

TROUBLE &

STRIFE 14



Black women slaves in Britain

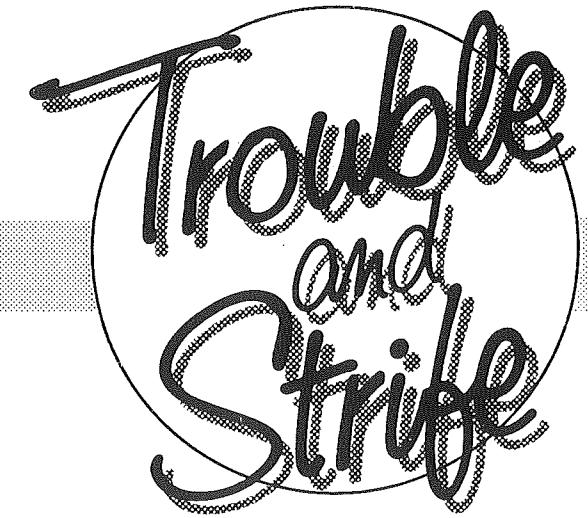
Beyond anti-apartheid

Dworkin on determinism

Sisters, friends and mothers

Feminism in the Republic

Philippine women after the revolution



Contents No 14

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 is produced collectively by Lynn Alderson, Margot Farnham, Cath Jackson, Susanne Kappeler, Liz Kelly, Sophie Laws, Lyn May and Sara Scott, with help from Harriet Wistrich (taping), Alison Dickens, Diana Leonard, Judy Stevens and Catherine Tidnam (paste-up). With many thanks to the Women's Health and Reproductive Rights Information Centre for the use of their space and resources.

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VIDEO 28 is a video about the fightback against Clause — now Section — 28, produced by five lesbians from Leeds and Bradford. It covers the Clause itself and its possible effects on our lives and records some of the protests, marches and gatherings to fight it. It lasts 22 minutes and can be hired (£15 funded/£10 unfunded) or bought (£30) from Video Vera, PO Box HP5, Leeds LS6 2ED. Tel: Leeds 717460.

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Amazon Press of Manchester who have typeset and printed 'Trouble and Strife' since we began, are closing. Amazon are the last women's printing collective in Britain. We are saddened by this news. To have survived so long, providing an excellent service to Women's, Labour Movement and community groups is pretty damn good. We thank everyone at Amazon for all those years of support.

LETTERS

Sally Rockett

Dear *Trouble and Strife*,

We are writing to record how glad we are to have known Sally Rockett. Sally was a wonderful person to know. She had friends in many different places — Germany, Reading, York, Nepal, Africa — and no-one who knew her could not have been touched by her energy and enthusiasm for life, and her sense of purpose. She was committed to working for change, for peace, and for women all over the world. She had warmth, an amazing sense of humour, and was a wonderful friend — good fun to be with. She was renowned in York for her cake-making. She had a very clear sense of what was important in her life, and she got on and did it in a way which was quite inspirational to those of us who knew her. Her death (in a bomb attack in Khartoum on 15 May) leaves us with a huge sense of loss.

To many of Sally's friends, it seemed important and appropriate to find a way of perpetuating Sally's work. She was one of the co-founders of Ladderback, a women's furniture restoring co-operative in York. She worked as a teacher in Nepal for a number of years, and at the time of her death she was working to establish the Gedaref Women's Centre in eastern Sudan. An appeal fund has been set up to equip the centre and as a living memorial to her work. The appeal fund has been set up by the World University Service (UK), a British charity for whom she worked. They write:

In Sudan many women can neither read nor write. *Education is more than just another goal.* Sally Rockett planned to set up an urgently needed Women's Centre. In the safety of a proper building local Sudanese and refugee women could meet together. Among the subjects available to them would be classes in literacy, first aid and child care.

Lack of educational opportunities means that hundreds of eager, intelligent women cannot find paid work. *Female employment is only for the literate.* Many women in Gedaref are in fact the sole breadwinners. Yet, denied the

opportunity for paid employment, they remain trapped in a hopeless situation . . . Sally had just received official Sudanese permission to enlarge and equip her centre. She wrote to us asking for help in raising the £10,000 needed for buildings, sanitation and teaching materials.

If any *T&S* readers would like to donate to the appeal fund, cheques/POs should be made payable to the Sally Rockett Memorial Appeal and sent to WUS (UK), 20 Compton Terrace, London N1 2UN. Credit card donations can also be made over the phone on 01-226 6747, or donations can be paid in directly at any Midland Bank (account no. 40-25-02 53130224).
In sisterhood
Dena Attar
Laura Potts
London SE15
and York



Sally Rockett
15 April 1956–15 May 1988

Section 28

Dear *Trouble and Strife*,

Reading Harriet Wistrich's article in the last issue of *T&S* — and, to some extent, Lynn Alderson's — left me feeling very uneasy because I felt as if my personal and political responses to Clause 28 had effectively been invalidated.

The very instant that I heard about the Clause, I felt that the deepest core of my being had been threatened and that I had to organise against it by any means available. To me this meant first mobilising as a Jew, then as a radical political activist, a cultural worker in the publishing industry and a campaigner for media freedom. Interestingly, given that I have always defined myself as a radical feminist, organising autonomously as a woman was not a priority at that point.

Thinking about this now I connect my reaction with my view of what organising as a radical feminist means. Having had similar discussions with women about organising around, for example, anti-nuclear and Middle East politics, I realise that choosing to organise politically with men when that seems appropriate has forced me to recognise the difference between a women's issue, where I organise autonomously with other women as a radical feminist, and issues where I bring my radical feminist perspective to my organising, but where, as a Jew or a media worker or whatever, I feel I have common cause with some men.

Thus, as far as organising against the Clause was concerned, mobilising groups of people — men and women — who might otherwise ignore its potentially devastating effects — seemed my first priority.

Fighting Thatcher's ideology

Of course the issue of feminist autonomy is particularly complicated in campaigning against the Clause, for the very reason stressed in Lynn Alderson's article — of lesbianism not as sexual preference but as a critique of the family and of male power

generally, both in individual relationships and in society. And it is true that any campaign to defend lesbianism which ignores this is not a feminist campaign. Nevertheless I would like to suggest that it is only by consciously adopting an encompassing political base for our organising, rather than an excluding one, that we are ever likely to defeat not only Section 28, but the entire structure of Thatcherism.

Thatcher has deliberately used ideology to destroy almost all effective opposition to her government, so we must develop a countervailing ideological force which demonstrates that we are not aiming to replace one form of authoritarianism with another. Although there are good material reasons for the decline in radical political activism during the Thatcher regime, it is the atmosphere of fear, intimidation and pessimism which is primarily debilitating. This is achieved by divide and rule tactics of which Section 28 is but the latest, and one of the most overtly ideological, manifestations. (Others include the North versus the South, the employed versus the unemployed, home owners versus non-owners, the sick versus the healthy — the list is virtually endless.)

In this context I find Harriet Wistrich's ready acceptance of the Tories' own explanations of their philosophy and policy worrying naive. The party's attempts to suppress the extreme Right within the Young Conservatives could more sensibly be assessed as an effective piece of public relations to distract people's attention from what the grown-ups are doing; Thatcher's voting against the Alton Bill could be interpreted in any number of ways, including as a middle-class Protestant distaste for working-class Catholicism, as a lack of enthusiasm for intemperate breeding among the lower orders or, indeed, as an accurate perception that an adequate abortion law is as likely to support the nuclear family as subvert it. Moreover, suggesting that there is a serious contradiction in practice between

LETTERS



Right-Wing Libertarianism and the Moral Majority makes as much sense as accepting the Tory line that abolishing ILEA increases parents' choices in education.

Collective revolution

Although Lynn's article does not participate in this overt acceptance of the Tory world view at face value, her tendency, along with Harriet's, to dismiss the importance of civil liberties is a dangerous step in the same direction. If "the personal is political" means anything, it means that our individual experience of oppression is important and that any satisfactory collective revolution can only be built on a firm basis of support by and for each self-respecting individual.

Feminists and leftists cannot counter the monstrous Thatcher lie that only she represents true individual freedom by suggesting that we care little for civil liberties and human rights. Tragically, each lesbian custody case has to be fought by that mother, struggling to retain custody of her own particular children; each attempt at blackmail threatens the life and livelihood of a particular gay man. This denies neither the class nature of these oppressions, nor that gay men and lesbians are oppressed differently, but neither must it lead us to deny the need to mount individual defence against individual oppression within the class context.

How can Harriet question the accuracy of stating that Section 28 is a direct attack on individual liberty, especially as she goes on to say that "the law will have massive repercussions for individual lesbians and gay men, in terms of the oppression and validation (this is *invalidation*, surely?) of our identities"?

I believe it is essential to remain aware of the importance of the individual within our political organising if we are to survive, and this can only be done as part of developing an effective collective strategy which remains true to feminist principles. This means deciding who you are prepared to work with, on what terms and why — that is, consciously pursuing the kinds of coalition-building that Lynn refers to in her article.

Coalition-building

In organising against the Clause I have mainly observed activities in London. I hope things may be different elsewhere. However, I have been alarmed by the extent to which lesbians and gays at the heart of organising against the Clause in London seem to have no concern or interest in building coalitions, as exemplified by women from the Stop the Clause Campaign who referred to defending freedom of expression and working with heterosexuals as representing "lowest common denominator politics", echoing Lynn's article more or less precisely.

Fighting for freedom of expression is inextricably connected with the human rights issue discussed above and has to be defended for all the same reasons. But additionally, as radicals, lesbians, gays and feminists, the ability to freely communicate our ideas with each other and the rest of the world is our major political tool. Why do we fail to recognise this when it is so glaringly obvious to Thatcher's ideologues?

Two further examples stand out: firstly I went to an early organising meeting against the Clause, partly to raise the issue of mobi-

lising against it in the mainstream Jewish community. I was completely unsupported by three Jewish lesbians of my acquaintance who were there. My main support came from a non-Jewish gay man who is a personal friend; secondly, on the Kennington Park demo in London, a black feminist heterosexual friend of mine was approached with surprise by some gay and lesbian work colleagues who wanted to know what she was doing there. Such positions strike me as extremely ill-considered, strategically, politically and morally.

I want as many people on my side as possible — to defend me whichever part of my politics I am being attacked for. And I want as many heterosexuals as possible to be actively working to defeat Section 28. I believe the threat of being labelled homosexual plays a key role in intimidating people into political passivity and even collusion.

Labelling any group of potential allies as representing "the lowest common denominator" could be interpreted simply as "I don't want to try to work with someone I might disagree with". Acknowledging the importance of a feminist analysis of the fight against the Clause must include a recognition that 50% of the heterosexuals with whom some lesbians and gays don't wish to organise are also women. A crucial early slogan of the Women's Liberation Movement was "Any woman can be a lesbian" — someone even wrote a song about it! — and I remember when the Sixth Demand was "Every woman's right to a self-defined sexuality and an end to all discrimination against lesbians". Those of us who fought against the subsequent separating of the two halves of the demand could have predicted that this dissociation would lead to a mentality which induces the sort of scenes I described above.

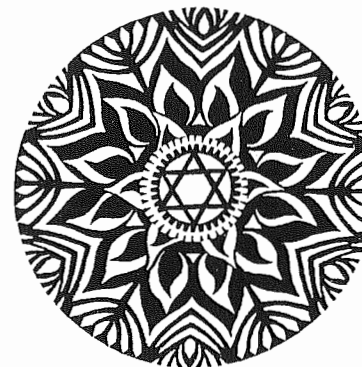
Lessons of a Jewish upbringing

I know my immediate sense of urgency to organise against the Clause had a lot to do with my upbringing, in an orthodox Jewish

family which always identified strongly with the Jewish community. I was taught two inescapable lessons from birth. The first one was consciousness of the Holocaust. Although complicated, its message boiled down to this; that we must never forget, because without eternal vigilance it could easily happen again. The other lesson was that to marry out or have a child outside marriage would mean being disinherited by my family and my entire community. The message here was much more straightforward: there is no such thing as freedom of choice concerning sexuality.

Thus, unlike Harriet, I do not think that making analogies between the Clause and fascism and the Nazis is a "pretty dubious argument". I find it extremely accurate and it was the *first* thought that crossed my mind when I heard about the Clause.

Because of our history, Jews are very sensitive to the misuse of images of the Holocaust and not to respect this sensitivity constitutes a common form of anti-semitism on the left, as Harriet suggests. But because people have tended to make comparisons with the Holocaust when it is inappropriate, we must not fall into the opposite trap of denying the similarities when they exist. In making this case, I am certainly not suggesting that anybody is "*about to be* incarcerated, tortured or gassed" (my italics), which is what Harriet states that drawing lessons from that period of history is *all*



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about. But the gas chambers were not created in a vacuum. They were the culmination of a set of historical circumstances which had been building up in Europe for more than ten years — and much longer, depending on how far back you wish to extend the analysis.

Jews Against the Clause (London) drew up a briefing document because of our concern with these issues, part of which says:

Determining whether parallels with events in Germany during the Nazi era are justified is a complex and ultimately subjective business. . . . As early as 1928, five years before coming to power, the Nazi party violently condemned a reform campaign in Germany (led by notable Jewish humanitarians of the day, among others) to repeal existing laws which criminalised (male) homosexual acts. Within a month of assuming control, Hitler ordered the closure of all restaurants, cafes and other establishments known to cater to gay or lesbian customers and in 1935 Germany enacted ferocious legislation which — because of its deliberately vague and general wording — greatly extended the scope of the existing law and effectively made any manifestation at all of (male) homosexual desire a crime. We know that this law was used as a basis for the arrests of tens of thousands of gay men — who then ended up in concentration camps, some indeed in Auschwitz. We know as well that many gay men and lesbians confined in psychiatric institutions were put to death in the Third Reich's "euthanasia programme" . . . Much of the language used against homosexual people today carries powerful echoes of anti-semitic invective. Thus lesbians and gays are made out to be a conspiratorial clique exerting secret influence; they are denounced as an "immoral" minority bent on undermining Christian values; and they are accused of spreading disease and degradation. These frequently-heard lines of attack bring to mind nearly identical denunciations directed against the Jewish people since time immemorial.¹

Not unique

Radical Jews have suffered much pain within progressive movements as our life experiences have been consistently diminished, ignored and undervalued; as Jewish feminists it seems we are currently being denied access to the feminist media to reply to yet another mis-

representation of our politics — but that is another story². The result of this treatment, which begins to feel like systematic silencing and abuse, is that we sometimes feel that we have to overstate our case to get paid any attention at all. I feel that our experience of the way these processes operate makes Harriet come dangerously close to suggesting that the Jews have uniquely suffered and that therefore any attempt to generalise from what happened to us leading up to and during the Holocaust somehow inevitably perpetuates the process of denial of Jewish oppression.

I believe that the reverse is true and that if we try to persist with the myth that the Jews uniquely suffered, not only do we further isolate ourselves from potential allies, but we deny everybody the opportunity to learn from history. And it is then that "the real significance of (an outrageous historical fact such as the gas chambers) can become obscured". (Without getting diverted into a discussion about the meaning Harriet attributes to "its real significance", it must be pointed out that she uses that phrase as if there is only one possible interpretation of it, and there too I would have to disagree.)

My interpretation of history is firstly that there have been other episodes of deliberate mass genocide in world history from which we may learn lessons every bit as harrowing as those which emerge from the Holocaust: one is the enslavement of the people of Africa; two more are the extermination of the native people of North and South America and Australia; there are others. Secondly we must not forget that another six million people died in the gas chambers alongside the six million Jews.

There were many particular features of the Holocaust, because history never repeats itself precisely. It was arguably more systematic (though this is possibly also connected with its happening in the technological era which encouraged it to happen in the way that it did). It also happened in an era of mass media and ideology, in the current

era, our own time. This means that to refuse to learn from that experience in its widest context amounts to gross political negligence. But it also means that many of the victims, perpetrators and casual by-standers of these atrocious events are still alive — and, complete with our sensibilities and insecurities and your guilt and denial and everybody's avoidance, we have to deal with it and keep working together. Otherwise yes, I do believe it could happen again and that Thatcherism is the ideology that could precipitate this.

And maybe next time it won't be the Jews. Maybe it will be the Asians, or the unemployed, or lesbians and gays, or leftists or single women. Who can say which group will be socially constructed as *the* group without whom the rest of society could sleep more easily in their beds?

The meaning of choice

I was one of those feminists who disagreed with Harriet's original counterposing of homosexuality, which she maintains is a choice, against being Jewish, which she states is not. I did not object in the simplistic way that Harriet describes. My reservations were based on my opinion that *all* forms of labelling are social constructions. How can Harriet accept that gender is a social construction when we have no control over that at all, yet suggest that we have no choice about being Jewish (ie that that is *not* socially constructed)?

The answer must lie again in the legacy of the fascist ideology of the Nazi era. Hitler consigned anyone to the gas chambers who had one Jewish grandparent, irrespective of whether they were even aware of this, so of course it feels to us that we have no choice about being Jewish — and of course it is much less painful to many of us to name ourselves "Jew" rather than wait in terror to be exposed. But suppose that lesbians and gays had been selected as the major target and that the criterion for the definition was anyone who could be proved to have intentionally promoted homosexuality? I think it is quite easy to see how a psychological reign

of terror could be instituted which is entirely divorced from any notion of "choice" in the liberal sense and leaves no room for any freely accepted self-definition.

"A Woman's Right to Choose" has been one of women's liberation's most important organising slogans, not just in its original narrow sense of free access to abortion and contraception, but in a wider sense whose implications are truly revolutionary. This recognises that "choice" is not an absolute moral activity, divorced from its social, political and economic context, but that nevertheless women (and men) have the right to determine their own destiny without the interference of the state. Our task as a revolutionary movement is to work to remove the restricting effects of the other constraints as fully and as quickly as possible.

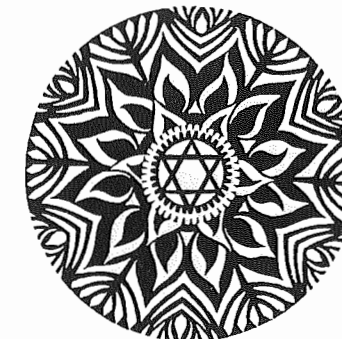
Finally, I take issue with Harriet's use of the word "choice" in her article because I don't think that choosing to *be* homosexual or to *be* Jewish is the entire story, even within the sense in which she uses the term. The heart of the matter lies in choosing to *pass*, or, rather, being able to choose to pass. Butch dykes, effeminate pansies, loud Jews with large noses and curly hair — we all exist and none of us can assimilate, whether we want to or not. There are many, many people in this society for whom choice, in that sense, does not exist and we are all people who should now unite to learn the lessons of history and thereby avoid becoming its victims.

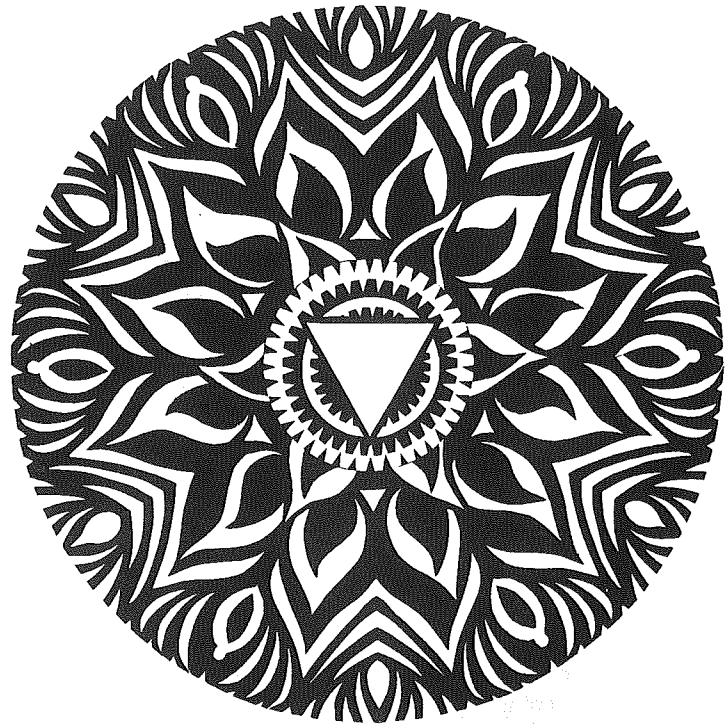
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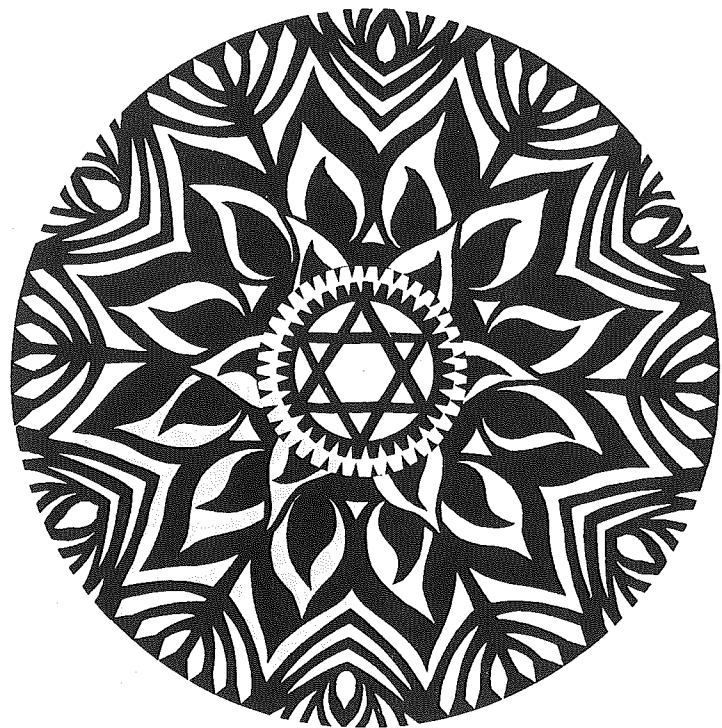
1. Jews Against the Clause (London) has produced a declaration which the group is encouraging all Jews to sign. Copies of this, as well as the briefing document, are available in return for a large SAE. Financial contributions and group and individual affiliations to the campaign are also most welcome. For more information contact JATC (London), c/o LAGER, Room 203 South Bank House, Black Prince Road, London SE1 7SJ.

2. I have recently written an article called "Notes on the Impossibility of Passing" in *A Word in Edgeways: Jewish Feminists Respond*, a collection of articles published by JF Publications in response to Jenny Bourne's recent pieces on Zionism and Identity Politics in *Race and Class and Spare Rib*. It is available for £2.00 (p&p inc) from Box 40, Sisterwrite, 190 Upper Street, London, N1.





JOY IS A FIRE
 THAT IS STRONGER:
 PROUD TO BE JEWISH,
 GLAD TO BE GAY



These pictures developed from an idea by the poet Maria Jastnebska. I see them as mandalas to look at, think and meditate on. There have been some striking similarities in Jewish and gay history. Both groups have been reviled for not living a Christian or heterosexual 'norm' and both have been systematically killed off by the Nazis. Warsaw Jews were obliged to wear armbands with blue stars of David. What was intended as a mark of shame has been turned into a symbol of pride in the Israeli national flag. Similarly, the Gay Pride movement has adopted the pink triangle, originally bestowed on homosexuals by the Nazis. The flames are a reminder of the ovens then, but now are about the fire of life within us. The seven-branched candle sticks are a feature of Jewish ritual. The many-petalled flowers are an allusion to lesbian sexuality. Being lesbian or gay, being Jewish, these are still things that many people bide for fear of being rejected, ridiculed or beaten up. Making these pictures I affirm the value of these aspects of myself, along with all the others that make up the kaleidoscope of my person.

Papercuts by Jolá Scicinska.



CALL LOUD:

the history of Mary Prince



In 1831 Mary Prince, a Caribbean Black woman who was brought to Britain as a slave, published her life history as part of the Abolitionist cause. She tells of the cruelty of slave owners and, in articulating her experience and her desires for freedom, becomes a "spokeswoman" for Black people in Britain and the Caribbean. Joan Grant reviews the reprint of this valuable document.

It is a great pleasure to see a major episode in the history of black women in nineteenth century Britain brought to life and presented to a wider audience by the re-printing of *The History of Mary Prince*. First published in 1831 it is the story of a black slave woman brought to Britain by her cruel owners, Mr and Mrs Wood, from the West Indies, her experiences at their hands and how she ultimately "frees herself" from them by enlisting the help of the Anti-Slavery Society in London. This is a delightful book, that should be widely used in schools etc as well as women's history classes.

A precarious existence

The original history has a useful foreword by Ziggy Alexander, who has long pioneered serious historical work on black women (see her *Wonderful Adventures of Mary Seacole*, Falling Wall Press 1986). She reminds us that black women have been rendered silent and invisible in history, which

makes this *History* all the more significant: since it is to our knowledge the only account by a black woman of her experiences of slavery in the British Caribbean.

There is also a substantial introduction by Moira Ferguson. Her essay is an attempt to set the *History* in its proper context, which in my view is not entirely successful for a number of reasons. Firstly, we should resist her attempt to make Mary Prince a heroine. Certainly she was unique in that she herself initiated her story being published — as an Anti-Slavery tract to assist the Abolitionist cause. But the purpose of feminist history is to throw light on the lives of all women rather than to suggest that some are remarkable¹. She does not develop the point made by Thomas Pringle, Mary Prince's editor, that her care was "by no means a singular one; many of the same kind are daily occurring". Some mention is made of other black women slaves in the Caribbean whose cases came before Parliament, in particular that of Kitty Hylton, but little information is provided

This is a revised version of the article that previously appeared in the re-launch issue of the *Feminist History Newsletter*. I am obliged to those of you who pointed out that the previous version used disablist language.

Notes

1. Both Ziggy Alexander and myself are researching black women in Britain, historically, and the Women's Press have a book on black women at work in Britain, forthcoming.

2. Grace Jones is dealt with in ch.13, *Black Slaves in Britain*, by F Syllon (OUP, 1977).
3. Information about Black Harriet from *Nocturnal Revels*, 1779.

about black women in Britain in the period 1750 to 1830 when there was a substantial black community in Britain. Thus a mistaken impression could be created: that she was one of the few black women to resist slavery. She was not.

Mary Prince should be seen as a member of the black 'community' in late 18th and early 19th century Britain, a community that in many ways was close knit but also under constant attack. The scheme in the 1780s to deport black people to Sierra Leone was simply the high point of this process. Many slaves had deserted their owners and lived a precarious existence always vulnerable to recapture, which might lead to a return to the Caribbean.

Many people in Britain mistakenly believed that slavery in England had been abolished by the case of James Somerset in 1772-73. Mary Prince, her owner Mr Wood, Thomas Pringle her publisher and the Abolitionists, the black community, and the West India Planters and their supporters all held this belief. This was the reason that Thomas Pringle ended his Editor's preface with the statement that:



JUDY STEVENS

It would well become the character of the present Government to introduce a Bill into the Legislature making perpetual that freedom which the slave has acquired by his passage here, and thus to declare, in the most ample sense of the words, (*what we had long fondly believed to be the fact, though it now appears that we have been mistaken,*) THAT NO SLAVE CAN EXIST WITHIN THE SHORES OF GREAT BRITAIN.

In fact the case only established that a slave could not be captured against their will and taken to the Caribbean. It was the judgement in the case of Grace Jones, in 1827 which had clarified the law on this point². Grace had come to Britain in 1822 and lived with a mistress for a year. She had run away from her and presumably was living as a free person when she was kidnapped and returned to her mistress. When her case came to court in England in 1827 the judgement showed that slavery was in fact still legal in England.

Most of the research on the black community in Britain, during this period, has focused on men, but there is information

A tradition of personal struggle

available about women which would show that Mary Prince was inheritor of a tradition of personal struggle and resistance by black women in Britain. Many black women in Britain, but by no means all, were servants. Some were 'housewives', for example Anne Sancho, wife of Ignatius Sancho, theatre critic. Those whose owners had died or deserted them found that the only alternative to starvation was prostitution, such as 'Black Harriet'. She had been taken as a slave from West Africa; having been taken to Jamaica she was sold to a local planter. He had arranged for her to read and write and she became his bookkeeper. He had then brought her to England. When he suddenly died of small pox she found she had no means of supporting herself, so she became a prostitute, but

since her arrival in England, she had given mind to reading, and at her master's recommendation had perused several useful and entertaining books, calculated for women; whereby she had considerably improved her understanding and had attained a degree of politeness scarce to be paralleled in an African female.³

Dido, whose father was Lord Mansfield's

nephew, lived in his house, but probably was not regarded as part of the family as such. He had decided the Somerset case. A visitor had made the acid comment that "Lord Mansfield keeps a black in house which governs him and the whole family"⁴. Dido was only made legally free after Lord Mansfield died. William Brown was a woman who had gone into the Navy by dressing as a man. She had gone to sea after a quarrel with her husband. She had been an able sailor before being discovered, but she still hoped to re-enlist as a volunteer⁵. Cross-dressing was a strategy that some women adopted to increase their personal freedom⁶.

Equally, Moira Ferguson has done extensive research on Mary Prince's background in the Bahamas and Antigua, (which is made more difficult in that Mary Prince was known by a number of other names, but usually, Molly), but in my view she does not adequately situate her in a wider Caribbean context. Drawing more from material on the Caribbean by Barbara Bush⁷ and others⁸ rather than on American material, Mary Prince is seen alongside all the other black women in the Caribbean who deserted plantations (particularly on the larger islands), and who also lived precarious existences in the towns trading food provisions⁹. There were as well women who resisted in other ways: rudeness to overseers, poisoning owners, like Priscilla who was transported to Australia, refusing to work and feigning sickness. As Ziggy Alexander pointed out in the preface, the colonial authorities were of the opinion that it was the women in particular who resisted slavery in these unspectacular ways. She quotes the Governor of Trinidad's comment that it was the black slave women who were "the most prone to give offence".

An indictment of slavery

Mary Prince's *History* speaks very powerfully for itself and is an indictment of the whole system of slavery in the British Caribbean. Mary Prince talks about all aspects of her life: her perception of herself as a slave; cruelty from her owners to herself and other slaves; the feelings of the slaves about their situation and their desire for freedom; about religion; and about sexual

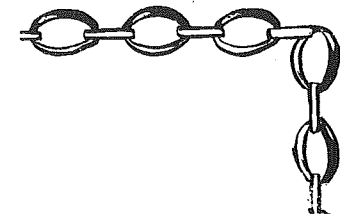
abuse from her owners. This, as Moira Ferguson rightly points out, had to be censored for a mainly 'Christian' readership. Also, the *History* has two examples of interracial solidarity between two women. The first when Mary Prince goes to the assistance of the daughter of her owner, who is being violently abused by her drunken father, the second when Mary Prince is in England. Crippled by rheumatism, she finds the laundry given to her to wash by her owner is more than she can manage and the English wash woman comes and helps her.

Despite her publisher's best efforts to launder Mary Prince's *History* to make it acceptable to a white Christian readership, the *History* was seen as an attack on slavery that could not go unchallenged. Although it was not reviewed in literary magazines, two vitriolic attacks on Mary Prince in particular and the Abolitionists in general appeared. One appeared in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*¹⁰, the other in the *Bermuda Royal Gazette*¹¹.

'Wash tub tales'

Attempts were made to undermine her *History* on two grounds. Firstly that Mary Prince was "immoral" and her story was so unprofitable to Britain that it should not be challenged. The article in the *Bermuda Royal Gazette* is an attempt to show that Mary Prince's owners were pillars of society who never raised a hand against their slaves, while she was mocked as "a prostitute", in whom her publisher Thomas Pringle "sees nothing but purity . . . because she knew when to utter the name of the Deity, to turn up the whites of her eyes and make a perfect mockery of religion".

In the *Blackwood's* article the author James M'Queen also ridicules her as a "tool" of the Abolitionists, with her "wash tub tales". He also claimed to have fourteen witnesses who had given evidence that Mary Prince's *History*, which he called her "washing tub tales", was untrue. These ranged from her owner's cronies in the Caribbean, such as doctors to black women and other women, some of whom were slaves, others free: one of whom, Martha Wilcox, claimed that a woman



4. Information about Dido is to be found in "Dido Elizabeth Belle", by G Adams, in *Camden History Journal*, No.11, 1984.

5. I am grateful to Julie Wheelwright for sources about William Brown.

6. Article in *Trouble and Strife* 6, Summer 1985, about "Women who Dressed as Men" By Lynne Freidle.

7. "Defiance or Submission: The Role of the Slave woman in Slave Resistance in the British Caribbean", *Immigrants and Minorities* vol.1 no.1 March 1982.

"White Ladies, Coloured favourites and Black wenches: Some considerations on sex, race and class factors in social relations in the British Caribbean"; "The Family Tree is not Cut; Women and Cultural resistance in slave family life in the British Caribbean" in Okihiro, G (ed)

In Resistance: Studies in African, Caribbean and Afro-American history, (Massachusetts University Press 1986); "Towards Emancipation: Slave women and resistance to coercive labour regimes in the British West Indian Colonies 1790-1833, in Richardson, D (ed) *Abolition and its Aftermath*, (Frank Cass 1985).

8. Gutzmore, C, *Caribbean Women: Labour and Resistance*, London (1986); Mathurin, L, *The Rebel Woman in the British West Indies during Slavery*, Kingston (1975); *Slaves and Missionaries*, by Mary Turner (1982).

9. An article by Lorna Simmonds published while this book would have been in print draws out this point. See *Jamaica Journal*, Feb/Apr 1987, p31-38.

10. *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Nov 1831. J M'Queen, "The Colonial Empire of Great Britain".

11. *Bermuda Royal Gazette*: "The Anti-Slavery Society and the West Indian Colonists", 22 Nov 1831.

12. Pringle v Cadell: *The Times*, 21 Feb 1833.
 13. Wood v Pringle: *The Times*, 1 Mar 1833.

Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince* (Pandora Press 1987).

named Phibba had made a complaint that Mary Prince had stolen her husband; another, Grace White, that she had "threatened to kill her more than once or twice". And a number of 'free coloured' women, both of whom stated that she was an immoral woman. The picture that these women paint is of a very ordinary black woman who resented the more privileged position of the mixed race (coloured) community and who got involved in disputes with other slaves about white men. It is interesting also that it is alleged in both articles that Mary Prince's husband added his voice to those of her detractors.

But M'Queen's article goes further. Firstly he argues that stories such as hers have poisoned the British public and the Government against the planters so that they believe that all the planters were cruel and wicked; and that the Government legislated on the basis that "the slave was everything and the master nothing". Worse, still, by so doing the Government risked the loss of the British Empire which he claimed brought £7 million pounds annually into the Government's coffers.

Allegations of immorality

Throughout the controversy surrounding Mary Prince her opponents sought to discredit her *History* by claiming that she was "immoral". Thomas Pringle had attempted to rebut these allegations by asking not only why her owners, Mr and Mrs Wood could allow her charge of their children, but did not sell her, even though they had sold five other slaves. A letter from a solicitor, Joseph Phillips, also an Abolitionist was printed with her *History*, to further deflect such accusations. He wrote that

The tale of the slave Molly's immoralities, be assured, was not intended so much for Antigua so much as for Stoke Newington, Peckham and Aldermanbury.

M'Queen's answer was that

The ignorance, moreover, in which Mr and Mrs Wood lived with regard to Mary's real character, no doubt arose from the fact that they did not, like Pringle and his associates, employ their time poking their noses into every scene of black filth, debauchery and uncleanness.

Two court cases resulted. In the first Thomas Pringle sued Thomas Cadell, the publisher of

*Blackwood's Magazine*¹². In the second, Mary Prince's owner, Mr Wood, sued Thomas Pringle¹³. Mary Prince was present in court to give a statement on both occasions, not one as Moira Ferguson states. Of greater interest still, the witnesses in the Wood v Pringle case included Emma Hill, the laundry woman who helped Mary Prince. She was in court to give evidence on her behalf, but Mary Prince's sister-in-law, Sarah Brown, was as well. How this came about is a mystery. In the course of the two court cases all the allegations about her alleged immorality came out. Quite simply she had lived with a white captain for seven years. In Joseph Phillips' view

such connexions are so common, I might almost say universal, in our slave colonies that except by the missionaries and a few serious persons, they are considered if faults at all, so very venial as scarcely to deserve the name of immorality.

Also, she had found another woman in bed with the said captain and had assaulted her. This woman had taken Mary Prince before the Magistrates where the case was thrown out. She had lived with another man who had promised to free her and had left him when he failed to keep his word. She left Captain Abbott after he had killed a man on Mr Wood's ship.

Moira Ferguson has done extensive research on Mary Prince, but has not been able to find any trace of her after the court cases and her own petition was presented to Parliament. We can only guess at what may have become of her. However, her *History* has ensured that her contribution to black women's struggle for freedom is recorded. She had related it:

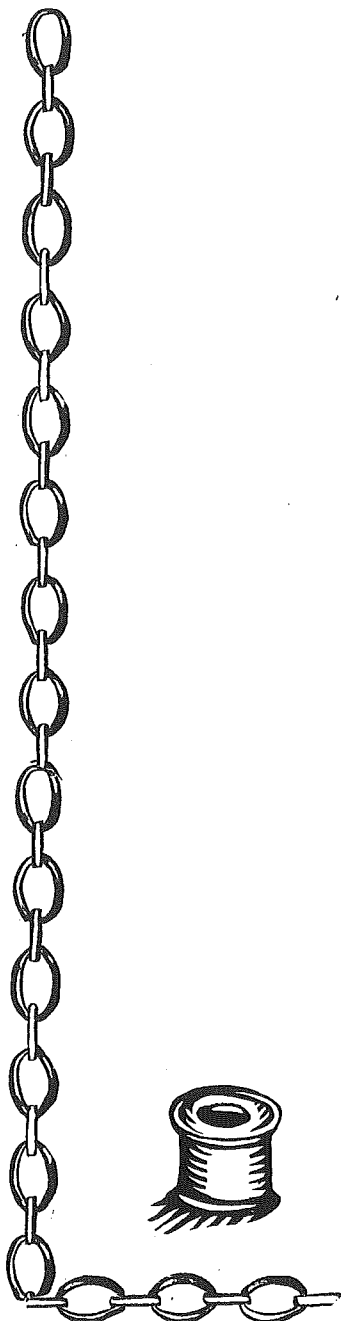
to let English people know the truth; and I hope they will never leave off to pray God, and call loud to the great king of England, till all the poor blacks be given free, and slavery done up for ever more.

Indeed she had become a 'spokeswoman' for black people in Britain and the Caribbean. Mary Prince's *History* is an extremely important document for those of us interested not only in black women's history, but a feminist history that includes women from different communities. I am delighted that it has been re-published and like Ziggy Alexander I look forward to the lives of more black women in the period being uncovered. □

When the Revolution came...



PRC LONDON





Since 1986 when Cory Aquino came to power in the Philippines, hopes of radical change have been disappointed. Women are at the forefront of an ever-deepening crisis. In this interview Cath Jackson asks Liza Maza of the Filipino women's coalition, Gabriela, what progress has been made and what are the hopes for the future.

CJ: *When was Gabriela formed and what does it represent?*

LM: Gabriela was formed in 1984, right after Benigno Aquino's assassination. On October 28th 1983 there was a massive all-women protest and about 10,000 women joined in a mass action in Manila. It was very historical because that was the first time during the time of Marcos that such a women's demonstration was held. It was an expression of women's collective protest against the assassination and against the prevailing political repression and economic crisis during the time of Marcos.

CJ: *Who organised it? Who co-ordinated all the women coming together?*

LM: There were different women's organisations then, like The Concerned Women of the Philippines, SAMAKANA, which is a multi-sectoral organisation of women workers, some individual women, some women's institutions like the Centre for Women's Resources and some other women's groups. So they agreed to co-ordinate this mass demonstration.

Then after that they agreed to hold a general assembly together, to do networking and co-ordinate activities. So in March 1984 they had this general assembly and that was when Gabriela was born.

Gabriela actually means General Assembly Binding Women for Reforms, Integrity, Equality, Leadership and Action, which is a very long meaning but it is also the name of Gabriela Silang. She is a heroine of the Philippine revolution against Spain. She led an army — when her husband died she took over the army that her husband was leading then — and she led several revolts against the Spaniards. That was early 18th century. She was the type of woman who transcended her traditional role. So the name Gabriela has a militant tradition to it.

I think the main line that drew all these women together during that time was that they wanted to get rid of Marcos. At the same time they were starting to see that

women's rights and welfare should be promoted. But it was mainly very strongly anti-Marcos and they were joining the general struggle against Marcos. Gabriela played a key role in that sense and was projected nationally as an all-women's coalition in the anti-Marcos struggle. It is only recently that Gabriela has started to look at women's issues, to examine women's position, in particular.

CJ: *So Gabriela was at the forefront of the EDSA Revolution (the revolution that swept Marcos from power)?*

LM: Actually we were — we participated in the EDSA Revolution. We were elated when Marcos was ousted and also when Cory Aquino took over we showed our support for her, not only because she ousted Marcos — because she was there to represent the collective sentiment of the people — but also because she is a woman.

And after that we continued to project a women's coalition.

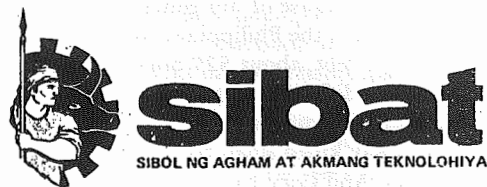
CJ: *Were you allied to any other movement or were you a distinct movement of your own?*

LM: Organisationally we joined the bigger coalition, the Bayan or 'People' in English. That was late in 1987 or 1988 that we joined Bayan. Bayan represents the big nationalist organisations like the May First Movement — that is the Federation of Workers — and the Federation of Peasants and some other groups. If you look at the political forces in the Philippines, you would put our organisation in the progressive movement. You can even put it in the Left, the progressive Left. But it's very hard to label because there are many different groups involved in Gabriela and we are women coming from all parts and a lot of different organisations.

CJ: *You say you were very elated when Cory Aquino came to power. Have things improved since then?*

LM: No. You know, she promised so many things when she was campaigning. She signed this manifesto saying that the US bases should be removed after 1991 when the treaty expires. She also promised that she would implement the general land reform programme, that she would increase the wages of workers, would improve people's standard of living, would not demolish the squatter houses until there were alternatives for them — things like this. And she would respect human rights. She said these things but more than two years after, we think that she has not fulfilled these promises that she made during her campaign.

For example, the question of land reform. There are women who have been agitating for a general land reform programme as much as the other democratic sectors of our society. But what Cory Aquino did is she just threw the responsibility to Congress and you know who the members of Congress are — these are the landlords, the rich people, the elite. They are still there. So how can you expect anything from that? So the Land Reform Bill, which was passed in May this year, is very much watered down.



CJ: *How does that affect women? Do women ever own land?*

LM: It is not stated in law that women cannot own land. But in practice, women cannot own land because, for example, usually when the husband dies the land or the tenancy right is passed on to the brother or to the son or to other male relatives. So it is very hard for women to own land and to have such economic rights. Also in the agricultural sector women are considered as unpaid family workers. When a man negotiates with a landlord, for example, for rent and crop-sharing, he negotiates his own wages but in order to meet the quota and to meet a viable production level he has to

employ his wife and all the other able-bodied members of the family, the children. You see women in the fields side by side with men, but they are not considered as workers. And if ever they are paid in the agricultural sector, for every peso paid to a man, a woman only gets 28 centavos. So there is great discrepancy.

CJ: *Do you think land reform would help that?*

LM: We believe that a genuine land reform programme would distribute wealth. It should democratise wealth based on equal sharing between men and women and there would be a free distribution of land to the poor.

But at the same time as being a women's organisation enhancing the women's cause, we also examine the relationships within society, within the family which is very much within society. In the Philippines we have very feudal relations between men and women, in the family. So in our education work we try to explain this to the peasant women. That side by side with democratisation of land the democratisation should go on to our very own personal selves, within our family; we also should democratise man/woman relationships.

CJ: *So teaching, educating women about their personal rights as women, is very important to Gabriela?*

LM: Yes, showing them why land reform is important and what, as women, they should expect from land reform; how this could be translated in their own personal lives, how this could be a step forward. We don't say that if you have land then you are already liberated. There has to be a transformation in your own personal life, in your own family.

CJ: *So you are going out to other parts of the Philippines to talk to women in your educational programme?*

LM: We work like this. Since Gabriela is a coalition we have a peasant women's organisation under us. We have *Amiban* — it means a certain kind of wind in English — and this is the federation of peasant women. They do work among the peasant women and Gabriela co-ordinates this work. For example, if the peasant women have issues that they want other sectors to take on, Gabriela co-ordinates it on a coalition level.



CJ: *How do you bring pressure on the government over these issues? Do you lobby the government?*

LM: We do lobby work. We are a member of another bigger coalition — there are so many coalitions in the Philippines! — actually not Gabriela as Gabriela, but *Amiban*, which is affiliated with us, is also affiliated to this Congress for People's Agrarian Reform. It is a bigger coalition

**STOP
FOREIGN LOANS
THAT FUEL
KILLER PLANTS
WOMB**



PRC LONDON

composed of the progressive left-of-centre organisations that believe in land reform. We assist *Amiban* in these efforts. If they require mobilisations we join these mobilisations and we do our own education among the other sectors, other workers; they should also know these issues.

So there is this lobby work being done, and we do campaigning and mobilisation work, education and we produce publications on the issues.

Unfortunately, we doubt that the President listens. This was very clearly shown last July 1987 when these farmers marched to Malacanan Palace (the Presidential palace) and they were answered by bullets. And Malacanan said Cory Aquino cannot meet them because she has other appointments. There were thousands of farmers there waiting outside, men and women. There was one woman killed during that massacre. And then of course she passed on the burden of the land reform to the Congress and finally this Bill was passed that was very much watered down.

CJ: *What about employment and industry? What's it like for women working in industry?*

LM: Actually unemployment has been on the increase, because of our general economic problems in the Philippines. We have a large foreign debt, about \$29 billion. There are many conditions attached to the paying of the loan, like import-liberalisation, which has practically killed small companies in the Philippines. And Cory has implemented this import liberalisation and about 1200-plus items have been liberalised. This is an INF conditionality, so many small firms have closed and this has caused unemployment and of course in these cases it is always women who are being displaced. More and more now there are many women who are being pushed to the informal sector; doing home-work and odd jobs like washing clothes for others; working as domestic helpers, street-selling all sorts of things like, for example, barbecued chicken feet, chicken heads, chicken intestines, which are sold very cheaply, say 1.50, two pesos. Things that were not in our streets before. So many women are working so hard, cooking all of these things, and ironically still they are in poverty because of the very high prices.

CJ: *Is there any protection for women in employment?*

LM: When you have this economic crash, the conditions in the factories become more and more oppressive. For example, because the Philippines' industry is mainly geared for export, the work in the factory depends very much on what is the demand outside. So when there is a great demand for a product, arbitrarily the company increases the workers' quotas. They limit the times women can go to the Comfort Room a day, and women have to use their break times to meet this high quota. Many of the factories are small and usually they don't pay the minimum wage, 63 pesos. A small company employing 20–30 workers would not be easy to monitor, so they would be paying a very, very low amount and they would not hire regular workers but take them on a piece-rate basis.

CJ: *And if women don't want to work the over-time they lose their job because there's plenty more women workers where they come from?*

LM: That's right. We have received reports from the Women Workers' Movement, which is affiliated to Gabriela, that there are increasing cases of sexual harassment among women and because unemployment is so widespread, women submit to this sexual harassment. This has been happening particularly since the 1980s.

CJ: *So in some ways things have got worse since Marcos went because poverty has become more widespread?*

LM: It was going that way anyway. The crisis was very much apparent in the early 1980s. That was one reason why we were very sure already that Marcos' government would be under soon. But Cory Aquino was not able to stop the economy from falling down and also she has continued the economic policies that Marcos implemented, like this debt-driven growth economic policy when you borrow and you rely on foreign investment to make your economy grow.

CJ: *What is Gabriela doing about the situation of women workers?*

LM: We are into many things, like higher wages for women workers, maternity and social benefits, play areas in the factories, security of employment. Last May 1st we

launched a maternity leave campaign because maternity leave in the Philippines is only one and a half months. We also want non-discrimination among married women.

CJ: *How does the working men's movement respond to those demands?*

LM: They have been very positive. There have been very positive actions on the part of the KMU (the working men's movement). Recently they have just set up women's committees in their own federations and they have included the demands for women's maternity leave in their demands to employers, as well as equal pay and non-discrimination.

CJ: *So they are actually quite supportive?*

LM: Yes, after much work! Along the way, of course, we encountered problems like 'Why should we be doing that? Do you think it's necessary?', things like that.



CJ: *Do they say there is no need for a specific women's clause in legislation around employment?*

LM: Actually this is funny you know, because in one factory there was this case that happened in 84/85. There was one factory that was about 80 per cent women, but those in the union were all men. So the women were asking for maternity leave but the union said it would not be included in the CBA, the Collective Bargaining Agreement, because that's a women's issue — you just do it on your own. So the women were very angry. But after so much discussion and so much struggle the men realised they had made a very big mistake in not recognising the women's rights.

CJ: *Does Gabriela speak to women working in factories in the same way as you speak to women outside on the farmland?*

LM: It's the KMK, the women workers' movement, that is doing the actual work.

CJ: *Is Gabriela also tackling prostitution and sex tourism? I imagine this has got worse with the economy too.*

LM: Actually it really became worse when Marcos encouraged the promotion of tourism in the late '70s. That was also the time when the Philippine government also wanted very much to earn dollars to pay for our foreign debt, which was increasing during that time. So the Philippines was promoted as a place where you can have cheap girls. Prostitution is illegal in the Philippines so what the government did during Marcos' time was it created some form of legality to it by calling the prostitution industry part of the tourism industry and by calling the prostitutes 'hospitality girls'. They even conducted skills training for these hospitality girls, like language courses, social graces!

CJ: *Was the government funding brothels as hospitality centres?*

LM: Nothing is openly said, but there are many rumours going around that some of the Marcos cronies, his relatives and friends, were actually in collusion with the owners of brothels and receiving money from them.

Of course, migration was also encouraged, export of labour, such that by 1979 the remittances coming from these labourers, those who went abroad, became the second highest dollar earner in the Philippines, surpassing the dollars we earned from exporting coconut, the traditional export crops.



WSRC
WOMEN STUDIES and RESOURCE CENTER

Workers were going to England, to the US, to the Middle East as contract workers. And in the late 70s, early 80s, women were getting into it. Many came to England. There is a trend that women work as domestic helpers, as entertainers, some become victims of trafficking, and as mail order brides, which has been on the increase in recent years. This is increasing in Australia, Norway, in Britain, also in Germany.

CJ: *Women do it because they hope it will bring them a better standard of living?*

LM: That's right. But they don't even know what will happen to them. They just have this hope that they will be able to

send back money for their families. That is one of the main reasons, to try to get money for their families. And of course also in the Philippines the advancement of women is limited, there are limited opportunities for women in terms of careers, jobs. There are also cases among women who go abroad to marry — they have had bad relations, a sad experience with their boyfriend, and in a culture that still puts emphasis on virginity and things like this, they don't think they have a chance any more to marry and have a family. So they marry western men who would be more open to these things.

CJ: *Do families reject women who are no longer virgins?*

LM: It is still a rule, especially in the rural areas, that women should be virgins when they marry.

CJ: *Do the women hope to go back?*

LM: I think especially the workers, their initial plan is to just work for three to five years, for example, and then save all the money they can, invest in the Philippines, buy a house, put up a business. These are the usual dreams of people who work abroad.

CJ: *How many Filipino women are working abroad?*

LM: In Hong Kong, for example, there are about twenty or thirty thousand women, mainly working as domestic helpers. And when Cory visited Hong Kong late last year she praised them; she spoke in a public meeting to them saying 'You are the heroes of the Philippines because you are contributing so much for our economy' and things like this! Oh my God!

CJ: *An incredible amount of sexual harassment goes with those kind of jobs, doesn't it?*

LM: Yes, that's right. There was a case of a woman working in Kuwait as a domestic helper and she became pregnant and she was about to be jailed because illegitimate children are not allowed under their social law there. So this Filipina is about to be put into jail and we heard about it so we held a picket at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. So there was a lot of coverage and a lot of reports about sexual harassment, sexual abuse — her employer was the father

of the baby — and a lot of reports in our papers about similar cases.

So there was a lot of discussion. And what Cory did is she had this law temporarily banning Filipinas to work abroad as domestics. As a stop-gap in response to this issue. That was early this year. But after that she lifted the restriction in most of the countries where the ban was imposed and said 'Now it's okay because we have reached an agreement with these countries that they would promote the rights and welfare of the domestics'. But actually when we examined the so-called willingness of these governments to protect the domestics, we learned these were just promises. They were not written down, they weren't going to help us. The restriction was for about three months only, because she immediately lifted it. And actually there was a lot of protest from the migrant workers who said that this was not the real solution to this problem, to ban the working abroad. The women in Hong Kong, where there are a lot of domestics and they are very organised — they have an organisation for migrant workers in Hong Kong — they immediately said this was unfair and for the security of their jobs it was very bad.

CJ: *What is Gabriela's line on that?*

LM: Our position is that the government should exert more initiative in their promotion and protection of the rights and welfare of the Filipinas abroad. And it should initiate bilateral agreements with the different countries in order to protect migrant workers. But not at the expense of the workers. Because when they make laws, it is always at the expense of the migrants.

And also we have to set up a migrant programme in Gabriela. We just started it in January and we plan to produce a handbook for Filipinas who would like to go abroad, to give useful information on what to expect, what are the migrant laws there, who are the groups to approach when you have problems, other non-governmental agencies you can approach aside from the embassy.

CJ: *Would you say that the Philippines Government is in fact selling women for dollars, because of the foreign currency the migrant workers send home?*

LM: Yes. The problem was on the increase in Marcos' time, but the present government has not done anything substantial to stop it. And in that way, by not openly condemning it, it is going along with it.

It is the same in the Philippines too. In May there was a series of raids conducted in Ermita, the Manila red light district, and they arrested the prostitutes for sexually transmitted diseases. They, the police, said they wanted to clean up Ermita. You could see on the television and in newspapers, these women photographed in bikinis when they were being arrested. This is very dehumanising to these women and you can see the attitude of the officials, when the women are prosecuted, the officials can do anything with them.



SAMIN
SISTERS' ASSOCIATION IN MINDANAO

CJ: *What motivated this sudden clean up?*

LM: They were saying they were cleaning it up, but we heard news that a big business man wanted to take over the whole of the Ermita district.

CJ: *You suspect he wanted to clear out all the small operators and take it over and be bribed the police to do it?*

LM: Yes, that's right. And the problem with these raids is that the owners of the bars and the pimps and the local officials who benefitted from the prostitution industry were not jailed and the women are the ones who are victimised in the process.

And then later on, in the newspapers, it was said that Cory Aquino is favouring these raids. She had to issue a statement finally, because it was a very hot issue.

CJ: *The other issue with prostitution is the American bases.*

LM: Yes. There are about three hundred to five hundred thousand prostitutes in these two areas alone, in Ermita and Olongapo (one of the two US bases). Some are local women, some came all the way from the Visayas and Mindanao to work at the bases.

But this is again an issue that is very hard in the Philippines because the US/Philippines military bases agreement is supposed to expire in 1991 and it's now an ongoing review and renegotiation. Earlier Cory Aquino said she would remove these bases and then afterwards, when she was in power, she said 'I will keep my options open'!

CJ: *Why do you think she has changed her stand?*

LM: There are many many positions, like 'Why don't we negotiate for higher rent', you know, and use this rent for production, things on those lines. She is very ambivalent about the whole thing, saying 'Regarding the bases my position would be, I am keeping all my options open'.



CJ: *What are conditions like in the town around Olongapo?*

LM: It is one big red light district. And especially now a big issue that has been brought up is the case of AIDS. Officially it is estimated that there are about 51 cases of AIDS, 51 AIDS victims in the Philippines, and 46 of these are prostitutes working in the base area. So this is really a big problem and of course it's uncontrollable — you wouldn't know how many are affected and of course the prostitutes would not want to report this because it will cost them their jobs.

CJ: *They're getting AIDS from the American GIs?*

LM: Where else? Their customers are the American GIs and actually the Americans are very nervous of this issue. They say 'We can get away with this nuclear threat issue, with this US intervention issue', but it is hard to make counter arguments against the AIDS issue which is why they are so nervous.

CJ: *You think that if the Philippines government were to say the Americans were bringing AIDS into the country, it would be a more powerful argument against them than all the other issues?*

LM: I think it will be a popular issue if they ever bring it up. Gabriela is highlighting this in our campaign.

The prostitutes usually work in the bars. There are very few street walkers. Then they have these 'bar fines'. When a client takes out a prostitute they have to pay a certain bar fine and most of the time the bar fines are bigger than what the prostitutes get, you know.

And of course you have cases of sexual violence. Recently there was a case of a 12-year old child prostitute who died because a vibrator was left in her vagina and it was rotten already and she had an infection and she died from that. There is very little protection from the pimps and bar owners.

Child prostitution is also on the increase, girls and boys aged ten and eight. These are run-away children and children of prostitutes. It becomes the family trade, you know.

CJ: *Gabriela would like to see an end to the prostitution? Because again this is these women's livelihood.*

LM: In our organisation we have these drop-in centres, in Ermita and Olongapo. The drop-in centre is just a place where prostitutes can go. If they have problems, want to get away from it all, they can just go there. They get some counselling. I think in Olongapo they have organised some knitting, handicrafts, something that will provide them with skills. But I don't think they're very hard on it, because it's not so profitable as prostitution — it's perhaps only useful to those girls that really want to give up prostitution. But the centres also do health education work, how to take more care of yourself and also rights, what are your legal rights.

CJ: *Is the line that it's better to help the women cope with their jobs than to say they must not do it?*

LM: Yes, we try to analyse. For example, our education work among the prostitutes is more trying to make them understand why these things are happening to them. Because many of the prostitutes did not go there because they wanted to go, but because they are driven to it by poverty or some unhappy personal experiences. So what we want to do is to make them understand the situation and help them retain

some self-respect, self-confidence, and help them see what they really want. But of course we cannot offer alternatives. It is impossible. When it comes to income-generating alternatives, we don't think we offer anything because we are up against so much. Economically we cannot give them anything.

CJ: *Do prostitutes resent women from Gabriela coming to talk to them? Do they think you are interfering?*

LM: No, actually they welcome it very much. Our approach is not a moralistic one. We approach it at the level of learning from each other, more on what they think they should do as women in this situation.

CJ: *And the drop-in centres have health clinics?*

LM: At the drop-in centre in Ermita they plan to have regular health clinics for women, but I don't know if they have started already. These efforts are very new for us!

CJ: *What is the general attitude among Filipino people towards prostitution?*

LM: Actually to a certain extent it is accepted. For example, I'm a wife, but it is general knowledge that my husband could have patronised the brothels. I would accept that. This is general thinking, it's alright for men.

CJ: *Is there not anger that so many Filipino women are being exploited in this way, or are prostitutes seen as something very different from 'decent women'?*

LM: There is a lot of moralism about it. And there are a lot of women's groups and other groups who say they are working on this issue but have this moralistic framework. They are often religious groups. Catholicism is very ingrained, about 80 per cent of the population are Catholic. And Gabriela organises campaigns. For example, in Olongapo there is this female boxing. The women put on a show when they do boxing and you are forced to do it, even if you are not fit to do it, or you will be sacked. And you really have to hit each other because if you don't, the management will scold you. And you are dripping with blood and you have bruises. So the Olongapo group asked for support in a picket of this bar where they have this boxing, so we went to

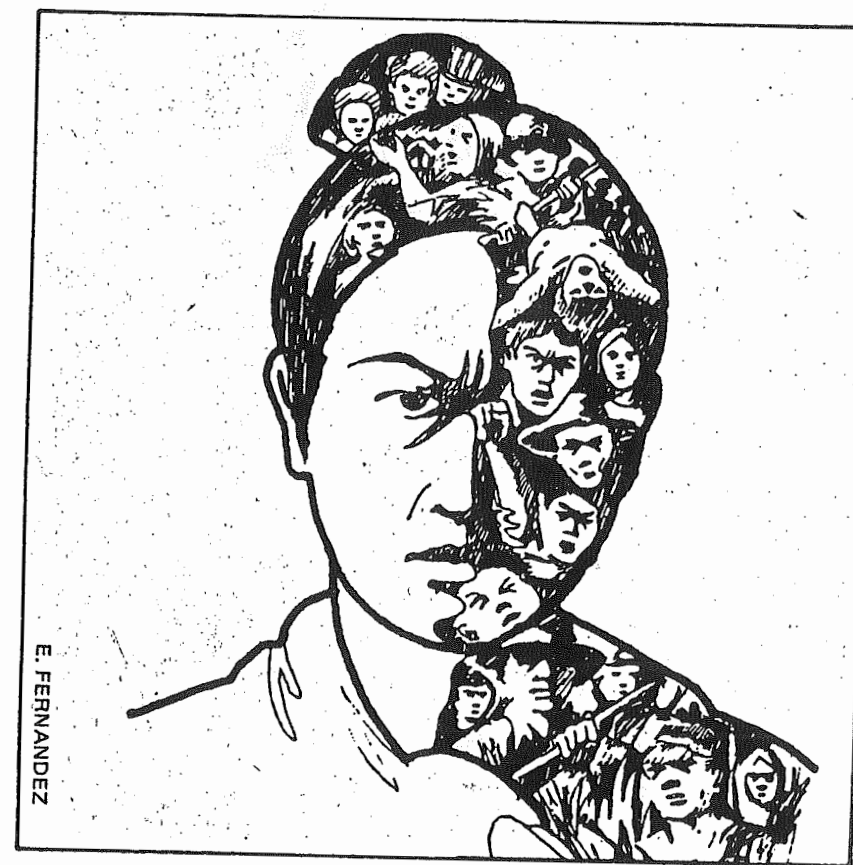
support them.

CJ: *Did this stop it?*

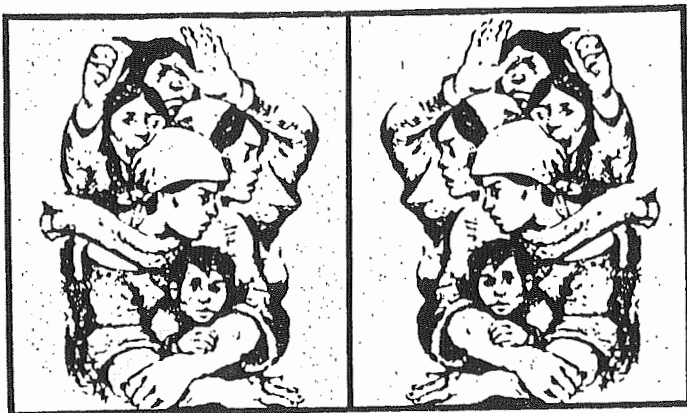
LM: There is still boxing but at least the issue was projected and it was in the papers and there was concern.

CJ: *Are women respected in general?*

LM: They say that women are respected, that women are this and that. Perhaps if you compare it with other Asian countries who have been influenced by traditional religion like Buddhism or the Muslim religion, where women would not be allowed to walk side by side with men. We don't have the same oppression in the Philippines because the Philippines, in the cities, is very much westernised, Americanised. It is even more Americanised than London. So you have a situation where there is a liberal attitude about women in the sense that you can have women for sex and prostitution is okay, but also women are educated and women can work.



But in the remote areas, the agricultural areas, there is still this belief that women should just be there, should always be subservient to the husband, to the men. They are not allowed to join men in talks, they are in the kitchen doing the housework. There is still a lot of oppression, economically and socially. For example, in the rural areas if you only have so much money for education you would send the boys to school and not the women because the women will marry anyway. Things like this are still prevailing. And there are other beliefs; women who are menstruating cannot go to the fields to plant rice because they are supposed to be dirty.



CJ: *How is Gabriela funded?*

LM: We get money from different sources, grants from charities, not from the government. We have membership dues but these are very, very small. We have donations from Filipinas who sympathise with us.

Of course the biggest donations are the individual donations of time that are offered. For example, we who are working full-time for Gabriela receive just a certain amount of allowance but a lot of it really is the time we devote freely for the organisation. We don't even have an allowance for clothing, just transportation and food, for very basic things.

CJ: *How many women work full-time for Gabriela?*

LM: In the national office it is less than ten. But since Gabriela is a coalition also, for example the peasant women's federation would have its own funding and two or three staff who go round the regions to do

liaison work. And then organisations like the drop-in centre are responsible for their own funding and we just have active exchange of information, how we can help each other, how we can co-ordinate our efforts if there are campaigns.

The national workers are all based in one office. We have this National Secretariat, as we call it, that does the day-to-day work, all the communication. And then in our office there is one desk with three people alternating on it! In our one room we have the peasant women's federation, *Amiban*, the *Samakana* urban poor women's organisation and the national officer for Gabriela.

CJ: *You are the International Relations Officer for Gabriela and you are over here on an international tour of Europe. What are you hoping to achieve?*

LM: One of my objectives is to bring to the international community, especially the women, the real situation of the Philippines, the real situation of the Filipino women after the downfall of Marcos, during Cory Aquino's time. Because the international community is very lax about the Philippines now, especially the women's groups. They think that everything's okay because there is a woman president in the Philippines. They think that women's demands will be taken care of. So one objective is to tell what is the real situation in the Philippines and also to get support for Gabriela's continuing struggle to achieve our reforms and to change the condition of the women and to bring about women's empowerment which is based on the grass-roots women, not the empowerment of Cory Aquino.

I have been meeting with individual women and different women's organisations and we are trying to work out ways of supporting each other and co-ordinating our efforts. And so far it has been very positive and I was able to talk with groups on how we could exchange and support and have co-ordinated actions. □

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SO MUCH TO SAY

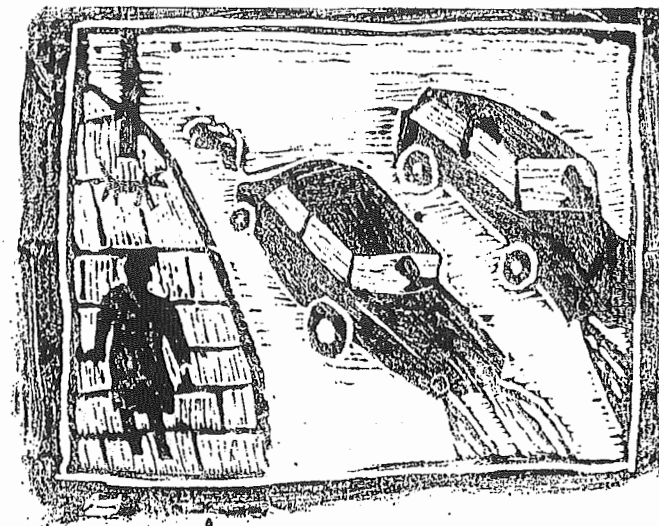
Nickie Roberts reviews two recent books on prostitution and sex work. She challenges the way women sex workers are also exploited in print and welcomes the development of a literature written by the women themselves.

*Lyn, A Story of Prostitution, by June Levine and Lyn Madden (sic)*¹

I cringed when I started reading *Lyn*. It seems there is no respite. In the end I couldn't manage it; it made me so mad. Why is a journalist telling another woman's story in the first place? At a time when sex workers have started speaking up for ourselves, in the grand old tradition of women's liberation, why has the Women's Press seen fit to publish yet another straight's version of a prostitute woman's life? It's a colossal step backwards. Imagine the song and dance if a lesbian's story were to be mediated through a heterosexual journalist — why is this still considered acceptable in the case of a whore?

Maybe it has something to do with the message this book rams down our throats, 'Lyn the degraded victim'. That's what the press cuttings scream. Oh yes, how they love that, everybody can have a good safe thrilling wallow in this poor female victim's degradation. And I do mean *safe*, because this bloody book challenges *nothing*, all it does is wallow, and invite its readers to wallow.

Writer Levine *judges* Lyn from the outset, in spite of her assertion in the pre-



LIZ NAVLOR

face that 'in sisterhood' Lyn and she had 'bridged the gap created by patriarchal class structure'. Parading her boring-as-a-yawn middle class prejudices, Levine assures us that she has 'never seen Lyn drink, swear or do anything more "unladylike" than smoke . . .'. It's not clear whom the writer is specifically addressing at this point, the Women's Institute, perhaps? Never mind that there's plenty to swear about in this world.

We're still in the preface when Levine gives her own Game away. After reading *Lyn's own account* of her life, Levine tells us she was 'devastated and infuriated' by what Lyn had written. 'And,' she muses, 'I was impressed by the book's potential value as a sociological statement'. And there it is, in a nutshell: to middle class careerists, any working class experience is valid not in its own right but as a juicy piece of tittle-tattle sociology, something the 'experts' can play about with in order to invent their pet studies and little statistics. Something they can turn into a weapon, to be used against working class people in order to keep us from taking any control over our own lives. If that sounds bitter, well, that's what gutter-level consciousness raising does for you.

I saw a clip of Lyn on TV last night, coming out with the therapists' shit: 'The money becomes like a drug, you get hooked on the money . . .'. I've yet to hear a middle class female high-flyer confess in front of millions to being 'hooked' on her fat salary — but then working class women are only 'good' when we're poor, aren't we?

I wish Lyn herself well and I hope she writes her own book one day soon, and I hope she finds her own strong voice, the one the therapists and do-gooders have buried beneath their heap of superior wisdom. Maybe by that time the Women's Press will have raised *their* consciousness enough to categorise her story as something other than 'criminology'.

*Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry*²

This was like coming home, to me, after the other effort. The title says it: in this book are the *real* experts (just like in mine, the one you all fucking ignored). * There is no mediator, making her living out of turning people into the stereotypes and caricatures that are so beloved of straight society. The voices here are individual, diverse, articulate and *global*. That's crucially important now, the globalisation of these issues — after all, the more of us that speak up, the more likely it is our message will get heard (whether we get *listened* to is another

matter). Already the self-organisation of sex workers world-wide (*always* under conditions of extreme oppression from outside) has culminated in what I consider to be the most exciting development so far — the *International Committee for Prostitutes' Rights World Charter and World Whores' Congress Statement*, reproduced in full at the end of the book. Everybody who has an opinion on sex workers (ie the entire planet) should read this several times over. There's no farting on about degradation and money-as-a-drug here, just achingly simple *human rights* demands, very concise and to the point. It's what's known as *self-determination*, I believe . . .

Of the personal stories, poems, essays and anecdotes I have lots of 'favourites' I'll just mention a few here. Sunny Carter's account of her decision to work as a prostitute to provide her terminally ill child with 'as full a life as I could' was compassionate, funny, moving, strong, a very human story:

My earnings enabled us to travel, gave him an opportunity to see more than would have otherwise been possible. By the time my son was seven, he had flown in an airplane more than many people do in a lifetime. We lived on an island in the US Virgin Islands for several years, where he learned to snorkel the incredible coral reef, seeing the splendour of the underwater world. He collected hundreds of hermit crabs and built them an intricate home in an aquarium which he called Crab Condo . . . I provided as full a life for my son as I could, and money was the key. Prostitution provided that money and, even more importantly, it gave me the spare time I wouldn't have had with any nine-to-five 'real' job . . .

Women writing about *their* priorities, *their* lives. Not clichés, explanations or justifications, excuses — all the usual demands foisted on them by hypocritical, leering, poncing straight society.

I liked Jean Johnston's poem *Speaking in Tongues*:

I am an alien
to the men a pussy/ a cunt/ a bitch
a cocksucker
to the women a whore with lumps of semen
still sticking to my tongue
speaking another language
I am
learning to communicate

(I sometimes feel that all sex workers must be brilliant writers, if only because we have



so much to say that is powerful and challenging, so many stories to tell other women.)

Among the academicish stuff (not too much of that in this book, thankfully) Gail Pheterson's essay, 'The Social Consequences of Unchastity' stands out for me. There was *some* academic feminist language to plough through, which meant I had to read it a few times, but that's not such a bad thing. I think the feminists who ask people like me 'Well, what are we supposed to do to help?' could learn much from Pheterson's piece. I read in the contributors' notes that Pheterson, professor of Women's Studies and Psychology in the Netherlands, is a co-founder of the ITCPR (International Committee for Prostitutes' Rights) and as such is 'especially committed to de-isolating, de-stigmatising, and decriminalising whore-identified women.' That's a good start . . . I was especially moved by her analogy between Jewish oppression and prostitution oppression:

Like Jews, prostitutes are unchaste both according to conservative ideologies (for their sexual license) and according to radical ideologies (for their transactions with sexist and capitalist men). Both Jews and prostitutes are denigrated and idealised and blamed for basic social problems. Furthermore, the reality of their persecution and daily abuse is frequently doubted or denied. Both Jews and whores are

stigmatised for their past experiences, their non-conforming intelligence, their assumed quest for money, and their assumed sexuality. Historically, they have both been legally forced to identify (and isolate) themselves publicly by wearing certain clothes or symbols such as a strange hat or particular color. They both have had to hide or 'pass' or migrate in order to survive. And, they both are perceived as simultaneously passive victims and guilty agents (Jews for communism-or-capitalism, whores for disease-or-disorder).

It's really good to have sound political parallels drawn between sex workers and other oppressed groups, it takes us out of the realm of the exotic, as Selma James once pointed out (a long time ago, it seems to me).

I could go on quoting from this book indefinitely, but I won't. Suffice it to say that it's light years ahead of the Lyn Madden book, and I think every woman should read it, feminists in particular. I would love to see a British version of this book because, as I've said before, sex workers past or present have so much to *say*. If any woman reading this is interested, please contact me through the address of *Trouble & Strife*. In the meantime, try to get hold of this book! As one of the editors says in her preface: *The words are out. Who will listen?* □

Since Nickie Roberts wrote this article, a British edition has been published by Virago.

Notes

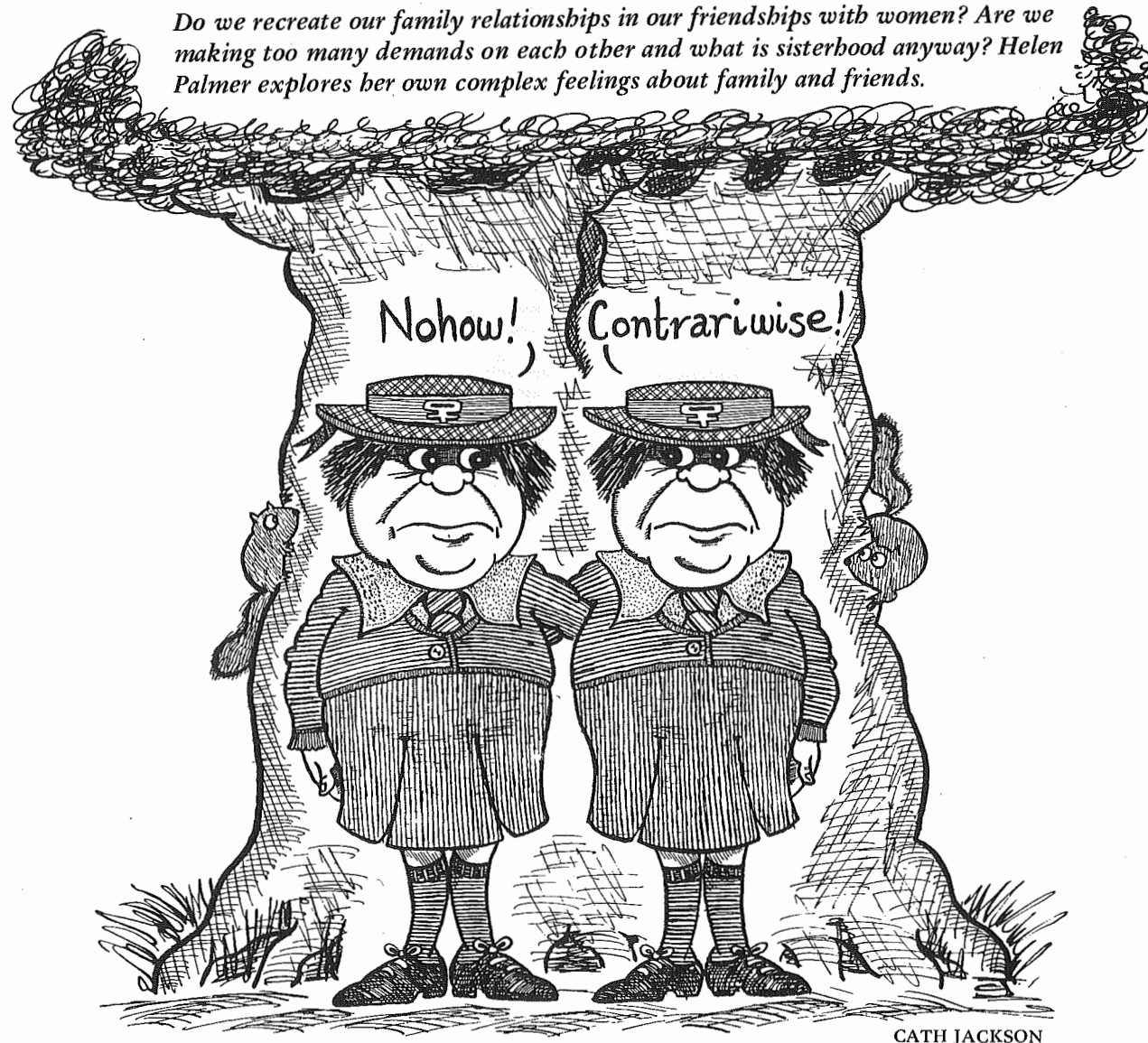
1. June Levine and Lyn Madden, *Lyn, A Story of Prostitution* 1988, The Women's Press in association with Attic Press, Dublin.
2. Frederique Delacoste and Priscilla Alexander (eds) 1987, *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry*, Cleis Press (USA).

* Nickie Roberts 1986, *Frontline: Women in the Sex Industry Speak*, Grafton Books.

Women who work or used to work in the sex industry and are interested in forming a group or network, please write to Nickie Roberts, c/o *Trouble & Strife*, Women's Centre, 34 Exchange Street, Norwich, NR1 1AX.

in sisterhood

Do we recreate our family relationships in our friendships with women? Are we making too many demands on each other and what is sisterhood anyway? Helen Palmer explores her own complex feelings about family and friends.



Last year, for the first time in my life, I did not celebrate Christmas with my 'family'; meaning my father decided to stay by himself in the country and I spent the day with my sister and her family — the nice lefty man with whom she has cohabited for seven years, their two young children (one of each) and the nice lefty man's younger brother.

Free of the pressure to provide or perform for my father's benefit, I was able to watch the celebration preparations. I watched rather than participated and had the opportunity to examine what I did and felt in previous years. At work I had listened to 103 conversations about Christmas and family; which part of which family each and every one of them was going to spend Christmas with; the long held grudges or affinities repeated, reinforced or changed. But the basic definition of who is family is a foregone conclusion, defined by blood and with labels that neatly define the appropriate role: sister, sister-in-law, aunt, mother, mother-in-law.

And I, a lesbian who has survived one of the most terrifying years of my life, found I had no sense of how to manage this entirely inappropriate framework. My family is surely the women who have kept me alive this year, kept me alive last year and I hope and assume will keep me alive next year?

I am nearly thirty and have lived in London for seven years and this contributes to my sense of having established a small number of women who have held me when I despaired, whom I have trusted with my most unnerving secrets, whom I have demanded of unreasonably; women whose well being I hold profoundly dear. As I watch my father who is 73 attend the funerals of his friends, friends of 40 or 50 years duration, I have a sense (somewhat morbid I know) that these are women whose funerals I will attend, if we all get that far.

I want a label to signify publicly their role in my life and to signify to them what they mean to me. Best friends seems hardly adequate, but to call them sisters seems to conflict with the nature of my relationship with my blood sister, Sally. But Sally has become a mother, a fact I didn't comprehend emotionally until during one argument she said that she was hurt that I

didn't seem to consider my independent relationship with her children important. Important! I hadn't considered it at all. They were merely another aspect of how she was my sister. Which leaves me still utterly confused about when she is my sister and we are being sisters and when she is a mother and I am an aunt.

Muffled love

Because our mother died when I was 16 and she was 19 we have in the last 14 years mothered one another, coming to the role with all the pain and guilt of our individual loss and all our sibling rivalry.

Our love and care of each other is muffled by our jealousy, our protectiveness of each other and our enormous expectations that we will understand and support each other unconditionally, perfectly. Our frustration that we are not understood and supported perfectly makes our sisterhood a destructive battleground.

As the younger sister I have been jealous and resentful of her always being first; of going to *her* school, wearing her old clothes, of being impressed and taken in by her new ideas and theories which dazzled me. Jealous of her closeness with my mother as she imitated her achievements. I felt myself to be the second child, second best, the outsider. Left to weep for my father when he didn't return home in the evenings. Feeling shut out, separate, alone — as my father was by the death of his father when he was 12 years old — the pattern of loss repeating and repeating, carrying the sense of not being good enough to hold your parents in this world, that your need (for them) is not quite right or strong enough, that you do not have a right to them.

I carry my mother's anger, her burning rage that she could not have what she wanted, that women are second class citizens, that we do not have a right to the best, that as women we are wrong by definition. And this I can see in Sally too and see that this sense of ourselves informs how we respond to one another.

We have rowed so many times, bitterly and furiously. The last time we were meant to have a pleasant day together we strode all over Hampstead Heath, shouting about whether or not it was a silly idea for me to train as a psychotherapist. We

were so angry with each other that when it was time for us to part I could not bring myself to offer her a lift home and when, driven by guilt I did, she refused it. It felt as though common decency had broken down between us. This failure to get through to each other, this sense that all communication is futile, looms significant and unmentioned between us. Our mother died having not spoken to her sister for years, after a row the contents of which our aunt either cannot remember or will not tell us. We know it is possible for our blood to go up the path of no return. I know already how total the separation can be. When Sally accused me of stealing her boyfriend I vowed that I would never speak to her again and for some time, perhaps four months, I didn't. So now we hold back from that final retort that would divide us; we become silent, and turn away.

She is often very wrong about me, about what I should or can do and yet gradually I have come to acknowledge the love contained in the fury of her attempted protection of me, to stifle the suspicion that she is intent on my destruction.

Perfect Mothering

For many years, between the ages of 17 and 25, Sally was the one person who could reduce me to violent tears. It is only recently that I have found the power to rage at her, to throw things about the room and slam doors, in order to free myself of the fear that she is right and I am wrong, of the illusion that she can give me what I lack or that she can mother me.

As she becomes a mother more clearly for me, so I have realised that she cannot be my mother. I realise that I wanted to be treated the way she treated — or tried to treat — her children. That I was carrying with me the myth of the Perfect Mother. A Perfect Mother with the power to kiss and make it better (whether the 'it' is a cut knee or the nature of oppression). A Perfect Mother would love me perfectly, completely and without any limits. I had been wanting perfect mothering and had not been receiving it from Sally.

But she is ambiguous about how much and in what way she wants me to be involved in her children. She too wishes to be mothered by me and is jealous of my

involvement with, my mothering of her children. If I come to babysit she will come into the room as I am meant to be getting the children off to sleep so of course they do not sleep. When she returns home and finds they have slept without waking while she was out there is the same tone of jealousy and unease in her response.

And I too am ambiguous — finding time to see her and them when my love life is bad or non-existent, dropping them when I have a lover. Ambiguous about putting my energy into this privileged man-child and his father and my sister who supports them both and has no sense of what it is to live outside the world of men. This woman who made the classic remark about how could I live without sex, when discussing how long I had been a lesbian. I am ambiguous about whether I want to "aunt" these children, to make them family.

She became a mother more clearly for me when she had her second child. One I could put down to experience, but two was a sign that despite the hours I had spent listening to her moan and complain about the children's father, the oppression of mothers, the worry about the children, the utter tiredness of sleep deprivation, despite all this she was going to do it again, that she liked it and was happy in a profound way that I couldn't guess at. She even told me how mothers felt embarrassed talking to non-mothers about how 'nice' it is being a mother. Are they afraid to make us jealous? Was she afraid to make me jealous?

And as I write about freeing myself from Sally's influence I realise quite how ironic it is that my decision not to be a mother crystallised into consciousness



CATH JACKSON

when I was about ten and she came home from school and said that childbirth was painful and disgusting and she was never going to be a mother and I decided I wouldn't either.

The work of mothering is emotionally and materially expensive and it is not recognised by the patriarchy as even taking place. But despite this the role and identity of mother is rewarded. You do get the patriarchy's seal of approval for having done what you were meant to do. Although this message is muted if you are a woman who is Black or you have a disability or 'deviate' in any other way that threatens the power and the categories of the patriarchy. It is also true that the outside world is not designed for buggies and there are a myriad of serious oppressions to undermine you. But Mother is more 'powerful' than sister in this sense, so what wonder that I try to elevate the women I love and need into the category of mother rather than keep them as sisters?

Fear and need

My fear and need of mothering is my fear and need of dependence on women and surely this in essence is also the sisterhood we are offering to each other? The difference is the divide between child and mother and woman and woman; between care reciprocated, as we expect and demand in sisterhood, and care not reciprocated, as between child and mother. But the generosity and limitless quality confuses us. Because there are limits; it is just that they are different limits and we often don't know what they are until it all goes wrong. When I ask am I asking too much? Will she resent it?

Mothercare, auntiecare, sistercare.

As a lesbian I come from being pathologised, I come from being considered psychologically immature, I come from having failed to stop loving my mother . . . so that I cannot come to how I feel about my mother with any ease: my rage, my disappointment, my love, my strength, my understanding. The feelings complicated confused, informing my identity and this even with a clear model of what is acceptable and right in the range of feelings about my mother.



Over the years I have learned how my family behaves, what I can expect, and still I feel profoundly confused. Faced with my unblood sisters it is clear that, with no socially acceptable patent to follow, I struggle. There is no map to guide me through the territory of dependence and independence. I do not know what is acceptable and what is not. But this gives me the precious opportunity to forge out what it is I want and then to try to get it. I am not completely trapped in established family definitions. I can demand the genuine thing, real emotion. But, striving for a mythical equality in all things, I feel I should care about all my unblood sisters in the same way. Yet my need for 'family' means that I care more about some women than others. This turns into a mirror image of my experience of my relationship with my blood sister. Blood sisters are not equals, they are older or younger and unequal to us in every way and so we do compete with, envy or emulate them. As I do my unblood sisters.

Seventies feminism demanded equality for women, demanded that women take other women seriously, stated that the personal is political and tried to change the political agenda.

In the '80s 'we' discovered that consciousness raising groups were not the whole answer. 'We' discovered that there are differences between women; or, more precisely women with more power and more privileges attempted to listen to the women who had been saying this for years. 'We' discovered that competition, envy, jealousy, oppression, violence and abuse exist between women.

Too great expectations

Many radical feminists have become disillusioned with sisterhood. We expected our sisters to be perfect. It is after all an idealistic movement; we sought perfection. We expected all women to be wonderful all the time. But we are not full of wonder, we are full of needs . . . needs to be understood, to be taken care of, to be mothered. Disillusioned, many of us have rejected 'sisterhood', hurt and angry. And yet I do not want to give up on feminism completely. I still wish to be able to write 'in sisterhood', a phrase that has never come easy, with a clear sense of what sisterhood is.

I need to know what I want from a sister. What can I expect, what is reasonable, what is acceptable? I need to be able to separate Sisterhood from Motherhood. I suspect I have wanted to be mothered far more than I have wanted to be sistered.

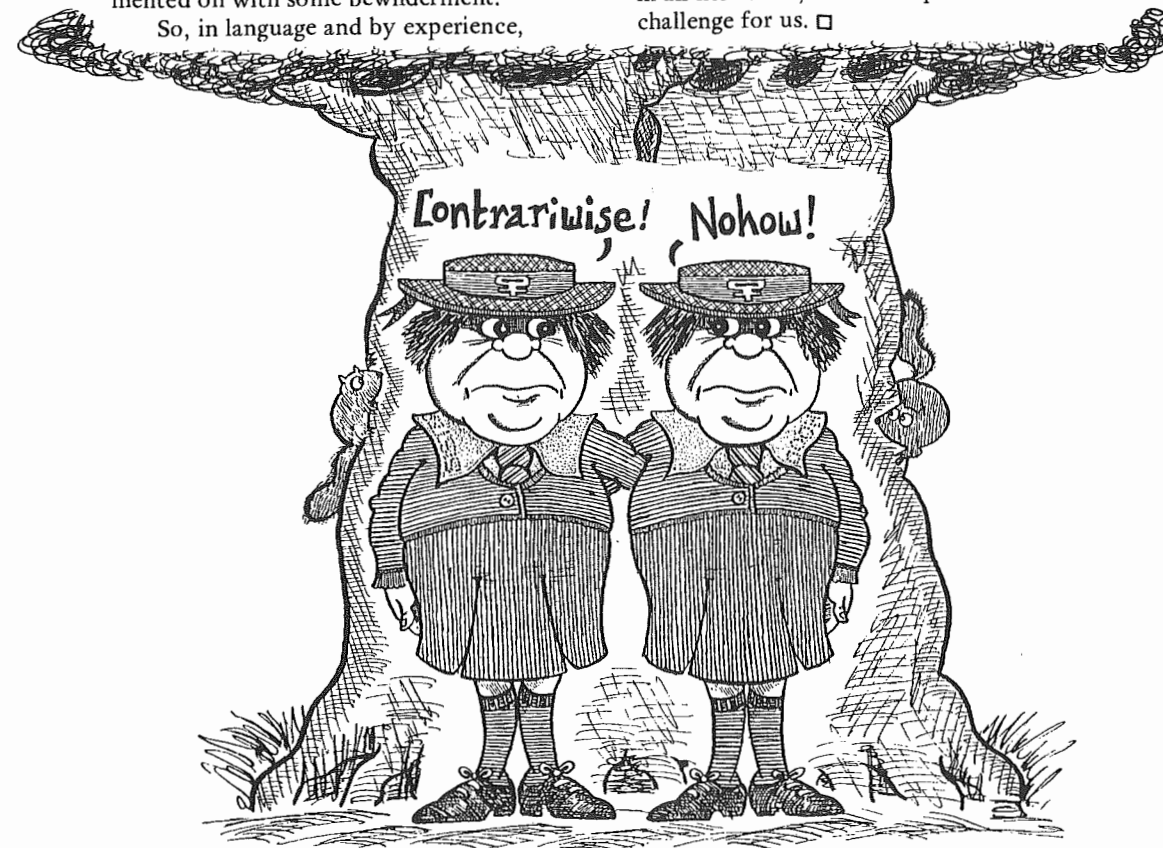
I know my experience of being a sister is filled with the strongest emotions of jealousy, rage and awe. Intense emotions which are also a feature of many lesbian relationships, a fact my sister has commented on with some bewilderment.

So, in language and by experience,

sisterhood is clearly a model for many of us. But then so is being mothered. When I discovered feminism my great joy was offset by my great disappointment as my sisters failed me, failed to heal my pain, even listen to my point of view. My sisters failed to kiss it better and make it all right. I had expected them to be able to and when they failed I had a hard time of it. I had expected mothering from them, not sistering.

Our strength lies in the common ground we can establish, the unity of purpose we can share, the limits we can accept. If sisterhood is not the total, life-long vocation of Motherhood, for some of us, then let us not despise those women. Our sisterhood is not a religious vocation with only some of us having the true faith.

For each of us what sisterhood means and what sistercare we want will be different. But knowing what it is and what it is not will make us a lot stronger. It gets me nearer finding a suitable label for my best friends. We fought hard to politicise our emotions. Don't let us stop now. Defining sisterhood, in all her forms, is another political challenge for us. □



HIJACKING in the name of SOLIDARITY

As "Anti-Apartheid" becomes part of Western popular culture, Julia Ndaba challenges the simplistic analysis of the Black struggle by Western solidarity movements. The focus on apartheid – which is only one aspect of colonial oppression in South Africa – can be used by whites to stifle radical African liberation movements. She explains the significance of naming the country 'Azania', which forces us to recognise a complex history which predates colonisation as well as breaking down the boundaries between African peoples.



LK: *Perhaps we can begin with how you feel the kind of international solidarity that has been given to Black people's struggle in South Africa has had an impact on that struggle.*

JN: *Yes I would like to talk about that, because the situation of Azania is one classical situation where the issue of international solidarity has been used, by liberals and pseudo-marxists, to derail the struggle for national liberation and to confuse people about how they can liberate themselves nationally, and how that is connected to the international struggle for socialism. In other words I am saying that the struggle for socialism has been used to distort and claim that the struggle for national liberation is reactionary, and not distinguish reactionary nationalism from progressive nation-*

alism. In our situation the concept 'anti-apartheid' has replaced that of anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism to the point that African people are being blamed for having caused divisions by raising the colonial question. This means that imperialism is allowed to go by unaccused.

In the case of South Africa I think the history of this confusion dates back to the last quarter of the last century. It is directly connected with the rise of imperialism and its penetration into Southern Africa in particular. During that process imperialist ideology – which is liberalism – was actually put out as being a progressive ideology. In the face of fascism and extreme forms of colonialism among the settler community, it was very easy for people to see liberalism as a progressive ideology in comparison.

At this time there was the emergence of an educated African elite, by educated here I mean in terms of western education, as opposed to our own education which everyone had. The liberals were the ones who facilitated for small numbers of Africans to enter education institutions and then become teachers, priests, clerks etc. The majority of these Africans also looked upon the liberals, particularly the missionaries, as progressive because they provided them with these opportunities. They did not question the fact that they were being educated into the liberal ideology of capitalism.

However there was a group among them which questioned this ideology, although they also stemmed from the church side. They began forming independent organisations, breaking off from the various denominations such as the Methodists and the Presbyterians. One of these was very popular, more forthright and understood by the people. It was the Ethiopianist church, thus the movement acquired that name.

This was all in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. So basically the liberals and the pseudo-marxists were seen as allies of the liberation struggle when they were not, and this brought into the movement fundamental strategic problems. Because they had resources, they could promote those African organisations which accepted the strategies they were proposing in the name of international solidarity or sometimes in the name of christianity, good will or socialism. So this is the point of departure. I usually talk about it as the difference between an anti-colonial strategy for national democratic liberation and an anti-apartheid strategy. The problem here is that apartheid isn't the real issue in South Africa, it is a by-product of the actual problem. I'm taking apartheid to mean racism here, it's actually not defined most of the time. People talk about it as if it means every form of oppression. But it actually refers to segregation, dividing people and proposing different lines of social movement within the society, including geographic mobility and location. In fact apartheid would never have occurred if it wasn't for colonialism. It was through colonialism that conquest took place and the means of life and work shifted from African hands to the colonialist hands.



It was only after the process of colonialism had been consolidated that apartheid was possible. When the dependency relationship between coloniser and colonised was established so that the coloniser could discriminate against the colonised in *any way shape or form*, ie racial, religious, cultural, gender or what have you. I'm not saying that sexism didn't exist before, it did, but it took a different form. So I am saying that this is one of the treacheries which have been purported, mainly in the press and other forms of literature, like books, and peddled by the so-called anti-apartheid movement. I feel that this is a conspiracy, I don't think it is an accident. I don't think it is the result of ignorance either. I do think people are defending interests that are clearly defined. They know that if the whole African movement takes on an anti-apartheid strategy, it will be moving towards a cul-de-sac, primarily because apartheid is a symptom of colonialism. We all know that if you treat the symptom and never the cause, then you never get rid of either the cause or the symptom. So I think this is being done on purpose. Unfortunately it has been bought by a large section of the liberation movement.

The next thing that took place was that the liberals (they call themselves the progressive whites) actually put pressure on the African National Congress (ANC) — which was the largest political representative of the African people from its founding in 1912 up to the '50s — to accept them as *members* of the ANC and for their own organisations to become member organisations of the Congress. This meant that they were to sit on *policy-making* bodies, and become the leading ideologues, being even more inside than they were already because of the power that they had over the media and publishing houses. Since they are members of the colonising group they also received the bulk of the resources that went to publicising apartheid. So already they were imposed as our ideologues, but now they were actually to lead us at an even more strategic level.

The African leadership which did not accept this penetration was labelled with all sorts of names like 'separatist', 'racist', 'CIA agents'. And I tell you, books have been written and published with this slander. This is the way in which imperi-

alism works, to divide people along ideological lines and to suppress those who they do not want to be heard, under the guise that they are the bad ones, and the bad ones become the good ones.

Solidarity between peoples of different nations or nationalities is very constructive *if* it takes place at an organisational level and there is *no merger*. In other words we should form alliances but not mergers. What that means is that each people has its own agenda and peoples meet where those agendas overlap, on a minimum programme and support one another accordingly. This works better because each side has an interest and the two interests are not necessarily identical, but may combine across organisations but not through individuals physically joining the other organisations *as individuals*. As individuals they don't even have the consensus of their own community, they don't represent anybody — yet they come in to be leaders of the organisations of the oppressed! I don't know any other situations where racism operates in this way. If a white person thinks that the ANC can't move in the right direction *unless* he or she is in there on the national committee, then she or he thinks that all the African people in the ANC are incapable of knowing which way the organisation must go!

This is how I see the so-called progressive whites who join African national liberation organisations. If they *really* mean well their responsibility is with their own people. It is the white people who are the problem in South Africa, it is not the Africans. If there are good ones among them, they ought to be increasing their numbers in the white community, then we would be moving towards an alliance that is truly anti-apartheid, anti-imperialist and anti-colonial. However, when they abandon the white people in their splendour, pleasure, enjoyment, wealth and everything to come over to help the Africans to do what they are already doing, to me that is the greatest form of hypocrisy that I have seen and I think it is a violation of the principles of anti-imperialist solidarity.

Azania

LK: *Can you explain to our readers where the name Azania comes from, and what it represents?*

JN: OK — that actually flows very much from all of this, we can use it as an example of how the leadership issue really affects the national liberation struggle and sends it off in a different direction. The concept of Azania has attracted the greatest attention than *any* name that has been given to any African country during the process of decolonisation and independence.

The concept of Azania was chosen because of a need; it could have been anything. Several names were in fact suggested. When a people are colonised they need to have concepts which they use to distinguish themselves from the colonising people. In our situation, we are only now looking for such a name, precisely because when our country was colonised it wasn't one country. It was various countries, various nationalities — you must have heard of the Zulus, that was one country, Xhosa, Tswana, Sotho were others — various peoples were inhabiting various territories just like here in Europe. Some of those nationalities in Europe were united to form one particular country. We hadn't gone through that stage of the bourgeois democratic revolution where various nationalities were merging to form one nation, we were colonised before that process. So there was a need for those different nationalities, now that they had one common enemy, to express the unity that was developing between them and you need words to express these things. We needed a concept to express that unity of oppressed peoples, of an oppressed nation.

The first calls for that unity came in the last quarter of the last century which I talked about earlier. Isaka Seme who was one of the founder members of the ANC, wrote and stated that need in undisputed words, he said that our people had to unite across nationality lines, and that unity would enable us to take our place among nations in the world as a nation. Since then there has been a search for a concept around which we can unite. The language issue has a lot to do with this as well, we speak various languages so if you use a concept from one it may not reflect the meaning in another. African historians came up with the concept of Azania following their learning about the empire of



Azania which dates back centuries in Africa. The empire was stretching from as far north east as you can imagine down to the Cape and it was one of the most highly developed empires in the world at the time. Its symbols are found all over Africa, in fact any African can call themselves Azanian. It is an expression of Pan Africanism or African unity in a way, because you'll find an African from the west telling you about a place called Azania in Senegal, or you'll be walking somewhere in Zambia and you'll pass a church or a school or a pub called Azania. European liberal archeologists also have this information, but this is what control of information is about. They are not telling people much about what civilisations existed in Africa, because the whole role of colonialism is to project the African people as tribes who had no civilisation of their own until the Europeans came. The so-called 'burden of the white man'.

People were ready when the name of Azania was proposed as the name of the country to unite all nationalities. Because they know why the country was called South Africa — that was Cecil Rhodes' dream to extend the British empire to the Zambezi river — and we are not in concert with that, so we have no interest in retaining that name — to us it is a colonial name. Yet our 'friends', the progressive whites, together with their friends in the African national liberation movement started circulating literature saying that Azania was a slave name. This is complicated and doesn't really make sense. Their argument was basically that Arab invasions into the east of the continent led to the enslavement of the peoples of the empire of Azania. Now I don't know why having become enslaved,

people suddenly have to drop their name — why now it's a slaves' name. This complex nonsense shows that when a foreign people take over leadership in theorising the experiences of other peoples they can cause all these historical distortions.

So this is why the name Azania was introduced and why it caught like fire. I don't think there is any better guide to people in struggle than when what they do or say catches. Then, and only then, they know that they are representing the interests of the people. In spite of it being suppressed by the media, the name Azania spread right through the country in no time! To me, apart from knowing the need existed for a particular concept, the fact that *this* particular one caught so fast and was so accepted made me feel it was the right one.

So this is where it comes from and rejection of it, I believe very strongly, comes not so much from Africans as from progressive whites. They are not rejecting it because they are anti the name but because they are anti the need. If the Pan African Congress of Azania, in order to get financed by the international community, rejected the name as well, it would also be rich. Nowadays you have to sing the tune that the funders want to hear. Now somewhere along the line your purpose becomes the means and the means become the purpose.

Hi-jacking

LK: *You've talked before about feeling that there is a conspiracy in the international media not to reflect what is actually happening at the moment, to the point of not giving a truthful historical account?*



JN: That's right. This is why when I speak about this subject I always give a historical account. Because prior to the 1880s there was no confusion, our people knew very well what the struggle was about; it was a struggle against colonialism. Somewhere from then to now it's become the struggle against apartheid and there are all these massive, massive anti-apartheid organisations which are being very heavily funded.

LK: *In Azania itself?*

JN: Everywhere in the world. They are highly organised with high finances. They have industries of their own where they produce their propaganda, things for sale. As far as the publishing world is concerned they have a huge stake, as far as newspaper coverage is concerned they have a huge stake, not to mention the television in your sitting room. And I am sure that every time you have heard about my country you have heard from them, and that's why you had to come here to ask me what I think. This is what convinces me that it is a well planned and orchestrated thing, the aim of which is to give an understanding to the international community that South Africa is no longer a colony and that the Africans are independent in that country together with the settlers. This is what the Africans I am angry with have bought. Once one buys that one accepts to be represented (both at home and outside) by the very state which one is fighting against. So it's as if we were a new-born baby placed in the lap of a huge gorilla, which is ready to devour us any time, and is devouring us this very day. In South Africa hangings are taking place at the rate of 12-14 people per month and the world isn't doing much except talk about it because we are seen as one and the

same nation so this is regarded as a domestic matter. South Africa is also very quick to say to others that they are interfering in its domestic affairs. Now for us to be clearly a nation that is a recognisable entity, the best way is to name ourselves, identify ourselves and have a particular movement and fight like all colonised people fought.

The liberals (so-called progressive whites) inside the ANC, whilst also being members of the colonising nation, are not giving us much of a chance to speak for ourselves. On the other hand, the world is willing to listen to *them*. I'm sure you've seen whenever they talk about our country they interview someone other than an Azanian. They talk to the so-called progressive whites to talk on behalf of the Azanians, as if to say that we are children and cannot speak for ourselves. There is no greater racism than that as far as I am concerned. The very people who are saying that they are anti-apartheid are practising apartheid in front of people's eyes, and people don't see it. But we see it because we are the ones who are getting hurt.

So basically I am saying that a conspiracy or hi-jacking of leadership in the guise of solidarity, is actually taking place.

LK: *Would you say that the press in the west has been very quick to pick up on divisions within Black communities, between Black peoples, and that those divisions are part of this process?*

JN: Yes, that one is really quite interesting because it is yet another amazing phenomenon which I have observed since living outside South Africa. When it comes to South Africa, Palestine, as well as Ireland, somehow people don't think about how things are happening in their own countries. They immediately jump to



make judgements — 'black on black' violence type of thing. Which country today and which people in the present day world are not having struggles within themselves, and I mean cut throat struggles where people die? When it's African people it's always immediately identified as 'black on black'.

The main reason why this happens is because since Africa, Asia and the Americas were colonised (I'm also talking about Spanish colonisation now) one of the major rationales or justifications for colonialism was the idea that these peoples were 'backward' and 'barbaric'. The 'great white hope' was to come and dawn on them, take them out of this 'darkness'. If and when conflicts between the peoples themselves occurred they were immediately used to confirm that — 'look at them' they'd say, 'they are backward', 'they can't run their own affairs', 'they are inefficient, disorganised' etc. All this is a rationale to continue colonialism through racism (ie they are either an inferior species or if they are human they are 'backward'), it is a justification for the continued exploitation of the peoples of the colonies.

For example, I was in Belgium not very long ago and I was telling them that I want to publish some things that I have written. And they were saying "Well there isn't much publicity for that sort of thing, because you are from there. It would sell if a Belgian went there for two or three months and came back and wrote about you". These were people explaining to me what I already know, but I appreciated the fact that they do know, that at least there are some people in the colonising nations who see what is happening. They would rather have a Belgian or a Dutch person, or a British person who went for two months or two years to come and tell about it. Why? I don't think this is just preference for kith and kin, or even that they will reinforce what has to be said. It is also part of rationalising this myth that we are not capable of commenting on our affairs, that we will be at each other's throats, if and when we were left alone to run our own affairs.

When we were invaded by colonial armies we existed as peoples and kingdoms and there were wars between kingdoms, territorial wars, wars over labour, slaves etc,

just like anywhere else in the world. Here in Europe the Napoleonic wars were then taking place. Even before that — *you* can tell that history better, how many wars were fought on this island we are on right now. We are talking about a big country when we are talking about South Africa, in territorial terms. And when we are talking about nationalities there we are not talking about a handful of people like the English, the Scots or the Irish we are talking about large, large numbers of peoples *then*. They definitely had the right to exist as independent nations from each other, and they were sorting out some of these things then. The notorious Shaka Wars which are projected as some sort of 'savagery' in the western media and in history books for young children. In fact, they were no different from those which were taking place in Europe. Napoleon was doing the same thing, so was Bismark, it was happening all over, there are even plenty of examples in eastern Europe. But because it was being done by Africans, 'primitive people' it was explained differently. We have internal groupings, every people has internal groupings. We are also sorting out certain things which we have to sort out from within. Take the gender question for example . . .

LK: *That was what I was going to ask you to talk about next!*

JN: That is one of the things we ought to be sorting out. Now if we are sorting it out, they are going to say 'Oh black on black'.

LK: *You mean it will be translated as a destructive conflict within Black people as opposed to constructive change?*

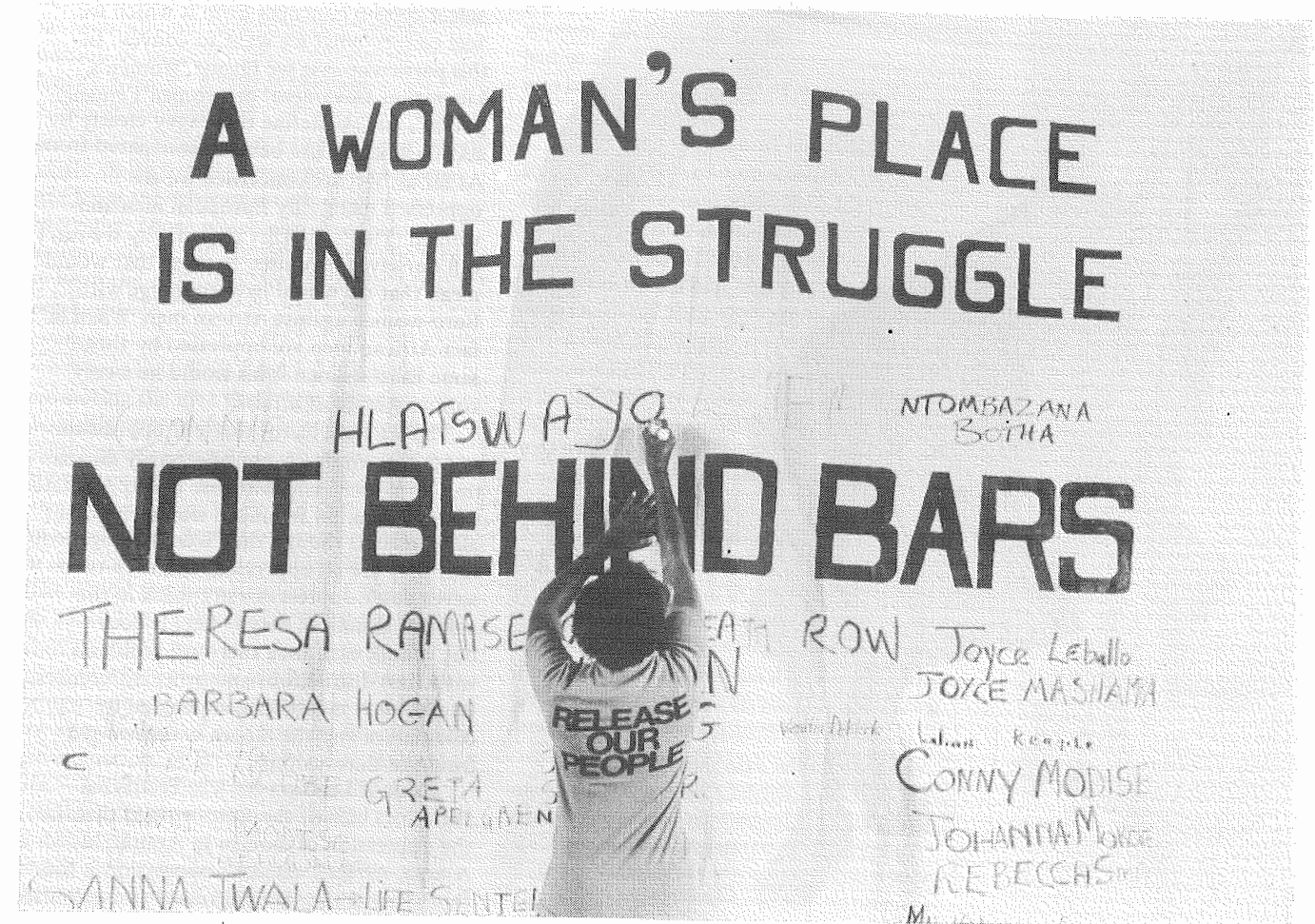
JN: Yes it wouldn't be seen as development it would be seen as 'primitiveness' or 'tribalism'. The other thing which makes them seize this opportunity in the case of Azania, but also in relation to Palestine, and even Ireland for that matter, is because of the so-called Bantustan programme. The regime wants the world to believe that the Zulu don't see eye to eye with the Xhosa, the Xhosa don't see eye to eye with the Sotho, the Sotho don't see eye to eye with the Swazi, the Swazi don't see eye to eye with the Tswana, etc etc, across all the language groups that exist. So the regime

creates situations. For example, there was great publicity not very long ago about a particular place in Zululand. The government had actually taken people to dump there! The people who were already there had very limited resources to begin with, before people were brought there. Obviously if you bring more people into a situation like that you are creating conflict. When the regime has finished creating the conflict the British cameras come and say 'black on black' — who in Britain is going to be able to work that out?

Women's autonomy

LK: *Maybe the last thing we could talk about is whether and how far women organising autonomously is seen as negative or positive within the struggle of Black peoples — obviously it's complex and probably varies?*

JN: It's just as complex as our discussion of solidarity. Because not by any means am I saying that there should be no supportive actions between people of different nationalities, but I am saying that there should be principles, which can result in constructive alliances. In the case of women organising separately according to their nationality, it is really quite an issue, because the very so-called feminists from Europe, again the same liberalism as progressive whites, have theorised the woman question in Azania in a conflictory way. First of all they theorised it in a manner that shows the social welfare factors and the need for meeting problems arising out of that. The second thing that they do is to promote an idea that the women's liberation struggle should not be prioritised, ie the struggle should go on but it should be subordinated to the struggle for national liberation and



21/2/88 Soweto. At a detainees' Parents Support Committee meeting, the audience write the names of women prisoners and detainees.



Pass burning during
the Defiance
Campaign.

socialism. Judy Kimble promoted this particular line. Also there is an article in the *Review of African Political Economy*, in the 1986 issue, dedicated to South Africa, where this point of view is theorised.

First of all I want to make one thing clear, we do not relate to the concept of feminism because it doesn't exist in our languages for one thing, and historically the whole feminist movement emerging out of the suffragette movement is the history of Europe really and we are done with being looked at through European eyes and European history. We are developing concepts whereby we can look at ourselves and be looked at through our own eyes and our own history using our own languages. That said I do accept that the English language is quite widespread throughout the world and is a convenient means of communication, so we will select certain concepts from it which we feel convey what we want to convey. In this particular case we favour 'Women's Liberation Movement' or 'women's emancipation', and we define these very clearly by stating what we are being emancipated from. As far as we are concerned we are oppressed mainly by European men and women. That's another reason why we can't call ourselves feminists, because that would mean that we would have to merge with Euro-women against African men. When in fact African men are oppressed by those same Euro-women. This would be a very confused state of affairs.

So we have learnt that our oppression as African women is not necessarily emanating from men only, but that it also emanates from women. So feminism which combines all women as though they were homogeneous, that they are all oppressed, and they themselves don't oppress doesn't work in the colonial situation. Maybe here it does but I think even here there are problems with class distinctions and other differences. But for us it is further complicated by colonialism and the racism which we get from the Euro-women.

Now if I can get back to rectifying the errors in how the Euro-women theorise the oppression of women in Azania. In Azania, African women's oppression is four fold. That is they are oppressed as a colonised

nation, as a race, as the lowest economic class, as well as women. If we take these four forms of oppression and say that the African woman is at the bottom of all that hierarchy, it is obvious that without her being liberated there isn't going to be liberation of any kind — national, racial or class, until *this* African woman is out of that situation.

The national liberation movement has to take into account the population figures, these are now something like 51% women. That is half of the army, if we were to think in terms of an army waging war for liberation of *any* kind. It is not liberation if half of those people are kept in bondage. So the issue of women's emancipation is *deadly primary*.

This is not to say that the gender question is more important. I think you can talk in terms of strategy but you can also talk in terms of tactics. All I am saying is that tactically we have to prioritise the question of women's emancipation, to identify what it is that is keeping women in bondage and free them as much as we can from that. Particularly those forms of oppression that emanate from the African society itself in its own right. Those which emanate from colonialism, racism and classism have to be faced by both the African women and the African men together.

There have been books and articles promoting the idea that there was no women's oppression in our cultures before colonisation. I dispute this. Usually they quote a number of leading women who managed, through thick and thin, to surface and become leaders of outstanding brilliance or whatever you like to call it. Obviously that would not have happened if there was no social base, I don't believe leaders come from nowhere. They are put there by the social force they are representing. Now this brings me back to the question you asked me about forms of organisation for women's emancipation, or even for life, for women's life — we don't have to be struggling all the time, maybe we can be just living sometimes!

In our own societies (before colonisation) there were areas of work which depended on

women's organisations. I can cite one particular area — health. The management and administration of health was in the hands of women and this gave them quite a lot of power. By the way, doctors get some of their power from the psychology related to the person who makes one feel related to the person who makes one feel better. Women produced medicines and systems of health care. It was women who controlled that particular area. The other area that women were particularly strong in was the area of cultural reproduction, cultural values — some of them being oppressive against women themselves. But still they were repositories of it. They controlled the development of children up to the age of 13/14. I'm not saying we have absolute control but we have a great cultural influence on them until that stage. We reproduce cultural values. It was because of this power base that the colonialists targetted women, they saw the power that women had in the society. The system of education was largely in the hands of women as well.

Most of the stages of the socialisation of children were in the hands of women, for boys until they go to the house of circumcision, then the men take over. So those particular institutions were organised by women and very often they used them for their own gain.

About the health system there is a very notorious practice amongst Euro-academics who write about Africans! They talk about superstition and so called 'witchcraft'. As you know, our own people who were involved in the health system were called 'witchdoctors' — especially women. They couldn't be doctors in the eyes of the west. The medicines that people used were supposed to be valueless or poisonous — they weren't medicines. I think the colonial administrators knew damn well that they were helpful, but preferred to suppress their use in order to open the way for their own medicines in the African market.

There is another area which was very much bound up with health, the religious institutions were connected with healing, what in Europe is referred to as psychic powers. Women were the ones who really developed these powers in the culture,



more so than men. Leaders, African administrators in pre-colonial times used those women very much because they were very highly respected and feared. You find people writing about the system of Ukunuka, which is to psychically identify a person who is supposed to be guilty of whatever crime is said to have been committed. African leaders used to use that to purge their own administration or to vet certain people.

So I am saying that these were forms of organisation before colonialism and that women worked in such a way that they used their power base. But also apart from that there were many activities which women were doing on their own in our culture, where men were not present at all.

I feel we need to revisit these and analyse them. I think we need to go back and look into them and see exactly what was happening. I can just cite one particular example, which is quite modern, from the time I was in school. There was a tradition whereby women make friends with one another, but it was done in a sort of a way of fantasising. They fantasise that they're mothers and children. In other words, if I liked a woman, I would say 'you be my daughter and I'll be your mother'. In that way we could have a relationship together which is recognised by all women. Men don't figure, they are not involved in that at all. Even if I had a husband or a boyfriend it would be none of his business, it's not the kind of thing he would even inquire into. That is the other thing that is really missed I think, that in African culture there are lots of areas which were said to be not men's territory and vice versa. So



we didn't have this thing which I see coming through in European feminist literature where there were male territories not penetrable by women and nothing the other way round.

So I am saying that these were the forms of organisation which existed, and that with the rise of colonialism all that went down the river, and these institutions were particularly targeted by the colonialists for destruction, and the social fibre was completely torn. This is why I get so angry when people reduce it to racism, because it is *far far more*. Mind you racism is a monumental problem. But the oppression of women is four fold. So with our cultural institutions destroyed that way, we had to copy institutions or organisations of women from Europe. We copied the way the suffragettes organised! Women organised at first, as far as I can reflect back, in small clubs which were called 'Zanzela' in my part of the world, which means 'do it yourself' — self reliance projects.

Whatever they were doing in it the ultimate goal was so women could provide, and I think that emanates from this social welfare ideology where African women are said to be deprived of this and deprived of that in terms of welfare. The whole political arena is left untouched, and the role of women in production is not touched at all — neither the production of wealth nor the production of values is addressed.

Racism in the name of feminism

Most of the literature on women in Azania doesn't go anywhere near such issues, because English women, who are the ones who are writing it believe that we have no

capacity to participate politically. They are racist. They believe we have no culture, so they can't see us producing cultural values, so they don't see that as a deprivation.

They don't see us producing wealth either, even though we raise their children. You know I could have slapped that bloody Zola Budd when she was on television. It was so awful, that girl who has been raised by an African woman, couldn't show any feeling for the African girls who run better than her in South Africa. Even that running she is doing she was taught by an African woman! And she has the bloody guts to stand there and say that when she can't run, that's political, but that when it's an African woman that's raising her it's not political! Anyway the thing is that the Euro-women who write about us just don't see us as complete human beings. They see us through their own eyes, and in their eyes we are underlings.

Cecil Rhodes last century is still operative — that Africans are children and you have to give them something useful to do.

There is also the problem of the dependency for resources which are controlled by the so-called progressive whites, organisations like Black Sash, the church organisations. African women *have* to organise in a manner which pleases the funders in order to get financed. So I tell you that's how they are organised, there are projects, projects, projects, everywhere, even research projects. There was a white woman recently who told me that *she* is setting up an African women's centre in Durban. She went all over this country in the last few weeks, and I've seen her name everywhere, in every women's journal, yet African women who have been here before her and will come after her, nobody ever hears about them. That is what I call racism in the name of feminism.

What I am saying is that because of this we have moved towards more European forms of organisation of women and we have abandoned our own cultural forms of organisation and that isn't helping women's emancipation. African men for example, or let me just say the African society, doesn't understand what we are talking about when we say feminism instead of women's emancipation, even women who

could support it. That's why if you talk about feminism you can forget it, they won't listen to you for five or ten minutes, they'll leave you where you are standing talking. But if you are talking about women's liberation and explaining the oppressive forms they will identify then because they experience it every day.

At the same time we need to return to the source of our own cultural forms of organising. For example, protest, you must have heard of the August 9th marches which are being hailed as landmarks in women's struggles against racism and colonialism. There are milestones I could tell you about, whereby African women organised in their own ways, but no-one knows about them, they are not written about, or internationalised. When they talk about women organising they are talking about them organising against apartheid and the forms are quite European. There are African forms of protest, there were some in Zimbabwe before independence where women would do things to show disagreement or to demand change. But I can't really go into that here, and because as I say we need to revisit. We are half European ourselves, myself sitting here I am semi-European in cultural terms. There's not much I can do about that, but I would like to be able to retrieve myself and I think as women we would be stronger, and not so much in conflict with the society when raising the issue of women's emancipation, even from African patriarchal forms of oppression. I think we would have an easier job in that we would communicate and people would recognise what we were saying should happen, and would eventually deal with the issues themselves.

What we fear is that when national liberation has been acquired, women will fall back, and in fact fall even a few steps further back than where we are right now. At the moment there is some sort of partnership and equality within the liberation movement. The constitutions are written in such a way that they give us some sort of power, that is if we take it. All the liberation movements have women's sections in them and they are doing quite a lot about their own chains. The women in there, in addition to the national chains which they also do something about. □





DANGEROUS and DEADLY

Radical feminists are constantly being accused of essentialist thinking. 'Trouble and Strife' has always argued against a biologically determinist analysis of women's oppression. To mark the publication of Andrea Dworkin's latest book, "Letters from a War Zone", we reprint this historic article in which she takes issue with women who promote the idea of female superiority.

1

All who are not of good race in this world are chaff.

Hitler, *Mein Kampf*¹

It would be lunacy to try to estimate the value of man according to his race, thus declaring war on the Marxist idea that men are equal, unless we are determined to draw the ultimate consequences. And the ultimate consequence of recognising the importance of blood — that is, of the racial foundation in general — is the transference of this estimation to the individual person.

Hitler, *Mein Kampf*²

Hisses. Women shouting at me: slut, bisexual, she fucks men. And before I had spoken, I had been trembling, more afraid to speak than I had ever been. And, in a room of 200 sister lesbians, as angry as I have ever been. "Are you a bisexual?" some woman screamed over the pandemonium, the hisses and shouts merging into a raging noise. "I'm a Jew," I answered; then, a pause, "and a lesbian, and a woman." And a coward. Jew was enough. In that room, Jew was what mattered. In that room, to answer the question "Do you still fuck men?" with a No, as I did, was to betray my deepest convictions. All of my life, I have hated the proscribers, those who enforce sexual conformity. In answering, I had given in to the inquisitors,

and I felt ashamed. It humiliated me to see myself then: one who resists the enforcers out there with militancy, but gives in without resistance to the enforcers among us.

The event was a panel on "Lesbianism as a Personal Politic" that took place in New York City, Lesbian Pride Week 1977. A self-proclaimed lesbian separatist had spoken. Amidst the generally accurate description of male crimes against women came this ideological rot, articulated of late with increasing frequency in feminist circles: women and men are distinct species or races (the words are used interchangeably); men are biologically inferior to women; male violence is a biological inevitability; to eliminate it, one must eliminate the species/race itself (means stated on this particular evening: developing parthenogenesis as a viable reproductive reality); in eliminating the biologically inferior species/race Man, the new *Übermensch* Woman (prophetically foreshadowed by the lesbian separatist* herself) will have the earthly dominion that is her true biological destiny. We are left to infer that the society of her creation will be good because she is good, biologically good. In the interim, insipient SuperWoman will not do anything to "encourage" women to "collaborate" with men — no abortion clinics or battered woman sanctuaries will come from her. After all, she has to conserve her

*Superwoman's ideology is distinguished from lesbian separatism in general (that is, lesbians organising politically and/or culturally in exclusively female groups) by two articles of dogma: (1) a refusal to have anything to do with men, often including women with male children and (2) the absolute belief in the biological superiority of women.



"energy" which must not be dissipated keeping "weaker" women alive through reform measures.

The audience applauded the passages on female superiority/male inferiority enthusiastically. This doctrine seemed to be music to their ears. Was there dissent, silent, buried in the applause? Was some of the response the spontaneous pleasure that we all know when, at last, the tables are turned, even for a minute, even in imagination? Or has powerlessness driven us mad, so that we dream secret dreams of a final solution perfect in its simplicity, absolute in its efficacy? And will a leader someday strike that secret chord, harness those dreams, our own nightmare turned upside down? Is there no haunting, restraining memory of the blood spilled, the bodies burned, the ovens filled, the peoples enslaved, by those who have assented throughout history to the very same demagogic logic?

In the audience, I saw women I like or love, women not strangers to me, women who are good not because of biology but because they care about being good, swept along in a sea of affirmation. I spoke out because those women had applauded. I spoke out too because I am a Jew who has studied Nazi Germany, and I know that many Germans who followed Hitler also cared about being good, but found it easier to be good by biological definition than by act. Those people, wretched in what they experienced as their own unbearable powerlessness, became convinced that they were so good biologically that nothing they did could be bad. As Himmler said in 1943:

We have exterminated a bacterium [Jews] because we did not want in the end to be infected by the bacterium and die of it. I will not see so much as a small area of sepsis appear here or gain a hold. Wherever it may form, we will cauterize it. All in all, we can say that we have fulfilled this most difficult duty for the love of our people. And our spirit, our soul, our character has not suffered injury from it.³

So I spoke, afraid. I said that I would not be associated with a movement that advocated the most pernicious ideology on the face of the earth. It was this very ideology of biological determinism that had licensed the slaughter and/or enslavement of virtually any group one could name,

One of the slurs constantly used against me by women writing on behalf of pornography under the flag of feminism in misogynist media is that I endorse a primitive biological determinism. *Woman Hating* (1974) clearly repudiates any biological determinism; so does *Our Blood* (1976), especially "The Root Cause". So does this piece, published twice, in 1978 in *Heresies* and in 1979 in *Broadsheet*. *Heresies* was widely read in the *Women's Movement* in 1978. The event described in this piece, which occurred in 1977, was fairly notorious, and so my position on biological determinism — I am against it — is generally known in the *Women's Movement*. One problem is that this essay, like others in this book, has no cultural presence: no one has to know about it or take it into account to appear less than ignorant; no one will be held accountable for ignoring it. Usually critics and political adversaries have to reckon with the published work of male writers whom they wish to malign. No such rules protect girls. One pro-pornography "feminist" published an article in which she said I was anti-abortion, this in the face of decades of work for abortion rights and membership in many pro-choice groups. No one even checked her allegation; the periodical would not publish a retraction. One's published work counts as nothing, and so do years of one's political life.

including women by men. ("Use their own poison against them," one woman screamed.) Anywhere one looked, it was this philosophy that justified atrocity. This was one faith that destroyed life with a momentum of its own.

Insults continued with unabated intensity as I spoke, but gradually those women I liked or loved, and others I did not know, began to question openly the philosophy they had been applauding and also their own acquiescence. Embraced by many women on my way out, I left still sickened, humiliated by the insults, emotionally devastated by the abuse. Time passes, but the violence done is not undone. It never is.

2

I am told that I am a sexist. I do believe that the differences between the sexes are our most precious heritage, even though they make women superior in the ways that matter most.

George Gilder, *Sexual Suicide*⁴

Perhaps this female wisdom comes from resignation to the reality of male aggression; more likely it is a harmonic of the woman's knowledge that ultimately she is the one who matters. As a result, while there are more brilliant men than brilliant women, there are more good women than good men.

Steven Goldberg,
*The Inevitability of Patriarchy*⁵

As a class (not necessarily as individuals), we can bear children. From this, according

to male-supremacist ideology, all our other attributes and potentialities are derived. On the pedestal, immobile like waxen statues, or in the gutter, failed icons mired in shit, we are exalted or degraded because our biological traits are what they are. Citing genes, genitals, DNA, pattern-releasing smells, biograms, hormones, or whatever is in vogue, male supremacists make their case which is, in essence, that we are biologically too good, too bad, or too different to do anything

other than reproduce and serve men sexually and domestically.

The newest variations on this distressingly ancient theme centre on hormones and DNA: men are biologically aggressive; their fetal brains were awash in androgen; their DNA, in order to perpetuate itself, hurls them into murder and rape; in women, pacifism is hormonal and addiction to birth is molecular. Since in Darwinian terms (interpreted to conform to the narrow social self-interest of men), survival of the fittest means the triumph of the most aggressive human beings, men are and always will be superior to women in terms of their ability to protect and extend their own authority. Therefore women, being "weaker" (less aggressive), will always be at the mercy of men. That this theory of the social ascendancy of the fittest consigns us to eternal indignity and, applied to race, conjures up Hitler's identical view of evolutionary struggle, must not unduly trouble us. "By

current theory," writes Edward O Wilson reassuringly in *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, a bible of genetic justification for slaughter, "genocide or genosorption strongly favouring the aggressor need take place only once every few generations to direct evolution."⁶

3

I have told you the very low opinion in which you [women] were held by Mr Oscar Browning. I have indicated what Napoleon once thought of you and what Mussolini thinks now. Then, in case any of you aspire to fiction, I have copied out for your benefit the advice of the critic about courageously acknowledging the limitations of your sex. I have referred to Professor X and given prominence to his statement that women are intellectually, morally and physically inferior, to men . . . and here is a final warning . . . Mr John Langdon Davies warns women "that when children cease to be altogether desirable, women cease to be altogether necessary." I hope you will make note of it.

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*⁷

In considering male intellectual and scientific argumentation in conjunction with male history, one is forced to conclude that men as a class are moral cretins. The vital question is: are we to accept *their* world view of a moral polarity that is biologically fixed, genetically or hormonally or genitally (or whatever organ or secretion or molecular

particle they scapegoat next) absolute; or does our own historical experience of social deprivation and injustice teach us that to be free in a just world we will have to destroy the power, the dignity, the efficacy of this one idea above all others?

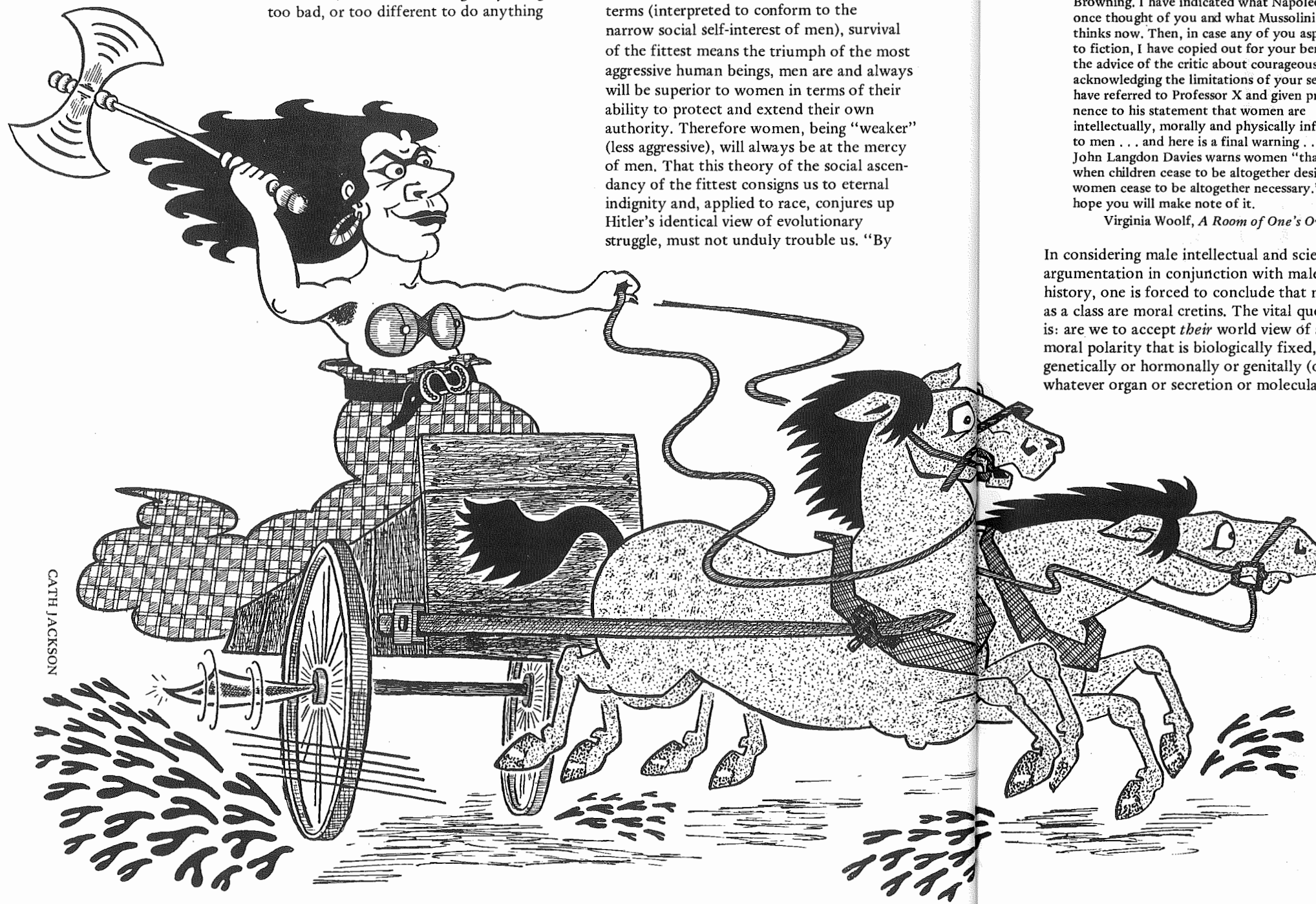
Recently, more and more feminists have been advocating social, spiritual, and mythological models that are female-supremacist and/or matriarchal. To me, this advocacy signifies a basic conformity to the tenets of biological determinism that underpin the male social system. Pulled toward an ideology based on the moral and social significance of a distinct female biology because of its emotional and philosophical familiarity, drawn to the spiritual dignity inherent in a "female principle" (essentially as defined by men), of course unable to abandon by will or impulse a lifelong and centuries-old commitment to childbearing as *the* female creative act, women have increasingly tried to transform the very ideology that has enslaved us into a dynamic, religious, psychologically compelling celebration of female biological potential. This attempted transformation may have survival value — that is, the worship of our procreative capacity as *power* may temporarily stay the male-supremacist hand that cradles the test tube. But the price we pay is that we become carriers of the disease we must cure. It is no accident that some female supremacists now believe men to be a distinct and inferior species or race. Wherever power is accessible or bodily integrity honoured on the basis of biological attribute, systematised cruelty permeates the society and murder and mutilation will contaminate it. We will not be different.

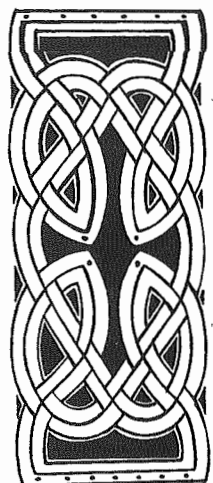
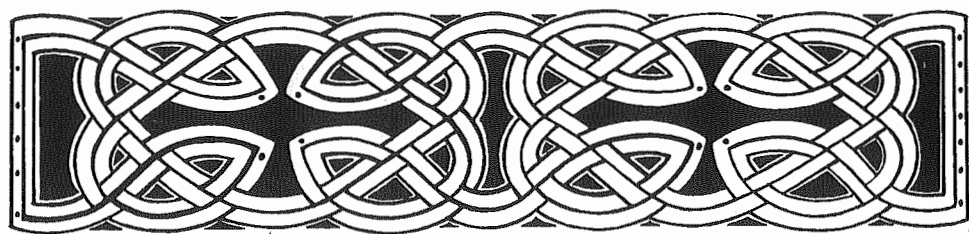
It is shamefully easy for us to enjoy our own fantasies of biological omnipotence while despising men for enjoying the reality of theirs. And it is dangerous — because genocide begins, however improbably, in the conviction that classes of biological distinction indisputably sanction social and political discrimination. We, who have been devastated by the concrete consequences of this idea, still want to put our faith in it. Nothing offers more proof — sad, irrefutable proof — that we are more like men than either they or we care to believe. □

Notes

1. Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962), p296.
2. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, p442.
3. Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, ed, *Documents on Nazism 1919-1945* (New York: The Viking Press, 1975), p493.
4. George Gilder, *Sexual Suicide* (New York: Quadrangle, 1973), v.
5. Steven Goldberg, *The Inevitability of Patriarchy* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc, 1973), p228.
6. Edward O Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1975), p573.
7. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc, 1957), pp115-16.

Andrea Dworkin 1988, *Letters from a War Zone*, Secker and Warburg. Original title of this essay is "Biological Superiority: The World's Most Dangerous and Deadly Idea".





States of Emergenc.e.

Following on from the article in 'Trouble and Strife' 12 on feminism in Northern Ireland, four women come together to talk about the last fifteen years of the Women's Liberation Movement in the Republic.

Ailbhe Smyth lectures in French at University College, Dublin, where she has been closely involved in the development of Women's Studies. She has been active in the Women's Movement for several years.

Pauline Jackson is a social scientist specialising in issues relating to women at work and reproduction. She has been active in both the women's and the anti-nuclear movements.

Caroline McCamley is currently chairwoman of the Council for the Status of Women. She is an active trade unionist and has been involved in the Trade Union Women's Forum for some time.

Ann Speed is a socialist and a republican, active in both the women's and the Trades Union movements. She is currently involved in the 'Defend the Clinics' campaign.

ASp: When we started out in the '70s, we had an expectation that if we in the Irish Women's Liberation Movement took the fundamental issues which women were discussing across the world and applied them in Ireland, then we could move forward in a straight line. The last 15 years have shown that we have *not* been able to fulfill that aspiration, mainly because of the kind of country we live in and its historical problems which have carried forward into the present time.

PJ: I would have said that any time from 1983 onwards – from the time of the referendum on abortion – was a time to take some distance and refer to the last 15 years. Even more so, of course, after the defeat of the divorce referendum¹ because those of us who were active in the movement in the early '70s could never have

predicted then that we would go backwards as far as these referenda seem to suggest. Then, it was a question of how fast we could go forward. Would we move at a slow, reformist pace, fighting it out issue by issue, or would it be possible to take great leaps. I believe we were caught on the hop, as it were, in the early '80s because we hadn't sufficiently analysed how right-wing thinking on a global scale was going to filter into Ireland.

ASp: Some of us may have foreseen the impact of international economic recession, but theoretically. When it had an impact on us personally, in terms of the movement and of our everyday lives, it was quite a shock. I see the defeat of the divorce referendum in 1986 as part of that. Women were expressing their fear of the economic unknown and of the potential effects of a change in their legal status.

AS: Do you think then that during the 1970s there was perhaps an overconcentration on issues which seemed to be of less direct relevance to women as we lived our everyday lives?

ASp: We have a very high ratio of dependents in Irish society and I think that the women's movement may have underestimated that factor. We spent a good deal of time – I believe correctly – trying to come to terms with partition. We tended to concentrate on it in purely political terms. It is only more recently that we have come to understand and to confront the social and economic implications.

AS: But if you consider the kinds of issues that were to the fore in the mid to late '70s, they do seem to me to have been very practical. The big debates and campaigns focussed on economic independence and equality, on reproductive rights and on violence against women. Surely these are central to women's lives? I wonder why the effect of these campaigns seems, in some sense at least, to have been rather ephemeral. Is it too gloomy to ask what went wrong? Is it too facile to attribute the apparent loss of momentum to the economic situation?

ASp: Well, it may be easy – but it is also true. To sustain development and change in these areas, there must be a sound economic structure. I think that while we were campaigning politically and ideologically,

the material basis on which to build was shrinking ever more rapidly. There has always been a certain lack of confidence in the Women's Movement in approaching the big economic questions. I attribute that, at least in part, to male mystification of academic work in particular. The major economic issues are, as it were removed from our grasp.

CMcC: Or women are quite simply ignored, as happened so blatantly in the recent elections. We were not asked for our opinions on the economy, the national debt, unemployment. It was assumed that women had nothing to say. The fact of the national debt has fundamental implications for women on a day-to-day basis, and throughout the entire country. The elections focussed on the central problem of the economy, without ever examining how women as a group are affected by the recession. So yes, I would say that the recession is an important factor but that there is *also* an attitude, still prevailing, that women, our views and opinions, are of no consequence.

Theory and debate

AS: Are we now feeling in the '80s the consequences of a relative lack of debate and theory-making during the early years of the movement? Or is that an unfair reading or interpretation?

PJ: I think in the early years there was a great deal of debate, although not necessarily based on very sound social and economic theory. We were functioning then mainly in terms of cultural and political theory. That's no harm – debate was in fact positively helpful, refreshing. What we did indeed lack was theory, but I can't say retrospectively that we *ought* to have had more theory. That would have been totally idealistic. Where was the theory to come from? Unless women had direct encounters with practice and action and unless there were political parties of the left or centre prepared to offer perspectives which were sufficiently attractive for women to engage with – to tangle with – how were women to *make* theory? At that time the major political parties had no interest in developing theory and analysis which women could test

or confront for its adequacy or inadequacy.

I think that we are now paying the price for the false dichotomy which developed then — where women regarded theory as outside, belonging to 'politics', narrowly defined, and regarded action as specially our own, belonging to the movement and to the mass of women in their workplaces or homes.

AS: But there was surely a lot of reflection and analysis coming from Irish Women United, between say, 1975 and 1977². And what I now find so depressing is that so many of the issues, so much of the analysis, are still the same. That what was thought and said then requires to be said again. Looking back from that perspective, I can clearly see phases or stages in the development of the Women's Movement.

How do you perceive and define this development — if that is the right word?

ASp: I think firstly it is important to recognise that a movement, whether on the ideological, social or political levels, can take many forms. The co-existence of different currents, campaigns, organisations is very much part of political life and action. I would argue that there have been three phases over the past 15 years — we are now, perhaps, in the fourth phase. There was, to begin with, the Reformist/Revolutionary divide. Then later, the Revolutionary current tried to consolidate, which was difficult to do in the mid '70s during a period of recession and reaction, when you had the Coalition Government, the state of emergency, attacks on the nationalist and republican movement and growing unemployment. Nonetheless, a number of women cut their political teeth, so to speak, at this time and went on to organise campaigns, and establish groups and organisations. The third phase I would place around the period of the hunger strike campaign, when a radical feminist current did not shy away from addressing major political issues.

Now, I am not suggesting that the reformist end of the movement was inactive. They accomplished a number of very practical things — the Council for the Status of Women was set up, AIM group for Family Law Reform, Women's Aid (now Family Aid) were founded, and so on³. Nonetheless, I think they stayed on the sidelines of the

big political battles.

CMcC: The groups you mention saw themselves primarily as providing a service.

ASp: Exactly. The fourth phase, or where we are now, is of course the most difficult to define. I think we are at a turning point, which is true of political life in general in Ireland. I see the potential for a major initiative from the left, and I believe that the Women's Movement must be involved in that development and make itself politically relevant in terms of analysis, issues and strategy.

Fusion of issues

PJ: I think it is more nuanced than participating in a major left-wing initiative. The kind of initiative Ann is suggesting could take the form of women standing as independent candidates in elections; or there could be the deliberate creation of socialist-feminist currents within political parties; currents of thinking that explicitly set an agenda for women — rather like the Working Women's Charter in the early '70s.

I take this thinking from the kinds of issues which are coming up in the trades unions at present. The fusion of feminist issues — such as the right to pregnancy counselling, to full family planning services, etc — and economic issues is, I believe, encouraging for women outside the trades unions. There was, earlier on, a very tight identification between Irish Women United and women strikers. There was direct involvement on picket lines in the Thoms' Directory strike and with the wives of postal workers, and this occurred without shame or embarrassment⁴. It was what you might call the direct offering of a *political* service by women in the movement to women workers.

The movement is extremely diffuse. There is a certain fear of drawing new lines. And this is justifiable given the defeats we have experienced over the past few years. Nonetheless, there are unities or unifying factors. Radical feminists may be less apparent politically, but are still very strong. There has been very significant cultural development, which we have experienced clearly within Women's Studies.

ASp: There was a critique of Irish Women United which particularly annoyed

me. It was argued that IWU was not interested in issues relevant to working-class women. Firstly, I would have to say that the assumption that contraception is not an issue for *all* women is simply ignorant. Secondly, we did, in IWU, in fact identify with women in struggle at the economic level.

I was involved in both the Women's Movement and the trades unions and I often felt quite schizoid. At the risk of seeming controversial, I have to say that so many women argued, "well, I'm a feminist, but my priorities are with the trades unions", whereas I maintained — and still do — that you have to stand in both places at once. Otherwise, you get sucked into the bureaucracy, and lose contact with the dynamics and energy of the Women's Movement.

I believe that kind of division cost us dearly. Some women *were* assimilated, and I can understand it up to a point. There has been such hostility to "mad" feminists. I *do* believe, however, that we must consolidate both strengths.

Questions of autonomy

AS: This may be controversial too, but could I put it to you that there has been a failure on the part of trade union women to introduce new concepts and forms of political practice into the trade union movement?

CMcC: I couldn't agree that trade union women have failed. One of the difficulties we faced at the beginning — apart from having to wear flak jackets to meetings — was that on the one hand, we were trying to preserve a principled stand on issues which we knew had a place within the unions, issues which in fact had a lot to offer the trades unions, while on the other we were attempting to deal with a male-oriented, deeply traditional structure and system. We had to fight the system, or at least try to break it down, on its own terms, and yet not lose sight of our priorities as women and feminists. We were constantly presented with dilemmas. I do think a lot of time is lost in this way — perhaps we do need to make a more overt challenge.

AS: Yes, I think that the problems of the dissipation of energies and enthusiasms is still a very real one. So much of your energy has to be turned towards just main-

taining your place in the system. Perhaps we might do better to avoid the risk of co-option, the diffusion of enthusiasm, by refusing to function within the system at all, and by developing alternative structures and mechanisms. Which is, I realise, to argue for a form of separatism with which I am not entirely comfortable.

ASp: I would say that we do need an autonomous Women's Movement.

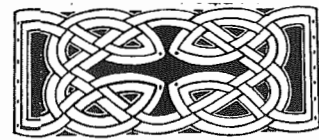
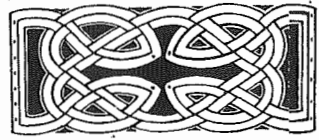
AS: And does that now exist?

ASp: It is wherever women organise independently to pressurise a government, an institution, to make change. It is a creature of constant ebb and flow — a chameleon. And of course you cannot change only from within. You also need the mass pressure of a social movement from without. And it is a mistaken analysis to believe otherwise.

AS: And I would also emphasise that women working within traditional, highly-structured and institutionalised settings are also part — potentially (at least) — of the autonomous Women's Movement *and* members of the broad community. There cannot ever be absolute dividing lines for me.

PJ: One of the more interesting manifestations of Irish women over the past five years or so has, I think, been in London. There has been, for example, the London Irish Women's Conference, the Irish Women's Centre has been set up, there is a Women's History Group, and Abortion Support Group and a number of other London-Irish movement groups as distinct from social organisations.

That flowering of autonomy occurred under a radical Labour Local Government — the GLC. We have never had an opportunity to develop in this way here in Ireland, partly due to the rigidity of the state, a fixation on certain political themes to the exclusion of others, partly due to the division of the state and its underdeveloped character. Everything we have gained has had to be fought for — often to the highest level of the courts. Here, we have had no concessions, unlike other states — even Portugal, Greece and Spain, emerging from dictatorships — which have felt confident enough to make certain concessions to women's status.



I think too that we are now suffering the consequences of women's exodus to London, to get a breath of freedom. Women are not leaving Ireland for purely economic reasons. They want freedom — the kind of ambiguous freedom that Pat Murphy's film *Maeve* explores. That ambiguity is composed of the desire *not* to leave one's country but, at the same time, the desire to be an individual in one's own right.

Divisions between women

ASp: During the early '70s for example, there was a hostility among women towards the national question. Many then went to London, where they were able to stand back from the situation, to develop a sense of perspective which enabled them to realise the impact of imperialism on their lives.

AS: In an interview in *Trouble and Strife 7*, Mary Jennings maintains that the national question was in effect evacuated from within Irish Women United, because it was recognised as being potentially so destructive. That, of course, is her interpretation.

What is abundantly clear is that there have been various divisive factors and issues within the Women's Movement. Some of these have been discussed and debated, while others have not. It seems to me that class issues have not been clearly articulated, despite IWU support for women strikers. I would also see the division between reformists, or liberals, and radicals as having been to some extent eluded. The crucial dividing line, however, does still appear to be between republican women and those who do not align themselves in relation to nationalist or republican politics.

PJ: Yes. Both Ann and I have emphasised that the national question and one's position vis a vis the State have been consistently more important than class issues, not because these issues are to be underrated, but because the national question is still overriding and overdetermining. It is easier to surpass class hostilities and antagonisms among women, but you can divide a women's meeting over the national question in ten minutes flat. Women will shout, cry, walk out, if you raise the question of Armagh, Maghaberry, strip-searching.

AS: I certainly agree with you that it is the most divisive issue — the 1984 Women's Conference in Rutland Street, in Dublin, is a pertinent example. Is there a way over and beyond this divisiveness?

CMcC: I would say, to begin with, that on balance women are now better educated, more vocal, more politically aware, and this does make a difference. One of the difficulties of the national question is that although the issues are obviously there, they are often not named as such. For instance, we have been discussing the issue of violence in the Council for the Status of Women over the past few months and it is quite extraordinary how there has been an evasion of direct debate about violence in relation of the national question and the State. We discuss violence outside and beyond the national question, but we have emotive and ambivalent attitudes towards nationalism and violence — for example, the difference which is made between the ANC (African National Congress) and Sinn Fein. I think there is a whole set of Women's organisations who have refused to deal with this area, and who will now have to do so.

AS: Nonetheless, there are significant numbers of women within the movement, and from a variety of currents or tendencies, who argue that discussion of the national question is not central to, or is even a distraction from, the fundamental bases of women's oppression under patriarchy. They maintain that it actively interferes with and impedes the development of analysis and cohesive action.

PJ: I don't think it can be dismissed. The issues creep in by the back door, even if they are not explicitly articulated. I think we have seen this clearly in Women's Studies, for example. Seminars and conferences which explore the issues even in an apparently peripheral way — Irish Folklore, Language, Literature and, of course, History — evoke very significant interest.

CMcC: And I would add that women's views, especially about their relation to, or place in, the State, do spring from their position on the national question, even when this is not explicitly stated. After all, the system that we are attempting to revolutionise is a system that came about

through armed struggle earlier this century. We are now having to confront the consequences of this. I don't think the debate can be evaded.

AS: What is the current position of the Council for the Status of Women on this?

CMcC: I wouldn't underestimate the difficulties we face in attempting to deal with it.

ASp: Women haven't set any preconditions on solidarity with each other. Republican women in the North will support the Defend the Clinics Campaign here, without demanding that every woman be a Republican⁵.

CMcC: And that also applies to more traditional women's organisations which are being asked to support anti-strip-searching campaigns, for example.

ASp: That is exactly the kind of solidarity which has continued to enable us to debate.

AS: That solidarity or cohesion seems to me to be very tenuous and fragile. One has the sense that it might collapse at any moment, and that it is maintained only by avoiding open discussion — as has already been said. I would suggest that what actually operates is a tacit decision *not* to introduce disruptive questions and issues.

ASp: True feminists, that is those who put their care and concern for women above everything else, will not allow their own political prejudice to interfere with action. I believe that those who refused to support the Armagh women betrayed feminism.

Control by Church and State

AS: I wonder if we are not saying somewhat contradictory things. On the one hand, we say that we must confront the national question and position. On the other hand, we seem to be saying that there are areas or issues which transcend nationalism. That there is a fundamental solidarity between women which overrides national divisions. I would like to ask you about how you perceive the relevance of the national question to, say, reproductive rights, and to women's right to define our own sexuality.

ASp: There is in Ireland no popular dynamic towards pluralism. Partition has given the state a powerful role, both eco-

nomically and ideologically. The education and health systems have remained significantly under the influence, if not the direct control of the Catholic church.

AS: Looking at the massive vote by women against divorce and for the constitutional amendment prohibiting abortion, perhaps we should be asking ourselves if our analysis of patriarchy has been inadequate or erroneous.

ASp: In the context of the 26 counties, what is happening to the patriarchy, and particularly to the family, is in point of fact contradictory. On the one hand the family is being consolidated by the recession and by the right-wing offensive. And on the other, it is being torn apart by a combination of those very same factors and by women's own efforts, despite the difficulties, to gain some sense of independence.

AS: Would you say, then, that the State in the South is becoming *more* oppressive, authoritarian and controlling?

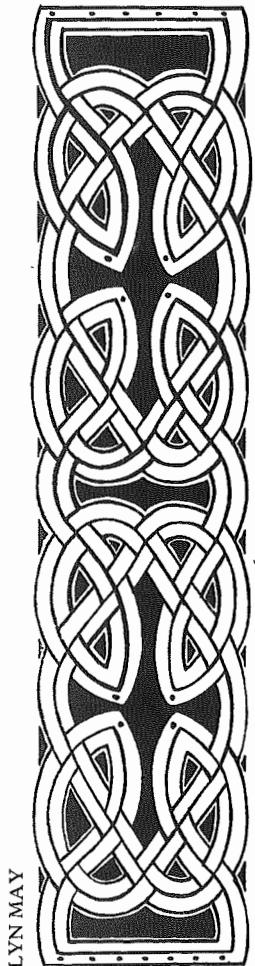
ASp: No. I think the authority of the State is being undermined. However, working-class women haven't got the power to push this process much further.

AS: I would say that we haven't succeeded in breaking down the power of the classic authority figures — the priest in the pulpit, legislators, educators and so on.

ASp: Nonetheless, their authority is now only partially recognised. If you take the example of the Pope's visit — women went out in their thousands to see the Pope in the Phoenix Park, and then went home and used the Pill that night. And of course, thousands of Irish women continue to have abortions in Britain every year.

AS: I would agree with you that there has to some extent been an erosion of patriarchal authority structures, and I think that somewhat paradoxically this became clear during the Abortion Referendum campaign, where the topic was openly discussed. Then however, last June, the result of the Divorce Referendum demonstrated that attitudes and positions had hardened, become more right-wing and entrenched. The fear of the disintegrating family seems to have strengthened.

ASp: I would still maintain that this State is very weak in its ability to control.



AS: So why, then, have women not gained in strength vis-a-vis the State?

ASp: Because we lack unity of purpose and clarity in our ideas. The answer lies in the resolution of the national question.

AS: There are very many women, feminists, in the South who will argue that the solution to the oppression of women does not lie solely or even centrally in the creation of a new State which would remain fundamentally patriarchal. This is a legitimate point of view, reinforced by experiences, by history, elsewhere.

CMcC: I think we must put our feminism first.

PJ: I don't believe the weakness of the State necessarily corresponds to the strength of the Women's Movement. There is a huge void, which in one part of the country is filled by Republicanism. To that extent, Republicanism does play a radical role and the State is correct — from its own perspective — to seek to suppress it at all costs. However, I think the question of what we might wish to put in the place of the existing State is an unfair one. It is a question which was not asked elsewhere — I'm thinking of Spain, Greece, Portugal and so on. It is a necessary precondition for the significant advancement of the emancipation of women that we united with our sisters in the North.

Final thoughts

AS: If I might put a final question to each of you: what do you consider to be the major issues which have *not* been prominently on the feminist agenda over the past several years?

CMcC: The national question remains for me the single most important area where discussion has been avoided.

ASp: It's difficult to answer that. I think class has not come to the fore enough.

AS: For me, one of the major items which has not been part of the feminist programme here is the question of sexuality. I would like to see explicit discussion of sexuality, because so often when we appear to talk about it, we actually mean reproduction. We need also in this context to explore the often problematic relations between heterosexual women and lesbians.

This is an issue which has remained oddly peripheral within the Women's Movement here.

There are so many other issues we have not been able to explore today. Perhaps we would all agree that we need more space, more time for this kind of reflection and analysis?

PJ: Yes — definitely.

CMcC: I expected us to be more in disagreement than we were in fact.

ASp: We did seem to have a common framework in which to entertain each other's political analyses.

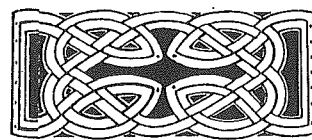
CMcC: In some respects, our revolutions may appear to be different — but it's all revolution.

In conclusion

Inevitably, many of our questions remain unexamined: politically specific areas such as censorship, emigration; broader issues such as sexuality; health and reproduction; the impact of new technologies on our lives; the politicisation of young women, the disillusionment of older feminists; issues specific to the nature and structure of the Women's Movement, such as the need for constructive auto-critique; the development of new organisational forms and strategies; the process of recording, documenting and analysing the contemporary story of the movement itself.

We acknowledge that serious attempts have been made to undermine women's struggles for freedom and independence over the past several years. None of us would accept that feminism is a spent force. It would be fruitless to deny that we have been wearied to the point of disenchantment by the systematic assaults of right-wing puritanism. It would be, equally, impossible to deny that the 1980s have been years of exceptional creative and cultural activity on the part of women throughout the country. This we must recognise, value and celebrate. □

This article originally appeared in The Honest Ulsterman.



Footnotes

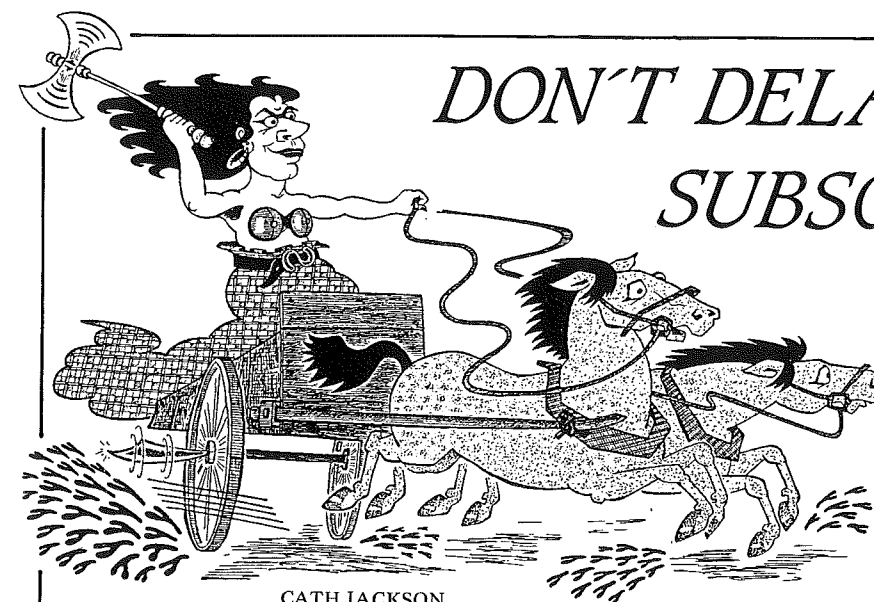
1. In June 1986 the referendum proposing the deletion from the Constitution of the prohibition against divorce was defeated.

2. Irish Women United (1975-1977) was the most visible and active radical feminist grouping to emerge in the 26 counties during the 1970s.

3. The Council for the Status of Women, established in 1973, represents over 60 women's groups and organisations. Recognised by the Government, it receives a small annual subsidy.

4. In 1975, 500 trade unionists marched in solidarity with eight women who had lost their jobs with Thom's Directory when the firm learned they had joined a trade union. In 1977, three women postal workers at Enfield went on strike for six months over their demand for improvements in pay and conditions.

5. In 1986, the High Court ruled that counselling women on abortion is in breach of Article 40.3.3 of the Constitution, ie the clause defending the "right to life of the unborn" inserted in the Constitution as a result of the 1983 referendum). A feminist campaign to defend clinics providing abortion counselling services formed immediately after the High Court ruling.



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