment to them. Take, for instance, an abortion campaign. You get paid workers in and, in a sense, what you're doing is removing the need for the involvement of dozens of women who used to put in the effort to produce newsletters, organise conferences, contact the press, keep the whole thing going. I think across London that there are very few campaigns left, just offices and workers. And you've also lost the other really important aspect of a campaign, which is the process of a lot of women coming together to think and argue and discuss. Not just the experience of the debate, which keeps the issue moving and changing, but also the experience of working on things collectively, which has always been part of the women's movement, and, to some extent, the labour movement.

L: *There's been an ironic shift in a way, because there's now all these other organisations and groups using 'feminist' ways of working and organising, while some feminist groups themselves have shifted into straight ways of organising.*

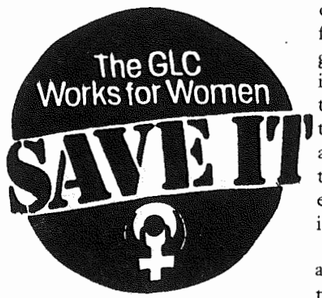
F: Another thing that happens when you get paid workers is that they, not the collective, become the decision makers. Women's Aid is, I think, interesting, because they are attempting to keep the balance between the grass roots organisation and paid workers, but it's a constant conflict. Perhaps it's gone on being a conflict and a debate because of the size of the organisation.

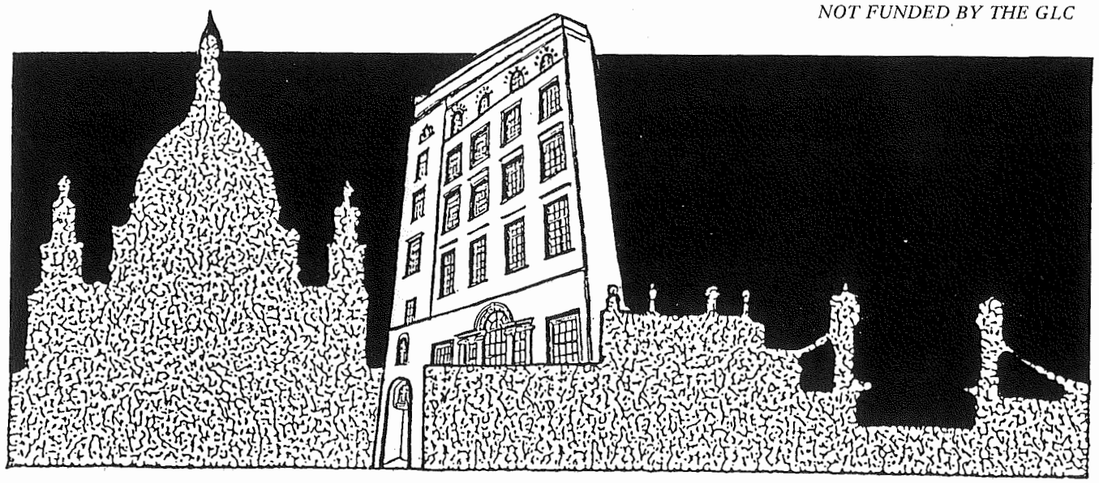
L: *There's a climate of opinion generally that you can't do anything unless you have funding.*

F: Yes, though I'm sure we'll all go back to doing without it, go back to typing stencils and duplicating newsletters.

L: *But a lot of women's organisations that operated in that kind of way have died, like WIRES and the London Women's Liberation Newsletter.*

F: Funding has given a lot of women the chance to work for feminist organisations. Women who've worked in straight jobs, jobs where there's the whole structure of





A NEW LONDON CENTRE FOR WOMEN

A PROJECT BY THE GLC WOMEN'S COMMITTEE — at Wesley House, 70 Great Queen Street WC2 5AX

The GLC Women's Committee decided to invest in a huge central women's building, a project particularly associated with the committee chair Valerie Wise. Unfortunately, the building is unlikely to be completed before the GLC is abolished on April 1.

oppression, and it's been an amazing opportunity for them to work in feminist organisations where they're in control and have a different relationship with their employers. That has to be a hugely positive experience for those women. The sad thing is that we haven't been able to work out a way for that to happen and for the collective as a whole to keep on going. A lot have shrivelled and died away after getting paid workers.

I do think that funding has separated women's groups. I have the feeling that there's been much less London-wide and regional organising recently. There's a tendency for groups not to know what each other are doing. It may be because they've got paid workers whose job it is to work within their groups; that groups are no longer made up of a lot of very politically committed feminists who are involved in several issues and maintain personal and political contact with other groups.

It's interesting that the groups where there's still action going on at ground level are those that never really got in on the funding game: tenants' campaigns, homeless campaigns, claimants unions, all largely dominated by women. That's where the action is in terms of demonstrations, lobbying, distributing leaflets. In a sense in the women's movement we've got to learn those ways of organising all over again. A huge number of organisations are going to lose their funding and many won't survive the transition, which in terms of immediate service is appalling, but in terms of political future may be quite positive. There'll be a period of reassessment. What happens at the moment is that with all the publicity coming out of the GLC about campaigns and action and improvements, we've lost sight of reality. We get the impression that important changes have happened, but the vast majority of women, especially women who are economically disadvantaged, Black and Asian women, their lives have remained untouched. We have to go back and reassess what we're campaigning about.

L: *But the GLC has also fed into the whole issue of race with women's groups. It has almost forced women's groups to become more racially representative. But at the same time it's encouraged the sort of tokenism where the solution is to have one or two black women in your group without actually discussing the issue of racism.*

F: Race has become a dominant issue in all women's community and left-wing political organisations in London over the past five years. One problem is that groups are expected to be representative on the GLC's, or whoever's, terms. But some Black women want to organise independently and there are organisations in which Black women don't want to be involved and that policy doesn't allow for that. We haven't yet found a balance between quite rightly making white women take on the issue of why Black women weren't involved in their group, and at the same time enabling them to function in the way they choose as a grass roots organisation. It may be that a group of women is representative of a lot of women without having the same racial balance as London or wherever.

Lots of collectives have suffered immense internal problems because of conflicts between Black and white members of the collective and Black and white workers. People haven't always found solutions and my experience is that people tend to leave the group instead.

There's also a lot of white liberal guilt which actually inhibits people dealing with the issue, which means the issues don't actually get discussed for what they are.

Also an awful lot of paper-politics have been written simply in order to get grant funding, which is another aspect of tokenism. People simply phone up and say, 'Have you got an anti-racist policy statement because we need one for our grant application?' The statements just get passed round. Everyone's desperate to get money out of the GLC before it goes down, but it means that no-one's putting any real thought and discussion into the issues of race.

In the long term however, I think the GLC's policy on race has positive effects. It has not only changed the way organisations have had to think about the ways they operate; it's also given an awful lot of Black groups the chance to make demands, to organise for funding, to move into a much more assertive position, which has to be healthy in historical terms. But I don't think the right balance has been achieved between raising awareness and interfering in the way groups operate. There is a problem of blanket policies actually just oppressing one person in order not to oppress another. For example, in the organisation I was involved in, we would have had to sack one white worker in order to to take on a Black worker to meet the GLC's requirements and I think the politics of that kind of action are quite difficult. Particularly where it's all women.

L: *Do you think the lack of grass-roots feminist involvement in the women's committees and women's units affected the decisions on who got funded and what for?*

F: Women's committees did make attempts to involve women from outside the council and most of them do have women from outside representing groups in the community. But the overall impression is that women's committees lack a sense of what was going on at grass roots level in women's organisations and therefore found it difficult to make balanced judgements about where the priorities for funding should lie. Either those groups that got it together to apply for funding got the money, or a cause was simply latched on to. One example is the Camden Council women's committee which got caught up with the issue of prostitution in Kings Cross. Because they'd had no involvement in the debate about prostitution that's been going on in the women's movement for years, they fell into one line of thinking, that of the English Collective of Prostitutes, which says that prostitution is just a job and that the only problem with it is that it's criminalized, which many feminists would quarrel with anyway. Because the whole debate about prostitution had never taken place in the Labour Party they got led down the garden path. It's an extreme example but it illustrates that lack of awareness of past history, particularly of the relationship between the ECP and Wages for Housework, and the tendency to seize on issues that seem right at the time. One of the consequences of this particular example was that they then couldn't give money to other groups with alternative points of view, like Rights of Women, because the ECP blocked it.

L: *And there were certainly some occasions early on when some of the women's committees felt they knew what women in London wanted. It was assumed that they wanted a really large building to meet in, although many feminist groups felt this was totally inappropriate to their needs and they didn't actually go out and ask.*

F: Yes, there was this kind of desire to leave some permanent legacy, to spend the money while it was there.

I think there has been a tendency for those groups who were already well-organised and knew about how to go about getting funding to get funded and this has left a legacy of unbalanced provision. If you look at the list of grants given out by women's committees in London over a four-month period in 1983, you see a huge number of groups in Islington getting funded. But what about Tower Hamlets and Newham? The very large, very deprived working class and ethnic minority communities in those areas didn't have the experience and organisation to get grants.

L: *Do you think the women's committees, particularly in the GLC, were aware of how much they were taking on, in that other parts of the bureaucracy of local government didn't want to co-operate?*

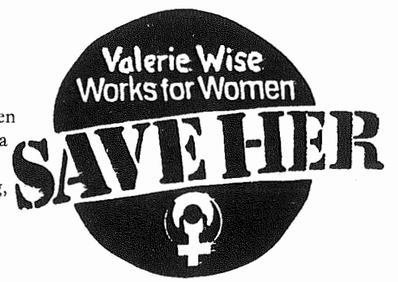
F: There's a great resistance to change within local government. There are thousands of people working in local government who have an interest in not allowing things to change. They feel it's a nuisance to have to change the way you operate, introduce new policies, change employment practices, give grants in different ways. All the tactics of bureaucracy have been used against women's and other groups. The use of delay as a tactic, referring back committee reports, endless paperwork so that an idea gets lost in the system for months until it fades away or gets abandoned in despair. There's been a clear resistance to women's units and what they're trying to do because they threaten the white male structures of local government. And, of course, many men simply don't accept that women are oppressed.

The other thing about the bureaucracy is the tendency to think that it's enough to write a committee report making points or arguing for a change in policy, when in fact that's only the beginning and there's a huge process of actually getting somebody to implement it. I think that came as a shock to a lot of women going into women's units who hadn't worked in local government before and went in as feminists. And there seems to be no way of speeding up the bureaucracy of making payments, which actually affects people's lives.

L: *I know groups where their workers haven't been paid for seven or eight weeks and have ended up being evicted.*

F: Yes, there's this bizarre contrast between the support given to actually applying for a grant by people within the local authority who actually agree with what you're doing, and then the authority deals with you like the worst employer.

L: *There's been a lot of discussion about the issue of monitoring of funded groups,*



whether it was ever done properly. And whether the support units that were established to mediate when there were problems and disputes were successful in doing that.

F: Clearly the monitoring hasn't happened successfully. Partly because of the process whereby groups applied for their next chunk of grant. They sent in a report and a set of accounts and obviously they said in their report that they'd been doing all the right things to get their next cheque. And partly because there wasn't the organisation and bureaucracy to do the monitoring. You would have had to have women in the units with time to go and spend time with funded groups, and while in theory there should have been that sort of support, I can't see how the women in the units could have done it within the constraints of their jobs.

L: *They would also have had to be women with experience of working on collectives.*

F: There have been far more women (as paid workers) in women's units with experience of women's collectives than sit on women's committees. But I think they've been worn down by the experience of trying to have a municipal feminism.

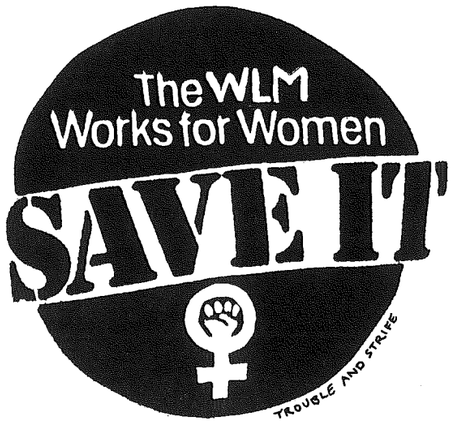
I think what the funding organisations should have done was give women's groups time to sort out their own problems. I'm not sure that appropriate support could ever have come from the funding body because whoever is working for the funding body has a vested interest in how that funding should be used. But maybe they could have set up some kind of process where women from funded groups could have come together and talked about problems.

L: *I can't help feeling pessimistic about some of the groups. I do feel that there's this dependence that's been created, where groups can't conceive how they'll survive without funding. There's a sense of resignation that the group, the campaign, will die out. And some of them are groups that existed before the GLC, which is even more sad.*

F: Yes, it will be a great watershed. But I do feel optimistic in the long term, that women will start organising again. And it will be different women and some different issues too, and women organising in different ways. We've got spoilt by the ease of getting a campaign together; getting a grant, getting an office, getting workers and leaving them to get on with it. Politically speaking, if a campaign is going to be called a campaign, it ought to have grass roots membership and involvement.

I think in this respect the funding authorities have been at fault too, not just the women's organisations. They haven't made any enquiries about grass roots involvement or grass roots demand. They've tended to put all the emphasis on who will benefit from an organisation's *services*, how many women in the borough or wherever. You and I could set up as a group and get funding and we'd probably provide a very good service to countless women, but we wouldn't be a campaign. There's been a failure to understand what a campaign is and what funding's actually about.

The success of women's committees has been in funding services such as childcare, and possibly employment. *Their biggest failure is in changing their own local authority policy*. They haven't changed the way most councils' policies actually affect most women. They've succeeded in opening up some traditionally male, manual jobs to women but they've had almost total failure in making it possible for women to work in those jobs without fear of harassment. They still have the illusion that if you make a policy, that's enough, that the problem is discrimination, not oppression. □



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