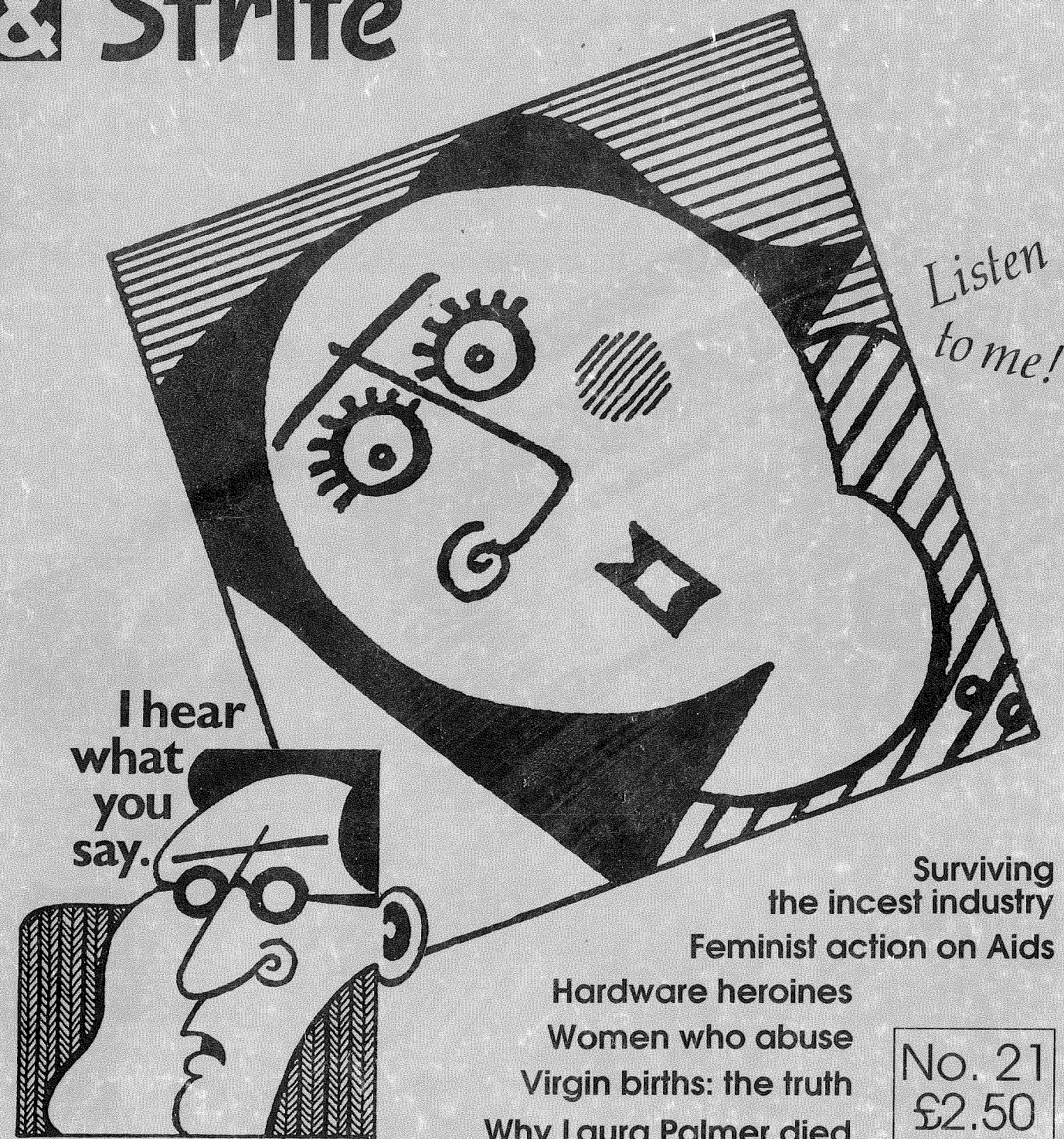


# Trouble & Strife

The radical feminist magazine



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to me!*

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what  
you  
say.

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the incest industry  
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Hardware heroines  
Women who abuse  
Virgin births: the truth  
Why Laura Palmer died

No. 21  
£2.50

*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 & Strife* is produced collectively by Lynn Alderson, Margot Farnham, Cath Jackson, Liz Kelly, Sophie Laws and Sara Scott; with help from Didi Herman, Davina Cooper, Lisa Adkins, Sue Botcherby, Caroline Forbes and Emma Kelly. With many thanks to the Women's Health and Reproductive Rights Centre for the use of their space and resources.

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number 2  
february 1990

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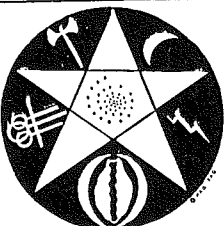
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## Contents No. 21

# Trouble & Strife

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Letters   | 2  |
| Deadly neglect US Aids activist <i>Risa Denenburg</i><br>talks to <i>Katy Watson</i>                | 3  |
| Immaculate conceptions <i>Jill Radford</i> asks why the<br>fuss about 'virgin births'?              | 8  |
| Unspeakable acts: women who abuse <i>Liz Kelly</i>  | 13 |
| "Dear Ms Woolf, we are returning your guineas"<br><i>carol ann douglas</i> reflects on the Gulf War | 21 |
| Re-inventing the wheel Saudi women take to<br>the road  | 23 |
| Why Laura Palmer died <i>Diana Hume George</i>  | 26 |
| Surviving the incest industry <i>Louise Armstrong</i>   | 29 |
| Making feminist law? <i>Maureen O'Hara</i> on<br>legislation against pornography                    | 33 |
| Hardware heroines <i>Sue Botcherby and Rosie</i><br><i>Garland</i> go to the movies                 | 40 |
| Three steps forward <i>Nema Mdoe</i> talks to <i>Liz Kelly</i><br>about women in Tanzania           | 47 |

**TROUBLE & STRIFE has moved: please note our new address.**  
**Trouble & Strife, PO Box 8, Diss, Norfolk IP22 3XG.**

**Shanti Service Cutback**  
Following the article in the last issue of T&S on Shanti Women's Counselling Service in Brixton, we have learned that two of the women we interviewed have been made redundant. West Lambeth Health Authority has cut back the service substantially, and no replacement funding has been found. Both Lambeth Council and the Health Authority have been obliged to impose very severe cuts on statutory and voluntary sector services this year, and those serving women and ethnic minority people have been particularly hard hit.



# Letters

## Impressed

Dear Trouble & Strife

I've been meaning to write ever since I too belatedly discovered the journal, about a year ago (*belated* for someone who has been a radical feminist for over 10 years now). A radical feminist *politically committed* journal! Imagine. Theory *still* committed to the goals of *women's liberation*. There's nothing of that sort here in the States, as you undoubtedly know. I am so impressed by your combination of down to earth, lucid writing and sharp, political thinking.



Judy Stevens

In the issues I've read (2) what stands out is Margot Farnham's wonderfully subtle critique – and from such a fresh perspective – of 'pro-sex' discourse. I also loved the critique of the "women who love too much" culture (I can't remember the author).

This material is so refreshing given my particular vantage point in academia, witnessing year by year the increasing trend of academic feminism to sell the goals of a women's liberation movement down the river. How many recently published feminist texts have not been primarily about debunking second wave feminism? (I'm thinking about Alice Echols' *Daring to be Bad* for a prime instance . . .). Thus thank you, thank you, for your work.

In sisterhood (which some of us in the States, like you, still believe in – as a goal of course).

Kathy Miriam  
Santa Cruz

Dear Sisters,

I have taken it for granted for so long that *Trouble and Strife* is the best feminist publication around that it took your latest issue (20) to wake me enough to tell you just how good it is. Every issue has not only taught me a lot but has also left me feeling more optimistic about the work still being done by radical feminists in all sorts of places. Sometimes I've also felt it has brought me much needed reassurance that there are a lot of us carrying on the struggle and always will be, and that there is at least one place where I can find the politics and commitment that I share and can trust. Thank you all for all your hard work.

But ... what finally moved me to write this down was that issue 20 was *visually* stunning. I thought the illustrations were your best ever. They moved me, upset me, made me think, and (thanks Cath) finally made me laugh. What more can I say. What more can anyone ask.  
Dena Attar  
London

# DEADLY NEGLECT

*The spread of HIV and AIDS among women has been wilfully ignored. This is in part deliberate US policy to ration health care by underplaying the impact on the most disadvantaged and least vocal. Risa Denenburg, a health practitioner and AIDS activist, talks to Katy Watson about poverty, race and how gay activists have also overlooked the needs of women. We must develop our own strategies of prevention.*

*Katy Watson: What proportion of people with AIDS in the USA are women, and which groups of women are most affected?*

Risa Denenburg: The CDC (Centre for Disease Control: the government body responsible for dealing with the AIDS epidemic) reports that overall in the US 10% of people with AIDS are women. New York City in general is about 14%, but if you look in the Bronx, where I work, it's probably closer to 22% and if you go to Newark, New Jersey, it's almost 30%. That's just the number of women who meet the CDC's definition for having AIDS, which is inadequate to describe AIDS in women, so the numbers under-represent. It doesn't begin to talk about the number of women who are HIV positive, for which we're not keeping adequate statistics at all. And it's growing. The incidence of AIDS cases is growing faster among women than any other and we expect it to continue to rise at about 3% a year. Every year the proportion of women infected by sexual contact with a man keeps increasing relative to the number considered to have been infected by their own drug use.

In the US 73% of women with AIDS are women of colour; in New York City it's more like 85%. Racism impacts on people's ability to

get benefits and health care, and it impacts at least twice as much on women with AIDS as men with AIDS: only about 40% of men with AIDS are people of colour, so racism has a much stronger, much more severe and life-threatening effect on women in this crisis, and that goes for children, too.

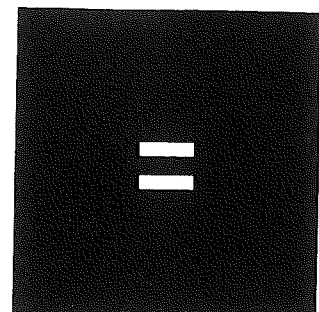
Combine that with sexism in a health care system that really has neglected women, that has been malignantly neglectful of poor women in terms of pushing drugs and contraception on women's bodies that were known to be unsafe. Deliberate exploitation of poor women has been the rule in this country. The question of access to care then becomes confused: can care be trusted?

The outcome of that very reasonable distrust is that a lot of women do delay care. There are many complicating factors: women are taking care of the children, taking care of men and other family members. Women really have a tremendous burden and caring for themselves is usually last on the list.

*KW: How are women contracting HIV?*

RD: We tend to jump to the conclusion that women are more likely to contract HIV than to spread it through male-female sexual interaction. We think that is because it's true of other

SILENCE



DEATH

sexually transmitted infections. There are certain biological realities: when a man ejaculates inside a woman she's exposed to more germs than he is.

This also immediately brings into mind the question of female to female transmission, because in the scenario where it's harder for a man to get it from a woman one could also presume that it's even more difficult for a woman to get HIV from another woman. But it hasn't been studied and we don't know. There are a few documented cases of female to female transmission.

Lesbians, in my experience, engage in risk behaviours like other women do. Lesbians are as likely to shoot drugs as other women and some lesbians have sex with men. There are a lot of risk issues that lesbians have so far been unwilling to deal with within our community and in terms of getting government recognition that we might be at risk. It's really scary. A lot of women who do sleep with women don't identify as lesbians, and there's a class and race dimension to that. Working in a clinic like I do in the South Bronx, where the majority of the women that I see are poor, the majority are Latina women or Black women, even I'm surprised at how many of them acknowledge that they have sex with women. It's quite a large number and it wouldn't come out if someone didn't ask. That means they're not informed at all that there may be a risk to their partner or to themselves in having unprotected sex with women.

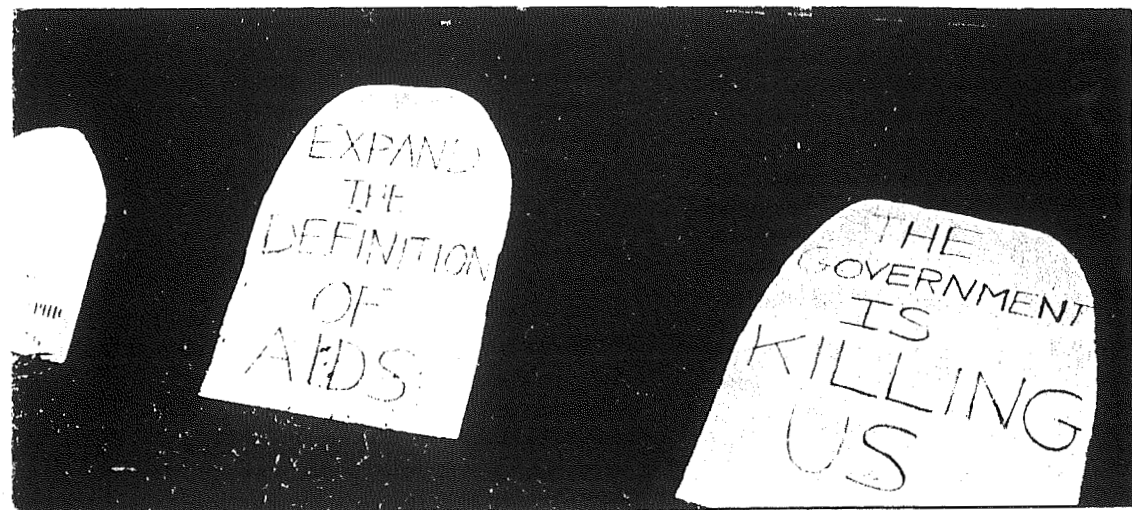
It's a huge topic and there's no language, no vehicle to talk about it. The answer isn't den-

tal dams. The question is, what are the behaviours, what are the sexual acts we're engaging in, what kinds of things could we do to minimise risk? The dental dam has become the symbol of appeasement to vocal lesbians, to our statements that lesbians are at risk. But the effectiveness of dental dams hasn't even been studied; they're not made for oral sex; oral sex is not the only thing that lesbians do that puts us at risk.

*KW: You said before that you expect to see the proportion of women with AIDS increasing steadily. Do you have an idea of why that is?*

*RD: When the gay community responded to AIDS, the affected people themselves created a model for safer sex that did not destroy gay sex and it's become almost normative now and it has definitely influenced the spread of HIV in the gay community. An effective strategy came out, by gay leadership, and resources were made available from within the community.*

What we have for women is a totally ineffective strategy; that is totally culturally irrelevant. We have: "Just say no". Fine! We tell women to use condoms: women don't have dicks, women can't use condoms. Women who are in heterosexual relationships, who have children, who are poor, are not in a position to organise to meet these needs. They don't perceive women as a community: their community is one of men and women. If it's a Black, a Haitian or a Puerto Rican community, women don't see themselves as separate from the men. And women have had no message that they're at risk, because the CDC doesn't believe that the problems women have are important



*Risa Denenburg, health practitioner and AIDS activist*

enough to study. Even women who do perceive themselves to be at risk have to weigh other risks: asking her partner to use a condom might mean risking physical abuse, or refusal or rejection, or getting kicked out.

It's a strategy for failure. Women feel less, not more empowered by messages telling them to use condoms. The very thing that's being promoted is almost impossible to do. And they say, "Cut down on the number of your sexual partners" as a strategy! So the woman who's had one sexual partner in her whole life thinks she's not at risk, no matter what he does.

Prevention strategies work: they are working in the gay community. And the way to make them work is to put money into the hands of women who will develop programmes for their own communities that employ useful strategies. And also to spend some damn money to create a method that women can use that the man doesn't need to know about. I cannot believe that a viricide that could kill HIV in the form of a cream or pellet that could be put in the vagina prior to intercourse could not have been created five or six years ago, when we first realised the need for it. And I don't know of anybody that's researching it, any money that's been put towards it.

It's a matter of neglect. That's why more women are getting infected and that's why more women are going to die.

*KW: Why do you think women are so invisible*

*as people with AIDS?*

*RD: I think that women are invisible because of government neglect and neglect in the press. I think that everybody, including AIDS activists, who stood to play a role in making sure that women's needs were met and that women were seen in this epidemic have failed women.*

The other aspect is that women's roles as vectors of the infection have been such a strongly projected image in the press: women as transmitters to their children, or transmitters to another woman through sex for money with that woman's husband. Women are devalued as people. Those things have stopped women being seen as having health needs and have contributed to the incredible increase of HIV among women.

*KW: Why do women die so much faster of AIDS than men?*

*RD: We don't even know for sure that women die faster than men if all things were equal. But women are poorer; there are more women than men of colour in the AIDS epidemic, and poverty certainly plays a tremendous role in terms of survival.*

Another reason is that the illnesses that women have aren't defined as AIDS. Underdiagnosing of HIV-related illnesses in women happens because, when women seek health care in this country, they're more likely to go to an emergency room, a public health department, an STD clinic or, if they can afford it, a





gynaecologist's office. Very few women of childbearing age are seen as whole people; the primary health care services never look beyond their vagina. The gynaecological manifestations of this disease are less than understood, so women with HIV-related problems are seeking health care in places that don't view those problems as representing their HIV status. The problem is self-perpetuating.

Also women get much sicker before they're diagnosed. If you're diagnosed later in the course of illness, of course your survival statistics are going to look bad. Even with a broader understanding of gender specific problems, we're still going to see poorer people dying faster in an inequitable health system.

*KW: In medical terms, how does HIV affect women differently from men?*

RD: A lot of things are similar: women get PCP (pneumocystis carinii pneumonia), pneumonias and so forth. People who use drugs get certain different illnesses; certain drugs are associated with certain kinds of illnesses. But women have specific gynaecological problems that are associated with HIV illness. There are three things that I know about and there may be others: chronic vaginal yeast infections (thrush), the pelvic inflammatory diseases (PID) and a tremendously increased rate of abnormal pap smears, which means that we're probably going to see a lot more cervical cancers soon if we don't do the pap smears, if we don't treat it aggressively.

These three areas need really good monitoring. Women need two pap smears a year but we can't get the government to acknowledge this. We can't get the resources to provide the kind of gynaecological care that women with HIV illness need, particularly when the gynaecological problems aren't even acknowledged as being related to HIV.

There are health care providers out there who are very well meaning, but they don't even know that their clients need two pap smears a year. That's the responsibility of the government. That's why we have the CDCs, to do this kind of epidemiological surveillance to inform the providers so that we can contain the mortality from this illness. And that's another area of tremendous neglect.

*KW: You say that the CDC's definition of AIDS (the list of medical conditions which mean that someone officially has AIDS) is inadequate and needs to be changed. Can you explain that?*

RD: Many women, including women who are known to be HIV positive, are dying of AIDS-related infections without AIDS being diagnosed. That's clearly a political problem in this country and in the world, because people follow the CDC's definition even though it's not appropriate for women or for drug users or probably for poor people of colour throughout the world. It's most appropriate for white gay men in this country. It's creating a very skewed picture of what's going on even here.

Many activist groups have been pressuring the CDC to revise their definition and they've been extremely reluctant to do this. The number of cases has soared when many officials were predicting a levelling off of the spread of the illness.

Women are getting sick and dying when they're young of things like pneumonia, complications of gynaecological problems and nobody is expanding the definition to recognise that these women would not have died were their immune systems not compromised.

We don't have a national health service and people have to qualify for benefits by presenting medical and financial information suggesting that they need these government benefits. In this case people who are very ill are being denied the most basic benefits because they don't have an AIDS diagnosis.

*KW: Why is there such a high proportion of women of colour among women with AIDS?*

RD: Well it's a very important question and it's not simple. One of the variables is drug use which predated AIDS, but the fact of the matter is that in poor communities where joblessness is the rule, where the kinds of money that people can make and the kinds of jobs they can get are horrifying, where life can be hopeless, it's not very difficult to understand that drug use will become part of the culture. And drug use, needle sharing, is of course a tremendous reason why poor people have been affected with the virus. Poverty itself has never been defined as a risk for HIV infection and yet it is, because poverty demands that people live in places where rates of illness are high, poverty demands that people are more susceptible to a variety of problems. And poverty disproportionately affects people of colour.

*KW: What are the implications of HIV infection for women who want to have children?*

RD: There's no very great risk in pregnancy for

a woman who has HIV infection but is asymptomatic and is doing fairly well. It's not likely to accelerate the rate of her HIV illness. In fact women are known to take better care of themselves when they're pregnant, because of the way motherhood is viewed. The risk of transmission of the virus to the baby is about 30%.

We can't abdicate any woman's right to have a child if she wants to and we need to know enough to support whatever decision a woman makes. In this country we've seen gross immediate reactionary abridgements of women's rights in reaction to HIV. Women who've been positive have gone into abortion clinics and been refused abortions. Women with HIV have been sterilised without their knowledge; women have even been forced to abort. Once a woman is positive she is an open field for people's judgement and for their coercive practices and policies on her reproductive choice.

I think that it's a cruel hoax to tell women who are positive and fairly healthy to delay childbearing until more is known.

*KW: I went to an ACT-UP meeting here and thought it had a very positive feeling as regards women's issues. How hard have women had to work for that?*

RD: It's been a battle for a very small number of women all along. There are more women in ACT-UP now, but I think that the original group of women to join ACT-UP sacrificed their own agendas because of a tremendous commitment to the community of gay men who were affected by HIV. That wasn't good enough early on and it's not good enough for us now and we've worked very hard to both educate men to the reality of women's needs and to confront them to take on these issues as part of their own struggle.

More men now understand that there is a movement to look to historically that has worked on health care issues and people's rights around health care. Also that the reproductive rights movement is a sexual liberation movement, just like the gay rights movement, and that we're naturally aligned – something that most gay men had never really considered.

And there's always the dilemmas that we face being lesbian AIDS activists: feminists or other lesbians working on a variety of issues who say that it's not valid to be working on these men's issues. Those women are closing

their eyes to the fact that this is a women's and a lesbians' issue. But I think a lot of us feel very torn in terms of the choices that we've made to do the AIDS activism.

*KW: Where did ACT-UP learn their organisational tactics and their direct action?*

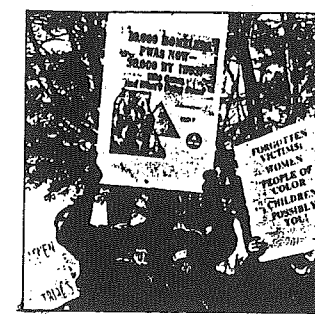
RD: There's nothing new. It's tremendously exciting to have 500 people come together at meetings once a week and engage in some kind of democratic process, dialogue, where anyone can speak. Certainly the tactics of ACT-UP, whether the young people in it realise it or not, came directly out of the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, the feminist movement – street politics, demonstrations, zapping, sit-ins. There's been some flair created by gay male sensibility that we may not have seen in other movements, but it's all been based on traditional, time-honoured effective strategies for drawing public attention to social injustice.

An almost basic step for a group like ACT-UP is to understand the history of other movements. I can't say that it's done that, but there is some basis in the organisation for doing that. There's a very strong Latino/Latina caucus, there's a certain amount of organising going on around issues in Puerto Rico, there's a strong women's presence. The organisation itself is a coalition and by interacting we're forced to listen to one another. There's some more powerful and less powerful groups – those are political dynamics that constantly have to be challenged.

*KW: What do you think will be the main issues for activists in the future?*

RD: I think that it's just so important to understand AIDS as a phenomenon that exists within a social system that fosters poverty, racism, sexism, and to broaden the understanding. But AIDS activists must engage in the painful work of coalition building and unification of struggle around the huge social issues of which AIDS is only one. That's a very hard thing to say within an organisation like ACT-UP, because the urgency that's felt by many of the members is the urgency of their friends dying yesterday.

But I still believe that in the long haul there is no way to change any one bit of this without changing all of it. The sooner we understand the holistic structure of the problem, the sooner our strategies will reach far enough to get huge instead of small public support, and with that kind of public support this movement might succeed in doing some very big things. □





# Immaculate Conceptions

*Why the sudden furore over so-called 'virgin births'? If it's news to the media, it certainly isn't to women. Jill Radford exposes the patriarchal under-belly of this latest hysterical outburst against making babies without men.*

Women have been 'doing it our own way' for a considerable number of years now, to our definite knowledge. It would be arrogant to assume we were the first generation to work out how, particularly as the 'technology' needed is as 'new' as the spoon and the jar. It was AIDs and HIV that brought some women (those with money: treatment is expensive and rarely available through the NHS) to use clinics, where the sperm, gametes or spunk is screened. The use of clinics moved what was previously private knowledge and practice into the public arena. Once in the public arena knowledge becomes available to men and, inevitably, male control and appropriation. However public visibility cannot be the sole cause of the recent media moral panic around the use of donor insemination by 'virgins', single women and lesbians. Since the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) began offering donor insemination on a non-profit-making and non-discriminatory basis in 1977, nearly one thousand babies have been born to mothers using donor insemination

through them. Peter Bromwich of Midland Fertility Services, a private clinic, identifies a longer history of service provision, arguing the first virgin birth was probably twenty or thirty years ago, discounting rumours of such an occurrence almost two thousand years earlier.

Because of this history and our personal knowledge of quite a few women who have had or are currently having children through donor insemination, the Lesbian Custody Project was not expecting the phone lines at Rights of Women to be suddenly besieged in March this year with calls from journalists, mostly male, on the verge of hysteria.

"Is it true?"; "Is it possible?"; "Can women have babies without men?"; "Will virgins throughout the land start giving birth?"; "What about the children and single parents?"; "Is this the end of the family?"; "Is this the end of society?"; "Can you find us some virgin mothers to interview?"; "What does it mean... (gasp)... for men?"; "Will we be laid off?"; "Are we redundant?"; "Mass castration?"; "Is it

legal?"; and, from the so called 'quality press', "Will you help us with an objective piece? Of course we are sympathetic really, but we do need to cover all perspectives. Can you find us some virgin mothers to interview?"; and "Are lesbians virgins?". The most unpleasant caller asked us, in the same breath and without any sense of irony, to find both virgin mothers and wives with experience of marital rape.

Having agreed to appear as the 'other Jill', i.e. one yet to be knighted, on the Silky Kilroy show (LCP's funding crisis is such that we have to accept all the fees we are offered) it seemed necessary to give thought to the question I'd put to the first journalists: "What exactly is the problem?"

The papers themselves seemed a useful place to begin to understand what exactly had caused such panic to the male order. A first reading confirmed my initial suspicions, formed when speaking to the press, that basically they were struggling with a problem they were unable to formulate: a problem that dared not speak its name.

Was Shulamith Firestone right when she argued that patriarchy will be reduced to rubble if women can gain control of their own fertility? Perhaps the birth of one thousand babies in the United Kingdom signifies the end of the patriarchal era of male right, male control and marks the beginning of a matriarchal world and women's liberation? It feels a little unlikely to believe that the actions of a few women in the west could be so threatening to one of the oldest of the world's power structures. And it is curious that mainstream thought assumes that the patriarchal world order can cope with the man-made war, genocide, famine, disease and environmental destruction we see in the Gulf, but is thrown into total chaos by the knowledge that a few sisters in the west are doing it for themselves.

## So, what exactly is the problem?

The *Daily Mail* (11.3.91), in its front page representation of the "STORM OVER VIRGIN BIRTHS", identified donor insemination as a "scheme which strikes at the very heart of family life" by giving "women who have never had sex... the chance to have a baby".

This needs clarification; if mother-child bonding is identified as a threat to the heart of family life, rather than being itself the heart of the family, then presumably for "family", as defined in the discourse about virgin births, we

should read "men" or male control. And presumably for "sex" we should read "heterosexual penetrative sexual intercourse".

The *Daily Mail* elaborated on its definition of the problem by quoting MP Dame Jill Knight's statement:

To bring a child into the world deliberately with only one parent is highly irresponsible with no thought for the child.

and from Nuala Scarisbrick of LIFE:

It is yet another example of children being seen as some sort of possession. Someone wants a child so she must have one without a thought for the consequences.

And again from Stephen Green of the christian, Conservative Family Campaign:

It is repellent and selfish... They think they have a right to a child in some way other than as a part of a loving heterosexual relationship.

Similar comments appeared in other papers; for example another LIFE spokesperson, Keith Davies, stated in *The Guardian*, 12.3.91:

This is a the flipside of abortionism. It is man-free designer children being created for the convenience and benefit of other people... It reduces human procreation down to the level of farmyard animal husbandry.

The same paper also reproduced MP Ann Winterton's statement:

It is immoral and it is unnatural in that it uses a medical technique to bring a child into the world... The practice is wrong for the very simple reason that it does not consider the best interests of the child once born. It reduces children to the status of consumer goods.

together with Archbishop of York, John Hapgood's comment that:

A child wanted because the parent wants something to love, wanted as an act of defiance, wanted in extreme cases, as a kind of accessory, has to carry too much of the emotional burden of its parents' needs. It can be the victim of dangerous selfishness.

and a spokesman from the Catholic Church saying:

In Catholic teaching a stable relationship between husband and wife is the only proper context in which a child ought to be conceived.

*The Guardian* also gave a more extended quotation from Dame Jill Knight MP:

A child needs two parents. If a child has lost one parent either through divorce or death or one leaving, that is one thing, but to deliberately make a woman pregnant who obviously has



I thought 'Natural' was a marketing term as in 'Natural Raspberry Flavoured Yoghurt'



Angela Martin

none of the natural feelings about the matter, I think is highly irresponsible.

This representation of media diagnosis to the problem, could be extended, but the above is sufficient to illustrate the sentiments initially promoted by the 'virgin birth' story.

### From common sense to populist moralism

The quotations draw on a cluster of assumptions which within a patriarchal society can be presented as commonsense thinking. These ideas are both confused and partial, but superficially attractive, particularly for those for whom the public discussion of the possibilities of donor insemination represents a challenge to the certainties of life. This may be an attraction of populist moralism, but it holds its power as long as its confusions and partiality are not exposed.

To understand this populist moralism, it is useful to unpack some of its underlying assumptions and analyse the model of social reality it promotes.

For mother-child bonding to be conceptualised as a threat to the heart of family life, then 'family' must be a euphemism for 'men' and male power.

Planned parenthood is presumably 'highly irresponsible' for single parents; far worse than unplanned single parenthood. Whether planned parenthood is acceptable for heterosexual couples is unclear, given that for some promoters of populist moralism birth control remains an anathema and most are vigorous opponents of abortion.

'Wanting' a child is deemed selfish, repellent, and reduces the child to commodity or accessory status; if, that is, the woman wanting the child is single, a lesbian and, most dangerous of all, a virgin. Married women are accorded a monopoly on acceptable reasons for wanting a child.

Alternatively, it is unacceptable for any woman to want or not want a child. In this reading motherhood is something conferred on women by men: the conclusion that, in patriarchal ideology, for women both to want and not want children is selfish and aberrant.

Wanting and planning for a child is deemed highly irresponsible, thoughtless, repellent, selfish and an act of defiance on the part of women outside of heterosexuality; maternity is an act of compliance for women living under male control.

Wanting and planning for a child outside of heterosexuality is unnatural and abnormal. This marks a retreat into biological determinism. Biological determinism, the philosophy of fascism, teaches that male dominance and heterosexuality are the only natural and normal relationships between men and women and the natural and only context for a child. Male superiority is seen as natural, universal and inevitable, as is the supremacy of white over black men. Any attempts to change the presumed natural order of things is by definition unnatural, dangerous and inevitably doomed to failure. The unnatural woman is also by definition an inadequate, dangerous woman, unfit for the responsibility of mothering.

In contrast, the married heterosexual mother is a natural mother. However, this last point needs qualifying. Up until the late 1960s the married heterosexual woman was natural, provided she remained loyal to her husband. Any suggestion of adultery was frequently sufficient to define her as both unnatural and unfit for mothering in child custody cases in English law (this qualification has never applied to men). So what is seen as natural, unchanging and universal can also confusingly be subject to change and thus historically relative.

In one of those coincidences that surprises no-one an expert, a Dr Rajendra Persaud of the Institute of Psychiatry, was produced to confirm that women who seek to have children without having sex (sic) are indeed sick:

Sex itself might not be what the woman fears. She may be suffering from social phobia, which manifests itself in various different ways, including acute embarrassment at meeting members of the opposite sex... This could be a situation where a baby is brought up by someone who has a jaundiced view, which could have been treated, about relationships. (*The Guardian*, 13.3.91.)

So, defined as fearful, unnatural and abnormal, women who say "No" are pathologised, medikilled, diagnosed, and prescribed treatment. Compulsory heterosexuality is enforced through an appliance of science.

### Selfishness and the single mother

In this analysis the wanted, planned child will not benefit from a mother's love and support but, it is claimed, will be victimised by her unnatural, selfish defiance. As a result of a mother's purported unfitness as a parent and the absence of a father figure male role model, the child is likely to fail psychologists' tests of

psycho-sexual development. There is no actual evidence of this, of course. In contrast, the child born within the Persil family will naturally learn respect for the male order, though if it is so natural it is not clear why it has to be learned.

Dame Jill Knight made this point on the Kilroy show when she stated she had no problem with anything that occurred within the family, and turned away when domestic violence, marital rape and, significantly in this discussion, child sexual abuse were mentioned. The facts of child sexual abuse within the family suggest that, if the paramount concern is for the welfare of the child, it is households containing heterosexual men, who constitute 97 per cent of child sex abusers, not virgins, single women, lesbians, which should be problematised.

Single parent families were also the object of concern on the part of the promoters of populist moralism. Their analysis deliberately confuses women who choose to parent children independently of men with the very real struggles of women and children who have experienced relationship breakdown. Unplanned single parenthood can be difficult: women need to survive the trauma of relationship breakdown, which may well have included sexual violence; and poverty, which for women often follows divorce in a society which has the worst childcare provision in Europe, limited training programmes and employment possibilities, and where maintenance from absent fathers is inadequate, irregular and often nonexistent. But this is a problem of poverty, not a problem of single parenthood *per se*.

The christian church is amongst the authorities quoted on the virgin birth story stating vigorously that the Persil family is the only proper context for a child. This is strange as theologians could convincingly argue that the followers of a religion should follow the example of their prophet's family. And, as Dr. Elizabeth Stuart, lecturer in theology at the College of St. Mark and St. John in Plymouth, points out, the consensus amongst theologians is not complete:

St. Augustine, the parent of Western theology, would have kicked his heels with delight at the possibility of artificial insemination since he believed that every act of sexual intercourse was sinful and the children born from such acts tainted with original sin. (Letter to the *Independent on Sunday*, 17.3.91.)

You only want me for my spunk



Would you like to make a donation?



If not exactly kicking his heels with delight, the Bishop of Durham seems to be acutely aware of what the issue is about:

Men have made a mess of it and women have revolted. There's no harm in men feeling left out and jealous for a change. Because men have been so dominant over the years, women have adopted an impossible shopping list.

Any guess what shopping list he is talking about?

The Bishop, by problematising men, brings us back to the question: what is the problem? The Lesbian Custody Project, along with many lesbian mothers and their children, has long been aware of attempts by individual men and the patriarchal legal system to punish us for daring to choose to live a life independently of men by denying us the right to live with our children. As well as an act of punishment or revenge, this represents an attempt by the patriarchy to ensure children are socialised into acceptance of male control; hence the impor-

The sperm that turned

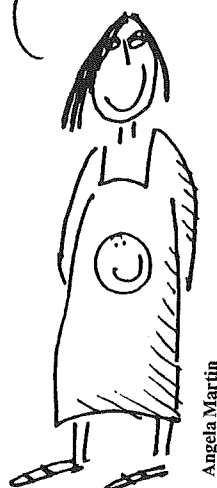
Unnatural woman inadequate dangerous unfit



Angela Martin



That  
Explains  
The Egg  
and Spoon  
Race.



tance placed on male role models in custody disputes. So the panic over virgin births can be interpreted as a reaction to the spectre of women having children independently of men and children growing up outside of male control. As the journalists who telephoned the Lesbian Custody Project recognised, fear of male redundancy is central to the panic.

### The 'necessity' of sex

There is something else going on as well, for the panic focused not simply on women having and bringing up children outside male control, but on a particular group of women: virgins, women who have never done it with men.

This was picked on by Judy Rumbold, in an ironic commentary in *The Guardian* 13.3.91:

How dare these women entertain the idea of DIY pregnancy? Worse, isn't it just plain martyrish self denial to swap the penetrative paradise of the penis for the cold prick of a hospital syringe?

She goes on to point out that the "virgin birth" label is not quite accurate:

Of course, virgin pregnancy is a bit of a misnomer. There is no birth without male intervention, even if it's only sex by fuel injection.

Sheila Kitzinger traced the virgin element of the panic in her contribution to this article:

Men think women shouldn't be allowed to have babies without having a penis thrust inside them, that you can't be a proper mother without having been penetrated by a man. How for instance will a child – regarded as the reward for a stable heterosexual relationship – learn about forming relationships if its mother has never experienced sex?

This argument has actually been put quite seriously by some contributors to the panic, who conveniently ignore the point that, whatever the ideal, very few children in fact learn about sex from their parents.

Sheila Kitzinger goes to the crux of the issue in exploring the symbolic significance of virginity in male discourse:

The unpenetrated woman has not been possessed. A woman has proved that all she needs is access to semen, and it's hitting men where it hurts. (*The Guardian*, 13.3.91.)

So at last the problem has been identified.

### Extremist fringe

One further point emerged quite clearly both in press representations of this discussion and in parliamentary proceedings in the pas-

sage of the Human Embryology and Fertilisation Act 1990, where the question of access to donor insemination by lesbians and single women provoked controversy. This concerns the players in this tale of populist moralism. In terms for numbers, they were small. In ideological terms they represent extremism: an extremist right wing fringe group in the Tory party, a handful of religious men and members of LIFE. They are a narrow band of activists skilled in generating moral panics and in campaigning for repressive legislation. Their previous areas of activism include attempts to outlaw abortion, the generation of panic around positive images of lesbians and gay men and the resultant repressive Clause 28, now Section 2a, of the Local Government Act 1989.

Debates during the passage of the Human Embryology and Fertilisation Act demonstrated their differences with government. Government ministers at the Department of Health, Virginia Bottomley and Kenneth Clarke, were concerned to avoid passing a directly discriminatory law. For them, a strong welfare principle, plus guidelines, codes of practice and a system of licensing clinics offering donor insemination services, were seen as more effective ways of controlling access to donor insemination. Directly discriminatory legislation could revitalise lesbian strength and gay pride, in the same way that opposition to the Clause did, and could produce a challenge through European Convention on Human Rights which guarantees rights to a private family life, to found a family and not to be discriminated against on grounds of status. In holding to their preferred route to control, the government had to suppress repeated challenges from those advocating a more extremist position, though in the end David Wiltshire did win (at 2am in the morning, rumour has it) a concession from the government in the form of an amendment to the welfare principle, a child's need for a father. His mistake was not identifying which particular child was in question, leaving a loophole currently big enough for semen to slip through.

Recognising and exposing these players as a small minority extremist fringe is strategically important. It will prevent, or at least make it more difficult for them to whip up populist support for their repressive agendas. So exposing their marginal political position could well be an important political strategy in any future struggle they may impose on us. □

# UNSPEAKABLE ACTS

*Why is it so difficult for us to face honestly the issues of violence and abuse by women? Liz Kelly argues that we must find a way or leave a dangerous gap for misunderstanding and anti-feminist viewpoints.*

The fact that most lesbians/feminists have been reluctant, if not down right hostile, to discussing violence by and between women has not prevented the issues from reaching the public arena. The 'discovery' of women who have sexually abused children, the current case in the US of the first female serial killer (Aileen Wuornos is a lesbian and charged with murdering five men), the Lisa Steinberg case all made headline news. A new knee-jerk reaction amongst policy makers in local councils, and even some police officers, is to include lesbians and gay men in discussions about domestic violence.

Our caution and irritation at 'women do it too' statements were justified, since the speaker was seldom concerned about the issues, and usually motivated by a desire to dismiss feminist analysis. But today, avoiding the issue of women's use of violence represents as much of a threat as we previously felt talking about it did. If we fail to develop feminist perspectives we are handing over this issue to the professionals and the media. Silence also means that we will continue to fail women and children who have suffered at the hands of women.

In developing our understanding of women's oppression we engaged in a many levelled process. Three aspects were: documenting the forms and extent of men's violence; re-valuing women; and challenging negative

representations of lesbianism. Each of these factors, and no doubt more besides, resulted in an idealisation of women and of relationships between them. At the same time our kitchen table talk focused on the complexities – the ways our vision and our real lives failed to match up. To talk publicly about these issues felt threatening. Yet we all know that our failure to name, let alone find ways to confront issues of power between women has been the downfall of far too

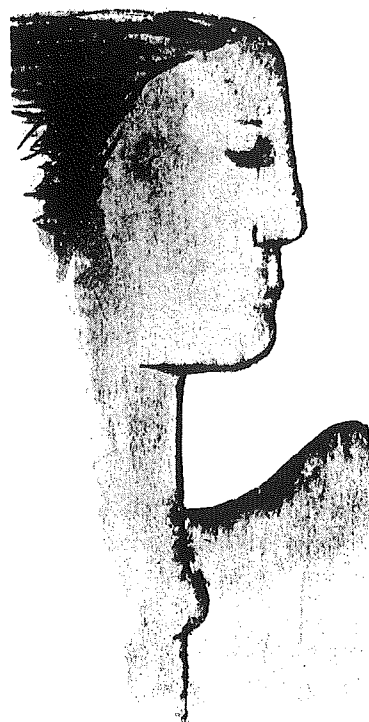


### Notes

1. See *Rights of Women Bulletin*, Winter 1990/91, for details for the parliamentary debate on the passing for the Human Embryology and Fertilisation Act 1990 and discussion of the welfare principle.

Jill Radford is a worker at the Lesbian Custody Project at *Rights of Women*. This piece is however written in a personal capacity. Note: As a result of funding decisions *Rights of Women* and Lesbian Custody Project need to raise £17,000 this year if we are to retain our current level of service. If there is any spare money out there, please send some our way. *Rights of Women*, 52/54 Featherstone Street, London EC1.





many women's groups, projects and campaigns (not to mention friendships and relationships). So what is at stake here is not simply what we stand to lose, but also what we might gain.

### What's in a word?

Before looking at evidence of women's use of violence, an exploration of definitions is crucial: both how power, abuse and violence is defined in feminist/lesbian communities and how non-feminist researchers and practitioners are defining abuse by women. In both, confusions abound.

There is a noticeable tendency within lesbian/feminist communities to use words in ways that confuse rather than distinguish between forms of behaviour. Joan Ward in a piece called *Therapism and the Taming of the Lesbian Community*<sup>1</sup> notes:

Therapism has taught us to find everything equally upsetting. I see lesbians respond to minor disagreements with other women as if they had been raped . . . We are so emotionally vulnerable that we cannot distinguish between a philosophical difference and a physical assault.

This is not simply an expression of emotional vulnerability; it is also lazy thinking and an unwillingness to tackle difficult issues. We will develop neither new ways of dealing with conflict nor ways to support women abused by women if we equate all disagreements or misuses of status and power with sexual or physical assaults. We need a vocabulary that recognises that words can be used deliberately to put down, humiliate, and hurt and which distinguishes between hurt which is deliberate and threatening to us and hurt which, although strongly felt, was not intentional. We also need to name ways in which women use structural power to shore up their supremacy over other women.

Violence/abuse is the deliberate use of humiliation/threat/coercion/ force to enhance personal status/power at someone else's expense, and/or constrain the behaviour of others, and/or to get one's own needs/wants met at others' cost. Whilst aspects of behaviour between women, and women and children, fit this definition, there are forms of disrespect and undermining which are not covered. For example, differences between women can be exploited through identity politics to compete in oppression hierarchies; women who experience particular oppressions may use them to generate guilt and silence in women who are more

privileged. I have seen, and in some ways colluded with, such interactions between lesbians and heterosexual women, for example.

Nor are the ways we acknowledge differences between women in our relationships – be they sexual, friendship, work or political (not mutually exclusive!) – straightforward. Our histories and identities are complex, and for most of us a mixture of reinforcing oppressions and cross-cutting privileges. Struggling for equality in conditions of inequality has a range of possible outcomes, and our responses are consistent neither across this range nor over time. In any particular interaction we choose between challenge, compromise, acceptance or use of power. Understanding how the many variations of how 'power over' are used, responded to and challenged in relationships between women, and distinguishing between forms which do and do not use overt force and violence must be our starting point.

The professional literature on sexual abuse by women also produces inclusionary definitions. Whilst many strategies have been used to limit the forms of men's behaviour that count as sexual violence, the reverse process is used in relation to women by, for example, broadening the definition 'sexual abuse of children'. One study of sexual abuse of children in the US recorded a much larger percentage of female abusers than previous studies. Careful investigation of the data revealed that women were being defined as 'co-perpetrators' if they were thought by professionals to have known about the abuse and not reported it. Mothers who played no part in the abuse were transformed into female abusers.

The most popular strategy is to suggest that women have many opportunities to sexualise interactions with children, particularly babies; that mundane, everyday child care offers the perfect cover for sexual abuse but there are so few reported cases because it is so 'normalised'. Abuse thus defined covers touching a baby's genitals whilst changing their nappy and allowing children to sleep in the same bed. Interestingly, no-one has written impassioned articles about the injustice of making 'innocent' mothers insecure about touching their children. This construction of motherhood as suspect has a long history. Freud was far more comfortable developing a mythology of the maternal seductress than the reality of paternal abusers.

Yet another strategy is to extend the category 'woman'. Several recent studies of reported cases record higher figures of women as abusers. When the statistics are examined in more detail a large proportion of the female abusers are under 18. So here 'women' includes girls, sometimes very young ones. I am not questioning the impact of abusive behaviour on any child, but to call a four, five or six year old an abuser presumes their understanding, intention and knowledge is the same as that of an adult.

The hidden agenda which unites these strategies is to deny that most physical and sexual violence is committed by men.

### Theory building

Feminist analysis of men's violence is only fragile if it is underpinned by essentialism: the belief that aggression is inherent in men. Masculinity and femininity are culturally and historically variable constructs, which individuals 'fit' more or less comfortably. Working class and Black women have always had to adopt 'unfeminine' attributes, simply to survive. Taking social construction seriously, including the fact that women do not live outside patriarchal ideologies and practices, means we can locate women as abusers within feminist analysis – but it is complicated.

Placing interpersonal violence on the political agenda, challenging the Right's idealisation of family and heterosexuality and the Left's focus on economics and state social control has been one of the achievements of this wave of feminism. We demonstrated that the use of explicit force and coercion was a common feature in many heterosexual encounters. Theoretical analysis highlighted that violence is a form of power – over, and its use tends to follow the contours of social inequality. Sexual violence is an expression of male supremacy; racial violence an expression of white supremacy. The use of force by dominant groups is often socially legitimated, although both its use and legitimacy may be resisted and challenged.

This structural analysis provided us with ways of exploring women's access to, and use of, violence, but we failed to develop it in that direction. Following the logic of this framework, the most likely targets for violence by women are children; the only social group over which women have socially legitimated power. Since the sexual is currently constructed

as a potential arena of power for men, women are less likely to sexually abuse children. The next potential target for violence by women is other women – physical fights between girls and young women are not that uncommon. The least likely target is men. Where women do use violence intending to harm adult men – for example when abused women kill their husbands – they tend to use weapons to 'equalise' the power dynamics.

Women using violence or abuse seem to be acting outside and against constructions of femininity and motherhood. This is in contrast to men, for whom using violence is consistent with traditional masculinity. This acting against femininity is especially marked when the abuse is sexual. It is the 'unwomanliness' of female aggression which partly accounts for the outrage and blame attached to women who do act in this way.

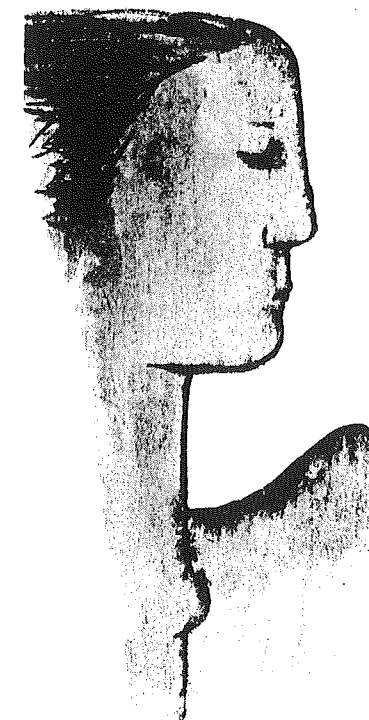
### Blaming women

Erin Pizzey and Jane Wynne have both recently written letters to the national press suggesting that the time has come to ask 'why people do it': gender is now irrelevant.<sup>2</sup> Carol-Ann Hooper's response was simple, but telling: "Would anyone argue that because both men and women do housework, gender is irrelevant in either its distribution or its meaning?"<sup>3</sup>

In fact gender is extremely relevant, even to those who profess otherwise. How could it not be when these same professionals make glib statements about how much 'worse' it is to be sexually abused by a woman, especially for boys? For example, Jane Wynne on *Women's Hour* last year said, "When the last taboo is broken, the effect is devastating". Research which asks men reveals the opposite, that they are likely to view sexually exploitative/abuse experiences with women less negatively than those with men.<sup>4</sup>

The death of Lisa Steinberg, the six year old illegally adopted daughter of white middle class American parents – Joel Steinberg and Hedda Nussbaum – resulted in a massive debate about Hedda's culpability. Two books by women have been published (one a novel by Susan Brownmiller) which hold her as much, if not more responsible, for Lisa's death.<sup>5</sup>

The other side of this tendency to hold women especially accountable if they use violence is the confusion between excusing women and explaining and understanding their behaviour. Is it the same interaction for both



abuser and abused when it is done by a woman? Many survivors accounts suggest not; they talk of additional senses of betrayal – suggesting that as children and adults we expect women to behave in womanly, ie not violent, ways. One very clear example of this is the book *When you are Ready*,<sup>6</sup> a moving account of a woman coming to terms with her mother's physical abuse. The sexual abuse she experienced from an adult male is referred to in passing, as if it were unremarkable and played no part in her subsequent distress. Some survivors, however, say that there is no difference, that abuse is abuse. We must explore these complexities about gender without attempting to justify abusive behaviour.

### Women, children and physical violence

Women's relationships with children commonly legitimate the use of violence and coercion. In white British culture, and in the majority of cultures throughout the world, the use of threat and violence to control and 'discipline' children is not only acceptable but widespread. Whilst the forms such control takes may vary, suggestions that excessive violence is used only within specific groups – usually working class and Black families – are just another mystification to implicate everyone but the white middle/upper class. Authoritarian (and non-authoritarian) child care practices exist within all social groups.

The media response to 'anti-smacking' campaigns in this country makes it clear that to question the right of adults, especially parents, to hit children is extremely contentious. The most common response is to trivialise the issue by reducing it to a jokey topic for chat show conversation, phone-ins or articles in newspapers. Little of what is said challenges the legitimacy of hitting children and much reinforces a comfortable acceptance of it. Incredibly it remains one of the few forms of interpersonal violence that is not legislated against in the majority of countries.

There are at least four forms of physical violence used by adults against children: the occasional smack; harsh discipline; explosive, unexpected and – to the child – undeserved outbursts; brutal, sadistic treatment which is justifiably named torture. It is the latter two which concern social workers and are covered by the terms 'physical abuse' and 'non-accidental

injury'. As with violence against women, only the extremes provoke state intervention.

Very few studies provide us with information on how many women use these various forms of physical violence. The NSPCC, who until last year produced the only national figures for reported child abuse, collapse men and women into categories like 'parents'. We currently know that women use violence somewhat less frequently than men and are less likely to commit the most sadistic assaults. That said, however, the numbers of women and men are much closer than for any other category of violent behaviour (the exception here is female genital mutilation – which is an act of violence done to girls by women). Physical violence towards children cannot, therefore, be so clearly viewed as gender specific.

We also have very little information on whether children view physical violence from men and women differently. In a current study involving 1200 young people, the numbers of mothers using physical violence were slightly lower than fathers, but fathers were much more likely to be feared.<sup>7</sup>

Sue Wise is one of the few British feminists to question why we have been so silent about the physical abuse of children.<sup>8</sup> She argues that our unease has resulted in our ignoring, rather than exploring, this issue. This failure is most evident for me in the work I did for many years in Women's Aid. We created new institutions and chose the name "refuge" to represent and make real our vision of a haven, a place of safety. Yet that safety was never truly extended to children. By seeing ourselves in alliance with other women, supporting their struggles to get free of abusive men, we neglected the fact that the needs of children and the needs of women are not always the same. Our house rules often included "no violence", but only a minority of groups applied it to everyone: to women's relationships with children.

Class and cultural stereotypes also played a part in our reluctance to question women's behaviour. Like the social workers we were so determined not to imitate, we justified our non-intervention by talk of 'different values'. Yet we knew then that not all working class or Black and ethnic minority women use physical violence against their children. Reflecting on my part in this hypocrisy and how we could have acted differently, I can see that simply extending house rules to include children is not

the answer, although it is an important beginning. The acceptability of physical violence towards children, the fact that many of us may have used it against our own children, demands a more complex approach.

Talking honestly and openly is a crucial starting point: about women's relationships to children; about how for many women an impoverished, constrained and oppressive reality determines their experience of motherhood; about the social expectation that we 'control' children and the legacy of religion and other belief systems which promote a 'spare the rod, spoil the child' philosophy. Work in refuges could also draw on child advocacy models developed in US "shelters".

### Women, children and sexual abuse

We have known about, yet chosen not to focus on women's use of physical violence towards children. Similarly, evidence of women sexually abusing children has produced not only resistance amongst feminists but also denial. We did not, and do not, want to believe that women act in this way; it causes us pain, and appears to threaten our analysis of sexual violence. Sexual abuse by women has become a 'hot' topic; the fact that a few women have been found to have sexually abused children is increasingly taken as sufficient reason to abandon looking at gender altogether. Several female abusers become equivalent to a hundred men.

In working on this piece I went back to books I read some time ago, and noticed how little attention I had paid to the evidence on women as abusers. If we continue this deliberate avoidance we fail survivors who feel, rightly, that we do not want to hear what they need to say; we leave a huge space in which anti-feminist ideas and practices can develop. It is possible to recognise that some women sexually abuse children without losing sight of the reality that it is mostly men who commit sexual violence. Such a position opens the way for us to explore the similarities and differences between sexual abuse by women and men, and whether the explanations we have developed for men's behaviour apply to women.

The information we have about women who sexually abuse is extremely limited, in part because they are much fewer in number, and because we currently lack the rich insight of survivors' accounts.

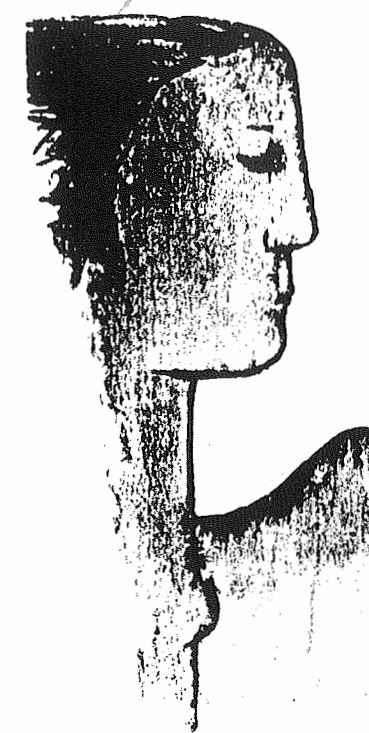
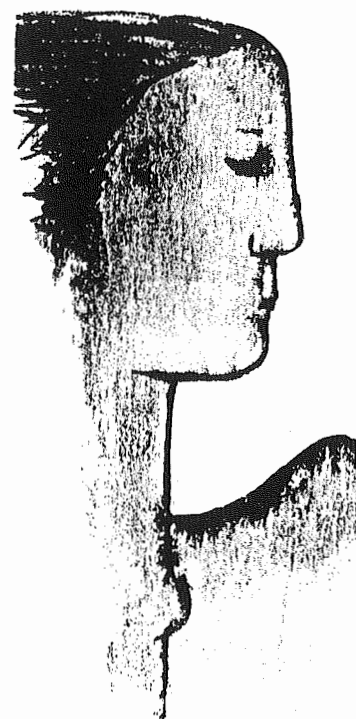
Most published studies reveal that some 3% of adult sexual abusers are women. The NSPCC, in a section of their 1990 national report which was not picked up by the media, stated categorically that their figures did not support the popular 'tip of the iceberg' view of women as abusers.

Diana Russell in *The Secret Trauma*,<sup>9</sup> a study of women's experience of incest, recorded a 7% figure for women as abusers (one mother, three other adult relatives and six sisters or cousins). Comparing women's abuse with men's, she notes that more of the female abusers were adolescents at the time, and more incidents were single events. She suggests that because female abusers use less force, abuse less frequently and there is less age difference, the abuse is less traumatic. However, these factors do not predict the impact of abuse by men on women. Is this the mirror image of the 'it's worse if women do it' position?

Kathleen Faller, an American social worker, has published the largest and most careful study of female abusers. She reports on 40; 14% of abusers seen in one programme during 1978-87.<sup>10</sup> Her findings revealed a different pattern of offending: three-quarters of the women abused alongside men in a 'family sex ring' (18% of male abusers were in this category), 15% were single mothers who were defined as "merged" with their children, relating to them as a "surrogate partner", and 10% were defined as "psychotic". The last two categories raise the interesting question of whether we accept these forms of explanation, which we have rejected for male abusers. Do they 'pathologise' women in ways which make them less responsible for their behaviour?

Thirty four of the women were mothers to at least one of the children they abused; 55% abused only their own children. The accounts of the children, who were also seen by the staff, confirmed that in the family sex ring cases it was usually men who initiated the sexual abuse (although in at least two cases it was women); that women's role in the abuse was secondary and they committed fewer and less intrusive acts. A number of the children stated clearly that they knew their mothers were being coerced and did not want to commit the abuse.

David Finkelhor's study of sexual abuse in day care confirms this pattern of the majority of adult women who sexually abuse acting in concert with male abusers. They studied 270





cases, involving 382 abusers (220 men and 147 women) and 1639 children. Women were involved in 36% of cases, and in all of those with multiple perpetrators. In 63% of these they were related to at least one of the male abusers who were either male partners or sons. However, there were 27% of women who sexually abused independently.

Evidence of lesbians sexually abusing children is still more rare; limited to one or two case studies. However, I have spoken to two lesbian/feminist social workers who have encountered such cases. The abuse has been either of lesbians' own children or children and young women they have befriended.

I have yet to come across an account of a woman with a 'career' of sexual offending who targets and 'grooms' large numbers of children they do not know in order to sexually abuse them. The only example I can think of is women who recruit into the sex industry. But here the motivation tends not to be personal sexual access to the girl/young woman, but to allow others to sexually abuse them for financial gain. Whilst the circumstances in which women sexually abuse do not excuse their behaviour, nor detract from the impact of their abuse on the child, we do need to explore what these differences mean in order to understand why some women do it. Is it appropriate to link the ways in which some children and women are coerced in sex rings to recruit children and even to themselves abuse? Where women are not coerced is there the same connection between sex and violence, power and pleasure that we have documented in relation to men? Whilst the numbers of lesbians sexually abusing children may be tiny what legal and 'treatment' responses are appropriate for these women, and what are the implications of being abused by a lesbian for the child?

There are complex questions too about the levels of responsibility we can and should attribute to women where they are also being abused; where they fail to challenge men's abusive behaviour; when they – as in the case of genital mutilation – act within cultural belief systems which legitimate violence.

The task we face is to develop a feminist understanding of the contexts in which women physically and sexually abuse children. Are they different from those in which men abuse? Are the kinds of abuse in which women engage different? Are their reactions when abuse is discovered the same – do they deny/justify? Does

being abused by a woman have the same meaning for the child?

We cannot develop appropriate theory and practice if we, like non-feminist professionals, ignore the fact that adults and children are male and female, that currently gender affects all aspects of our experience and behaviour.

### Violence between lesbians

Constructing alternatives to the medical/pathological model of lesbianism was, and remains, an important facet of lesbian feminist politics. As our work increasingly highlighted the oppressive nature of heterosexual relationships for women, having an alternative vision became an important political and personal project. The introduction of Clause 28 was, in fact, a recognition that it is indeed possible to 'promote' homosexuality – or perhaps more accurately, lesbianism. One of the successes of feminism over the last 20 years has been to create spaces where women feel able to question heterosexuality, where lesbians can be visible and to some extent affirmed. Both hostility outside and the positive energy inside lesbian feminism has led to the construction of idealised representations of lesbian relationships. Alongside this exists a more general revaluation of 'womanhood', a positive re-interpretation of aspects of femininity.

Many women who came to lesbianism because of, or through, the WLM were both unprepared and unwilling to face the fact that some of the behaviour of which we had been so critical in heterosexual relationships also occurs between lesbians. Voicing this publicly seems to undercut not only our political analysis of male power and heterosexuality, but also our optimism about lesbian relationships. This collective refusal has been, in part, responsible for the difficulty many lesbians have in naming their experience as abuse or violence, especially if it includes coercive sex.

A further problem in relation to violence and abuse between lesbians is the promotion of stylised scenarios – s/m – as a liberating form of sexual practice. It has even been suggested that women who have been sexually abused by men use these practices as a way of reliving, whilst somehow overcoming, their past. Quite why or how this might be is seldom made clear, apart from vague references to 'being in control'. Several women who support s/m have also argued that a truly revolutionary sexuality would embrace sex between children and

adults, provided children were empowered to be able to choose freely to participate. Again, quite how the developmental process which places children at a physical, emotional and experiential disadvantage to adults is to be overcome is never honestly discussed.

Our refusal to accept that coercion and brutality do occur in some lesbian relationships means that when some women did courageously talk about their own experiences they, and others, placed their accounts within a heterosexual domestic violence framework. Certainly women's accounts do suggest stark similarities. When I read *Naming the Violence*<sup>12</sup> the resemblance of the stories lesbians told to those I had heard from women abused by men both alarmed and disturbed me: consistent and persistent undermining of self-confidence; repeated criticism, often in front of friends; the use of threats and violence to enforce demands and/or reinforce negative interpretations of the woman and her behaviour; isolation – cutting women off from their friends and potential sources of support and validation; extreme levels of sexual jealousy and possessiveness, sometimes accompanied by coercive sex; and dire warnings about the consequences of telling others. The responses of abusive women to their behaviour, and the negative impacts on the abused woman, were also horribly familiar.

But do these echoes amount to an explanation of why some lesbians choose, not to mention attempt to justify, the use of violence to exert control over their partner? There is no social legitimisation of their relationship, let alone the 'right' of one to have power and control over the other. Part of our explanation of men's sexual violence has been the centuries of entitlement they have had in relation to 'their' women and children and, by extension, to all women. For me there remain unanswered and unexplored questions about violence between lesbians. I want a framework which is more than mapping heterosexual theory onto lesbian experience or an individualised psychological account.

As with women who sexually abuse children, to repeatedly act in this way towards another adult requires acting outside gendered constructions of 'woman'. We need a theoretical perspective which takes account of gender and sexuality if we are to make sense of this contradiction. Heterosexism, woman-hatred and the eroticisation of dominance do not exist

only 'outside' lesbian communities. I wonder if part of the explanation might be found in an analysis of constructions of lesbianism and how we as individuals either integrate or challenge them in our sense of self. These are the beginnings of an exploration lesbians must debate and develop.

How do constructions of lesbians as 'mannish' women inform our self-concepts? Do they encourage or reflect not simply a rejection of traditional femininity but an adoption of aspects of traditional masculinity? The construction of lesbians as 'other', 'outsiders', 'the third sex' and, more recently, as 'not women', may have similar consequences where aspects of masculinity which affirm strength and power come to signify our difference from heterosexual women.

In what circumstances do the roles of 'butch' and 'femme' become such a reflection of heterosexuality that it results in one partner believing she should control the relationship, and that if this is threatened or challenged she is justified in using threats or force?

What I am suggesting here is that in rejecting traditional femininity, lesbians may borrow from or identify with aspects of heterosexual and/or gay masculinity in order to construct a sense of self; and that these identifications might in some way explain a lesbian's choice to use physical force against her lover. I am not saying that only 'butch dykes' act this way or even that they are more likely to. Style can be a front, a public face that tells one relatively little about interpersonal behaviour. But style, presentation and roles are also about power, and choices that lesbians make can be at other women's expense.

There are other questions too. How do structural inequalities between lesbians affect their relationships? Do they make violence more, or less likely? What are we to make of lesbian therapists justifying sexualising relationships with their clients by arguing that since both are women there is no possibility of abuse of power or psychological coercion? And even that to have an ethical rule against such relationships (which applies to heterosexual sex, although we know it is frequently broken by male therapists) is anti-feminist – because it ascribes more power to one of the women!<sup>13</sup>

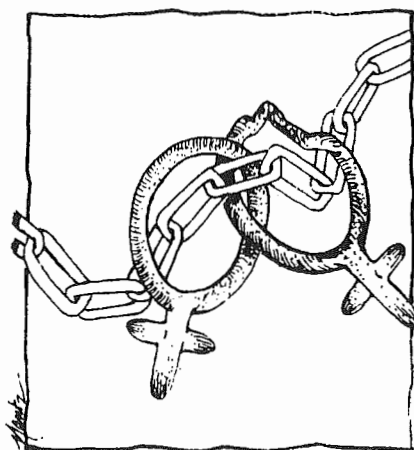
We also have to face the practical implications: what support and services we should be providing, both to lesbians who are being abused and, more contentiously, to lesbians



## Notes

1. Joan Ward, 'Therapism and the taming of the lesbian community' (*Sinister Wisdom*, 1990).
2. Letter to *The Observer*, 13 August, 1989.
3. Carol Ann Hooper, 'When women do it too' (*Community Care*, 16/11/89).
4. Mary Ellen Fromuth and Barry R. Burkhart, 'Childhood sexual victimization among college men: definitional and methodological issues' (*Violence and Victims*, 1987, Vol.2:4).
5. Susan Brownmiller, *Waverley Place* (Simon and Schuster, 1990); Joyce Johnson, *What Lisa Knew: The Truth and Lies of the Steinberg Case* (Bloomsbury, 1991).
6. Kathy Evert and Inie Bijkerk, *When You're Ready* (Launch Press, 1987).
7. Liz Kelly, Linda Regan and Sheila Burton, 'An exploratory study of the prevalence of sexual abuse in a sample of 1200 16-21 year olds'. Final report submitted to ESRC, May 1991.
8. Sue Wise, 'Becoming a Feminist Social Worker', *Studies in Sexual Politics* 6 (Manchester University, 1984).
9. Diana Russell, *The Secret Trauma: Incest in the Lives of Girls and Women* (Basic Books, 1984).
10. Kathleen Calhoun Faller, 'Women who sexually abuse children' (*Violence and Victims*, 1987, Vol 2:4).
11. David Finkelhor, Linda Williams and Nanci Burns, *Nursery Crimes: Sexual Abuse in Day Care* (Sage, 1988).
12. Kerry Lobel (ed), *Naming the Violence: Speaking Out About Lesbian Battering* (Seal Press, 1986).

who abuse. (Some of these issues also apply to women who abuse children.) Can we afford to take the view we have with heterosexual violence, that we will not work with abusers? If we think men should work with abusive men, isn't the logical corollary that lesbians should work with abusive lesbians? What forms of protection can we create which work, which do not involve women having to resort to state agencies and the legal system? Do lesbians need their own refuges, or can Women's Aid refuges provide not only physical safety but also trust and support for lesbians? Should we be working with police domestic violence units to develop specific procedures for lesbians? Is a policy of excluding of women who have used violence from the 'community' an answer? What are the implications of such a policy when we are still unclear what we mean by violence or abuse? The potential for such rules being 'abused' is very great indeed. Does the view that we create 'safe' places for women who have been abused lead to a perception that the only problem is the few women who are thus excluded?



## Yes, there's more

I have only looked, in this piece, at the behaviour of adult women. Interactions between girls and young women need a fuller exploration. For example, the fact that a high proportion of female sexual abusers are girls and young women must be addressed. How many of them are doing what used to be called 'acting out' - trying to make sense of their own abuse by re-enacting the experience whilst changing roles? How many act with full

knowledge that what they do hurts the other child, but go ahead anyway because it makes them feel good?

We must also look at women who, in the context of their paid work, use violence as a form of control and/or power. The contexts range from women in the prison/police service/armed forces, through to women working in residential institutions caring for distressed children and young people, elderly, sick and disabled people. A slightly different, but equally important, issue is the circumstances in which women use or endorse the use of violence in the context of political struggle. Both are further challenges to essentialist constructions of women as 'non-violent', and raise questions about the influence of brutalising contexts on behaviour.

As I pondered on how to end this piece whilst watching *Prisoner in Cell Block H*, I began to puzzle about its popularity amongst women, and lesbians in particular. Could it be that it depicts complex relationships between women which include not only support and solidarity but also the use of power, violence, threats and coercion by the prison guards and between the prisoners? What does our reluctance to discuss the issue of violence by and between women mean when we are so fascinated by fictional representations of these issues?

## Moving on.

In our discussions about abuse by and between women we must begin from an honest admission of the many ways in which women deliberately hurt/betray other women, and our failure as lesbians and feminists to explore this. It is this issue more than any other which has resulted in the disillusion and despair which infects the women's movement and lesbian communities today. We cannot, and should not want, to return to idealised notions of sisterhood, but we need to discover and create ways of disagreeing and challenging which respect other women, not contemptuously dismiss them. Just as we needed to develop a language to describe men's violence and abuse, we need to return to small groups to discuss relationships between women and between women and children. Like consciousness raising in the 70s, the process will enable us to develop a framework within which we can both describe and explain, which in turn will be the spur to action and change. □

# Dear Ms. Woolf, We are returning your guineas

*This article is from the American radical feminist newspaper off our backs (Feb 91). Writing during the Gulf War, carol ann douglas questions western women's loyalties.*

*In 1938, Virginia Woolf published "Three Guineas", an essay in which she said that she would give one guinea to a peace group only after contributing two guineas to educate women and help them obtain a place in the professions. The best hope for peace, Woolf said, was to educate women so that they would no longer economically depend on and support men who launch wars.*

Dear Ms Woolf,

We are returning the two guineas that you contributed to women's education because we are unable to fulfill the conditions you attached to the gift. We are not able to ensure that the educational institutions will remain free of the military-industrial establishment or that women will refrain from forming the "unreal loyalties" you deplored to patriarchal institutions such as the nation state, the corporations, and the military.

As you no doubt have noticed, some 40,000 US women currently are serving with the United States military in Saudi Arabia, where the US government is waging a war on Iraq. Neither increased education, increased professional opportunities, nor the feminist movement in the United States have prevented these women or the thousands of other women, more highly educated and highly paid, who work in the defence industry, from developing "unreal loyalties" or at least as great a willingness as men to engage in war if ordered to do so.

Indeed, the US government for years has greatly reduced all non-military scholarships and loans, thus compelling many young women and men to work in the military in order to attend college. The opportunity to broaden the mind is thus incongruously tied to the commitment to give unquestioning obedience. The opportunity to support oneself in the professions is purchased with the risk of death. The colleges have protested the loss of other scholarships and loans, but have not adequately counselled the students on the significance of accepting the aid from the military.

The leading US feminist organisation, the National Organization for Women (NOW), has not urged young women to refrain from making themselves available to fight in patriarchal wars (but I am being redundant - are there any others?). Although NOW's leadership says it opposed this particular war because it considers Saudi Arabia's and Kuwait's ruling classes to uphold a more extreme than usual form of patriarchy, NOW has since its inception urged women to move through the ranks of the military. NOW and a few more radical feminists such as Susan Brownmiller, have suggested that thoroughly integrating women in the military would at least reduce the amount of rape that soldiers commit in other countries.

While it is undoubtedly true that women soldiers are unlikely to rape women in the countries they occupy, this improvement in behaviour only slightly modifies the horror of slaughtering and maiming the inhabitants. Clearly women soldiers are expected to form bonds with and be accountable to their fellow nationals in the army, rather than the women of other countries.

In short, this attitude seems the furthestest possible from what you expressed when you wrote, "As a woman, I have no country. As a



woman, I want no country. As a woman, my country is the whole world." You made this comment not in the spirit of erasing differences but in the spirit of promoting peace and loyalties superior to the unreal loyalties to nation states that never have treated women as full citizens.

However, if nation states, needing workers and soldiers, choose to treat women, or some women, more like citizens, how shall women refrain from developing unreal loyalties to them?

As you noted, women were not born superior to men but learned to have different loyalties because men kept them out of the "professions and processions." You urged women to learn skills without losing a detachment from the values of the professions and processions, to refrain from joining the dance around the mulberry tree of property, to learn to support ourselves without developing arrogance and avarice.

Many women in this country do become involved in the professions and processions and are disturbed by the codes of those professions only when they do not reach the front of the procession (being blocked by the so-called "glass ceiling").

Nor is it only those women who are connected with men in the more obvious ways who accept the values of the professions and processions. A lesbian who became a cause celebre for fighting her ouster from the military has urged the US government to create a lesbian and gay division to battle in the Persian Gulf to prove its valour! The government has declined to acknowledge the request, but undoubtedly many lesbians and gays are with the army in Saudi Arabia. Another woman in the reserves proclaimed that she was a lesbian and wanted to be sent to the Persian Gulf as an open lesbian. First, her army reserve commander said they would send her to fight, and then terminate her from the service later. After her lover made the case public, the army said she would be discharged. On the other hand, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) is taking a stand against the war.

The nightmare is repeating. War is here. Although there are anti-war demonstrations and teach-ins, those of us who are appalled spend most of our time going about our lives, believing that there is little we can do. Our morning newspapers and news broadcasts have prepared us to accept the idea that our country is killing

thousands of Iraqis.

We are being taught that 'Iraq' is an abstraction that wears the face of a dictator, rather than a nation of millions going about their lives. As soon as the so-called Communist nations began scrambling to unseat their governments and join the race to market economies, we learned that Iraq, which had never concerned us before, had a leader who was worse than Hitler.

In short, we are prepared to meet the devastation of Kuwait with greater devastation of our own making. Although most of us had known nothing about Kuwait previously, we are being prepared to defend the death of every Kuwaiti with the deaths of hundreds or thousands of Iraqis. We are being prepared to shoulder arms — long range arms — to prove that George Bush is firmer than Saddam Hussein and that gasoline is more precious than blood.

As you will note, women still have no say over great issues such as war and peace. None of George Bush's advisors on questions of war are women. Congress, which has about four percent women members, was called in at the last moment to vote at a point when rejecting the war would have led to charges that Congress was responsible for Saddam's failure to leave Kuwait. The Republican women in Congress all supported the war.

Those of us who try to preserve the "poverty and chastity of mind" — that is, the independence — that you advised from the capitalist patriarchy do not seem to be in a much stronger position to oppose it than you were two generations ago. We have a few political groups and institutions of our own, but they are small. It is difficult for us to communicate with women across the nation, because the means of communication and education overwhelmingly are still in the hands of the patriarchy. It also is true that we often do not seem able to communicate with women who do not seem to be similar to ourselves.

Women can become "educated", and most do, without hearing the words that you and others have offered warning against unreal loyalties.

Therefore, we are returning your two guineas, since no one can guarantee that educated women will not participate in battle actions and defence industries that are engaged in large-scale killing. □

# Reinventing the wheel

*One day last November, just before the start of the Gulf War, 47 Saudi women decided to drive a few yards in their own country. This is a report by one of the participants of what took place in Riyadh and on the consequences for the women involved. The writer, a Saudi herself, has to remain anonymous for her own safety.*

3:00 pm. Cars arrive in parking lot at Safeway supermarket on King Abdulaziz Road. Women sit beside male relatives or in the back of chauffeur-driven cars.

3:15. Fourteen women slide behind the wheels of as many cars. The men step away. Thirty-two other women join the 14, as passengers. None speak; they all move swiftly, as one black mass — wearing the traditional *gitwa* (head covering) and *abaya* (robe); all but five have their faces covered as well, with only their eyes showing.

3:22. The excitement in the air is overpowering. It is the first time the women have driven on their native soil. Furthermore, this is a country that does not favour public demonstrations of any kind, so this is a precedent. The convoy begins to move. Steady hands, heads held high.

3:25. Convoy moves out of the parking lot, turning north on King Abdulaziz Road. Some male relatives drive discreetly behind

and alongside in support.

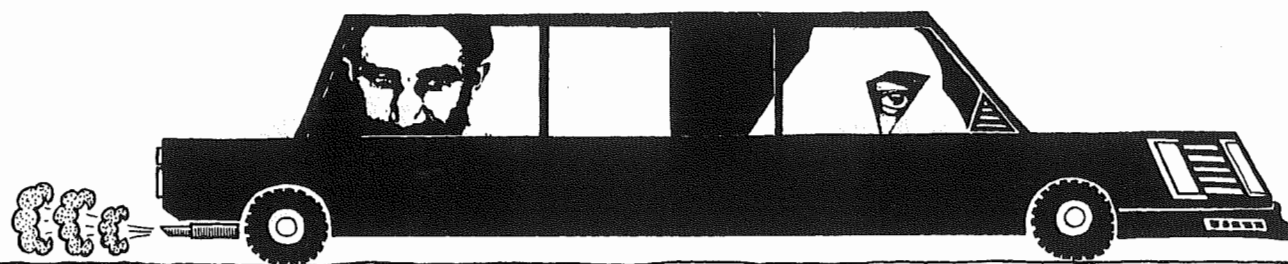
3:31. Turn west at the corner onto Mursalat Road. Two of the cars pull over by the Sheraton Hotel. People on the roads: a variety of expressions. Shock, horror, admiration. Some thumbs-up signals in encouragement, some smiles and fists held up in the air in solidarity, a few horns beeping in support.

3:35. Turn left, south on Olaya Road. Cars with curious (male) drivers begin to follow the convoy.

3:45. Another left. Four cars stopped at the traffic light are caught and pulled over by the police. The rest of the cars continue.

3:48. Back onto King Abdulaziz Road. En masse they decide to make the round one more time.

3:53. Stopped by police at the traffic light in front of the mosque. Afternoon prayers have just ended. The police don't know what to do. One officer leaves to call his superiors for instruction. They in turn call City Hall.



Cath Jackson

3:55. The imam of the mosque comes out to ask the police about the situation, then goes back in. Within minutes, about 30 *mutawa* (fundamentalists) emerge, screaming epithets: "Whores! Prostitutes! Sinners!" They surround the cars and pound on the windows and doors. The women sit silently inside.

4:00. The police move in. They ask the women what they think they are doing. "Driving," is the simple reply.

"Why?" "In time of war mobilisation and national emergency we need to, for the safety of our families."

The police seem strangely awed, filled with respect. More *mutawa* appear, screaming and cursing, demanding that the women be taken to their own (religious) prisons. The police refuse, saying this is a secular matter.

4:30. The eight cars and the other two cars are allowed to drive to where the other four cars are parked. Now numbering well over 50, the *mutawa* follow, becoming more abusive. The women no longer answer questions; they sit with the car windows rolled up while the fundamentalists surround and batter the cars.

5:15. Finally, a policeman takes the wheel of each car, with a *mutawa* sitting alongside him, haranguing the women. Only one carful of women refuses to permit the *mutawa* inside. The cars are driven to the Olaya police station, and the women are told to enter. They refuse to do so until a government representative is present.

5:50. The women are finally escorted into the police station. Seven *mutawa* insist on entering, and only after repeated requests by the police that they leave do they comply. The questioning begins.

Q: "Did your husbands or fathers or brothers know you were planning to do this?"

A: "Does it matter?"

Q: "Is this demonstration politically

motivated?"

A: "Why, no, it is a matter of safety during a time of national crisis." The women are polite and peaceable, courteous in giving the necessary information. One woman, assumed to be the ringleader, is taken to another room and questioned intensely. The other women chant, "We want her back with us. She is not our leader. This is a collective act". She is brought back, but later again sequestered for more interrogation. This continues for at least three hours.

9:30. Some of the husbands of the women appear. They are told to wait in an adjoining room.

12:00 midnight. Interrogation of the men begins – about a half hour each.

1:00 am. A government representative appears. The male relatives are urged to sign a document declaring that the women will never again participate in such an action, will never again drive or even speak of this matter, under threat of punishment or imprisonment. Only then will the women be released.

2:30. All the male relatives comply except one, who refuses as a matter of principle. Finally, so much pressure is put on him that he signs. Another male relative is so angered at his wife that he refuses to come to the police station at all; at last he too appears and complies. One of the women is single; her father is dead, and her brothers are in another city. Since she is not permitted to sign for herself, she names a male friend who appears to sign for her, so that she can be released. (Later, this man is harassed and called a criminal for having helped.)

3:30. The entire group is finally permitted to leave the police station and go to their homes.

### The next day

Handwritten copies of 'police reports' (bearing no official stamps) appear as leaflets; these are

distributed in government offices, pasted or nailed to the walls of public buildings, left on the front windows of cars, passed out in the streets. These so-called reports claim that the women in the driving demonstration were wearing shorts; that they hurled insults at religious men and condemned the government. Included in the allegations: the women were sluts; their husbands were secularist, westernised, communist pimps. Some leaflets include the women's names, ages, professions, addresses and telephone numbers; others include this information about the husbands or other male relatives. All the leaflets end with the ominous directive, "Do what you believe is appropriate regarding these women".

There is no government or police statement issued to counteract the lies in the so-called reports. Consequently, many people believe the lies.

A huge gathering of *mutawa* (estimate: 20,000) demonstrates outside the City Hall. They are protesting the women having driven, and accusing the government of condoning this "sinful action". Prince Salman emerges and assures them that the government did not and does not condone such actions, and he asks them to disperse. They refuse. Only after the religious leader Sheikh bin Baz appears and asks them to leave do they disperse.

### Aftermath

The women and their families have been ceaselessly harassed, threatened, cursed – by telephone, mail and in person. Some of the women are educators; their university offices were broken into and ransacked by fundamentalist students who believed the allegations.

After some days Prince Naif, minister of the interior, confirmed that 47 women drove cars in the demonstration, that they must not have been brought up properly "in the Islamic Way", and thus must have been ignorant.

The women have been fired from or suspended from their jobs, and they (and their husbands) are banned from travelling abroad.

One week after the action, the women were called back for further interrogation, this time by the *mutawa* and religious police. They were ultimately released with stern warnings.

No effort has been made by the secular authorities to tell the truth or rectify the situation, in which the women are being daily terrorised. Most reasonable people who do not believe the lies nonetheless say that "this is not the appropriate time to demand driving rights; we are in a war situation now". They seem to miss the point.

### Postscript

January 15: Today I rang up my neighbourhood civil defence office. I said that my brother is in the army, my father is dead, and my driver is too scared to drive me anywhere – he wants to stay in his room or go back to the Philippines right away. I told the civil defence office that I need tape and plastic to seal the windows against possible chemical warfare. I need bread and bottled water and basic supplies. May I have special dispensation to drive in this emergency?

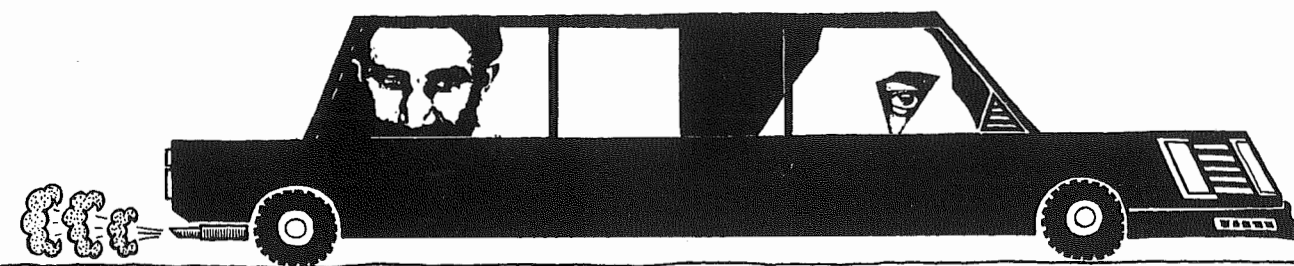
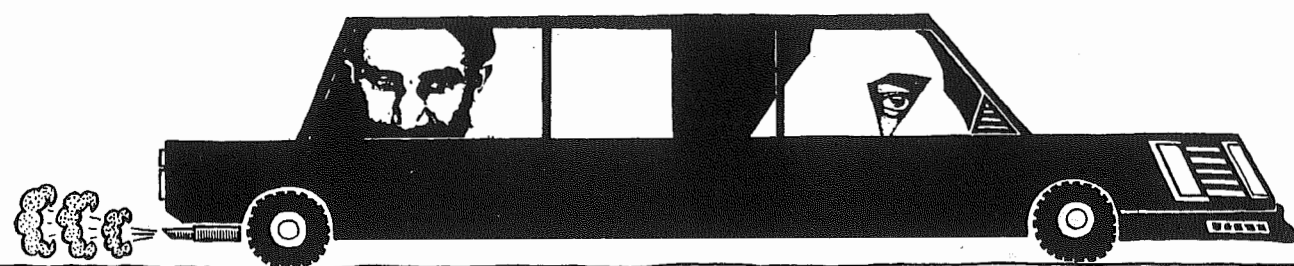
"No," was the reply. "Call 999 emergency and they will bring you what you need." I called. They gave me another number. I have been trying to get through to this other number now for days. The line is continually busy.

### Late January

We are at war.

In the midst of all this horror and uncertainty, last night a group of *mutawa* climbed over a fence to throw stones through the windows of the home of one of the women. They shouted threats for an hour before departing.

In a time of national crisis, they have nothing better to do than terrorise women? □





Should I call this a double-breasted approach? Laura Palmer has a double, so that's at least four breasts, but of course the show is crawling with creepy sex and Grand Tetons. They don't eat with forks on *Twin Peaks* – the brothers with the yuppie ice-cream names are into primary process. Everything longer than it is wide certainly is phallic in the surreal Lynchscape. Who but David Lynch could give saddle shoes the impact of spiked heels? And incest is definitely in. Should we eat all that luscious Frosting on the cake baked by the Lynchmob? I don't think so, folks. I'm dead serious.

My reading doesn't come from outside the circle of aficionados. I was instantly hooked on *Twin Peaks*. I taped the pilot run for repeated frissons and dissected each episode. The menu for my season-opener dinner this fall featured fish and fowl. The people who said *Twin Peaks* weren't worth my time. I gazed beyond them, helplessly bored. I'm seriously addicted.

The question is no longer merely Who killed Laura Palmer? The questions are now almost as legion as the viewers. Laura herself asked a few. "I think a couple of times he's tried to kill me, but guess what? I sure got off on it. Isn't sex weird?" My own most urgent question disappoints me because it's monolithic, political, ill-humoured, and no fun at all. Little Laura really got off on being almost killed, did she? What, in the phrasing of Laura's postmodern postmortem tape, are the Peaks Freaks getting off on when we watch it?

It wasn't until about the third episode that I came out of my stupor of admiration for the wacko combination of irony, parody, and skillful manipulation long enough to wonder if I was being Lynched again, as I was with *Blue Velvet*. In the middle of an ironic giggle, the thought began to form itself: What am I laughing at?

Certainly I'm enjoying directorial moves from Mars, scripts that seem to have dropped through holes in the ozone layer, nonstop non sequiturs, Lucy's fine whine, Nadine's noiseless drape runners, Ben and Jerry's arrested development at the oral stage, Jocelyn's stam-pede of mangled colloquialisms. But something more fundamental gets by me if I leave it at that.

#### Getting off on what?

I, we, the trendy twenty-thirty-and-forty-something audience, are getting off on the sexually

# Why Laura Palmer died

*Irony, mystery, bizarre characters and small town intrigue: 'Twin Peaks' is much more than a 90s 'Peyton Place'. Diana Hume George admits she is addicted but deeply suspicious and asks how this misogynist mix of sexual degradation, abuse and murder has been rendered so stylishly seductive – even to some feminists.*

tortured, brutally murdered, mutilated body of an adolescent girl. And what's new about that? What's new about television exploiting our love affair with the interfaces of sex and death, or our hunger for seeing women dead or maimed or mutilated or suicidal or raped or helpless, especially if they're sexually active? Nothing much. Prime-time business as usual, only a little worse because even feminists like me are sufficiently charmed to offer it exemption.

My expectations and anticipations of *Twin Peaks* were of course fuelled by *Blue Velvet*. Challenging that film's morality was about as fruitful as interrogating the unconscious, for David Lynch seemed to have a main line straight into his own and perhaps into the collective unconscious of the nation's psyche. What I felt was the film's power to haul the horrors of the unconscious into screaming articulation.

But this time I won't have it. Or if I will, if I am compelled by his nightmare, at least I will own it as mine, and I will not be satisfied to let him off the ethical hook. "The thing is about secrets," says Lynch. But what are they? If he doesn't know, then my knowing, your knowing, become still more important – then we, the viewers, need to take responsibility for what we're seeing and how we see it.

I can see Lynch's work in three ways. All of them scare me. He might be cynically corrupt, exploiting his now vast, gullible, prime-time audience with those secrets he says it's all about. Or I can see him as the wise man, the visionary showing us our darkest depths. Or maybe he's really the gifted innocent in touch with, though incompletely aware of, his own unconscious and tapping ours in ways he cannot articulate.

If that's so – and I'm not at all sure I buy it – is the result profound or trivial? *New York's* John Leonard concludes that "*Twin Peaks* has nothing at all in its pretty little head except the desire to please. In this, and only in this, it resembles almost everything else on television. But beautiful is better." Questioned in *Rolling Stone* about the "disease" of both *Blue Velvet's* Dorothy and Laura Palmer, Lynch replies, "It's so beautiful just leave it abstract." But "beautiful", if that's applicable to the blue-lipped corpses of lovely girls in body bags, is not necessarily better.

The crucial difference between *Twin Peaks* and the rest of the trash is not beauty. Rather, it has to do with parody, irony, laughter. We laugh at the punch line, forgetting the premise. Answering objections to *Esquire's* August cover, featuring a shrouded Laura Palmer ("She's cold! a little stiff at parties, but

then, so are we!"), Lee Eisenberg tells us to "Chill out. Having a corpse was, after all, sort of a joke, right?"

I will not enter here into the ever-changing terms of the debate on cause and effect, nor suggest censorship. But I do know that the subliminal suggestive power of mass-produced images is real, probably at this point literally incalculable. Given the high stakes, the risk if not the certainty of influence, Lynch and collaborator Mark Frost are playing with dangerous material.

To what effect? Might this be, if not a moral tale, which no one over the age of consent could possibly wish, then at least an ethical one? Are they helping us perhaps to see how sick our love affair with death is, and how silly as well? Are the clips of the *Peaks* characters' favourite soap, *Invitation to Love* (which turns out to be yet another invitation to death), an invitation to look at what we're doing when we watch them? Are we both privy to the joke and its butt? Are they using the medium not cynically, but with highly subversive intent, whose end is to cause us to interrogate our collective mental mutilation?

Maybe. Against the possibility of such a reading, take a close look at the men and women of *Twin Peaks*. Among the men there are surely many bad guys (Ben and Jerry, Leo, Jacques, sometimes Bobby). But it's also chock-full with good guys, who even when comic or relatively powerless are ethically trustworthy (Pete, Dr Jacoby, Andy, James). The good guys, who are sympathetic, act decently, and can command viewer respect as well as affection, include chiefly Agent Cooper and Sheriff Truman, but also Big Ed, Hawk, and Dr Hayward. These men have most of their wits about them.

Now look at the women. First we have the victims of murder and/or rape and mutilation, Laura and Ronette, high school kids on coke with jaded perspectives and promiscuous sex lives. Laura is an active participant in her own corruption, and the cause of fall in others. Leading the bordello where all these high school girls have their after-school jobs is Blackie, a creature of smoothly amoral collarbones if ever there was one. Catherine is a grasping bitch about to go bad in the teeth. Audrey is so sexually advanced that she's 18 going on 40.

Among the girls in white hats, we can recently include the dubious Audrey – perhaps. Nadine is bonkers, and Donna's mother, Mrs

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Hayward, has no damned first name that I know of. Margaret, the Log Lady, may be a gifted prophet, but she's also out to lunch. We get treated to vividly suggestive scenes of Shelly's beatings and bondage. All Laura's mother does is cry, but to be fair, so does her husband. Audrey's mother began cold and hysterical and then disappeared. Lucy is wonderful, but she's comic relief. Who does this leave among the women? Is anyone vaguely in charge of herself, not a victim, not crazy, and not corrupt?

There is Maddie, Laura's cousin/double, who is so much a parody of innocence that you want to puke on her shoes; the jury's out on her. We thought we had Jocelyn, who could even do double duty for affirmative action as a minority, but it appears that she is involved in murder and blackmail. So who's left? Donna? Sweet but hardly in charge, and thus far underdeveloped as a character. It is Peggy Lipton's Norma who must finally bear the burden of being the only adult woman in the series who is strong so far, nobody's fool, and maybe only one man's victim.

### Victim women

The end of the spring series tightened the noose around Lynch and Frost's necks – and around the women's – with necrophilia and incest. Two men mount Laura's corpse, in effect, in the missionary position: the visiting forensics agent is thrown onto her body on the autopsy table, and at the funeral her father hurls himself on her coffin, as it is lowered and raised, in a not very subtle screw joke. The season closed with Audrey waiting for her first prostitution customer – her father.

In a society where a woman is battered every 15 seconds, it's not acceptable to have a ripping good laugh founded on that pain. And it's probably very risky to feed a mass audience the idea that the girl next door might be a whore, that the seductive adolescent perhaps wants a real man to hurt her.

What does Lynch have to say to questions about his suspect portrayals of women? "People have an idea that Dorothy was Everywoman, instead of just being Dorothy," he told *Rolling Stone*. "If Dorothy is Everywoman . . . it's completely false, and they'd be right to be upset." But as Dorothy multiplies herself in Lynch's bad dreams, she becomes the dark whorehalf of Everywoman,

whose Other is the innocent Madonna. This is the major source of doubling in *Twin Peaks*: it breaks women in half. The premiere this fall engaged in such splitting in a nearly farcical hurry. Donna switches from ingenue to seductress overnight, befuddling us and upsetting sweet baby James. When parody parodies itself, its subversive value is probably negated. *Wild at Heart*, his summer offering, does nothing to change the pattern. We have the ravaged innocent, the woman helplessly compelled by kink, the wicked witch, just more of the same.

Lynch's major defensive strategy is to say it's all a mystery to him, all a dream. Claiming the special status of visionaries who receive them, he says, "It's better not to know so much about what things mean." Whatever they can't articulate, whatever disclaimers they wish to make on their way to the bank, Lynch and Frost surely do use their knowledge about people's psyches. We are all affected by our unconscious mental lives, to which we often have little direct access. We reach the unconscious through dream images, and they reach into ours with slick, sick replications of our most monstrous nightmares. Our dreams are full of ungovernable primary forces, primal urges, unspeakable desires. Those desires push their way into action when they are unexamined.

If *Twin Peaks* helps us to identify those urges, name them, see them for what they are, even if distorted in the fun house mirror, then it might be said to have something in its pretty head after all. If it exposes to us just how deeply our urges are misshaped by repression, aggression, and misogyny, then it will have some worthwhile dimension. But I'm afraid we can't assume that's what's going on here.

It was Lynch's film *The Elephant Man* that from the perspective of a deep journey into the underworld gave us the beautiful images of an experienced, restored innocence – uncompromised, knowledgeable, beleaguered, genuine, worthy. Some day, before the internal tribunal every thinking, privileged, and especially every powerful person should face, he'll need to ask himself the disarmingly simple question Dr Treves poses in *The Elephant Man*: "Am I a good man? Or am I a bad man?" Will he and Frost manage to retrieve *Twin Peaks* from the elegant trash heap by the end of this season? To do something good, or at least to do the wounded world no harm? By their works ye shall know them. □

# Surviving the incest industry

*Survivors of child sexual abuse spoke out about their experiences in order to expose this hidden aspect of male violence and destroy it. Louise Armstrong argues that their accounts have been reduced to fodder for a burgeoning 'incest industry' which individualises and medicalises survivors and marginalises feminist politics.*

It is a dozen years since feminists first spoke out on the issue of incest, of repeated sexual violation of children by males – fathers, step-fathers, grandfathers, uncles. A dozen years later – survivors continue to speak out. Their writings, which I will call "I-story" books, have become a small sub-genre of the burgeoning incest literature (framed by books on healing yourself and, for professionals, books on healing others). When taken note of by the feminist press, "I-story" books tend to be dealt with gingerly, with delicacy, concerned to maintain a proper comportment in the face of anguish.

I will now proceed to be somewhat indelicate, to speak out – as it were – on speaking out.

Without in any way intending to diminish the genuine feeling which imbues these works or, in some cases, their literary qualities, I think the institutionalisation of speaking out on incest needs re-examination. I think we have been bamboozled.

Since I was among the first to break the silence, and since speaking out was one of the fundamentals of feminism, this may smack of the politically – not only incorrect, but outrageous. Since a central purpose of those speaking out is to help others know they are not alone, and since those who speak do so with great pain, this may smack of the callous. I do not think all that smacking applies. Bear with me.

What I want to show is that the context of speaking out has been altered so radically in these past dozen years that it changes the meaning of what is being said.

When we first exploded the news that this crime against children was routine and widespread, we did so within a feminist

framework of the exposure of multiple, licensed violences against women and children: battering, rape, marital rape . . . Our analysis, our understanding, placed child sexual abuse squarely within this framework, identifying it as a historical permission, a male right: as normal, not deviant. The goal was to raise society's consciousness: to try for a consensus which – it seemed in that climate of feminist optimism – might now say, hey, let's revoke the license!

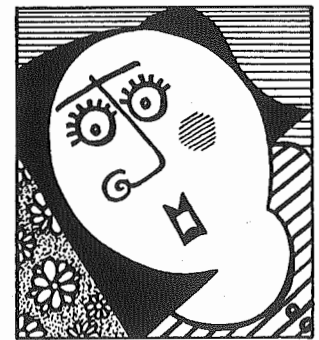
Oh, we did not expect the world to simply cry: 'good, glad you told us, we'll just cut that out'. But what we had learned, from talking, from listening, was so clearcut, so eminently reasonable – that men did not do this despite the fact they knew it was wrong, but because they believed it was their right – that it seemed possible the public would react at least to the embarrassing absurdity of so many fathers suddenly spotlighted playing doctor (and much worse) with their three-year-olds. Just because they wanted to. Just because they could. Ours was an exuberance that anticipated a healthy fight for which we felt properly armed.

There was no fight. If we expected to be told to shut up, we were wrong. If we expected to be told we were wrong that abuse was so common, we were wrong. If we expected to be told we were wrong about the sexual politics – we were wrong as well.

On this last point, we were simply ignored.

### The message-suppressors

It was not the forces of repression that were sent in to meet us. It was battalions of newly minted mental health professionals. And they were so sure we were *not* wrong about the incidence, and so sure we were *not* wrong about



My father  
did it to me

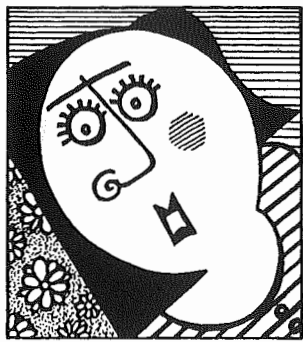
I hear  
your grief



Cath Jackson







Men did it  
to me

the entrenched license, that they were willing to stake their careers on it: to enter a new specialty, "incest expert". We had agitated the public. They believed that they had the balm to peddle which would calm them. Being professionals, they banked on the fact that their calm-balm would prevail over our call for social change. They were right.

Almost from the start, the media carried our stories – and their analysis. Minutes after first opening our mouths, our message was first muffled, then obliterated.

We spoke of male violence and deliberate socially accepted violation. They spoke of family dysfunction. We spoke of rage. They named rage a stage. We spoke of social change. They spoke of personal healing. We spoke of political battle. They spoke of our need to hug the child within.

If our speaking out was an effort to litter the landscape with our cry for reform, they were the message-suppressors, sent in by the powers that be, the sanitation engineers. Overt argument would have lent vigour to the fight. Converting the issue to a non-issue, they spoke in pieties of the horrors of incest – all the while often crying for the human advance which would be represented by de-criminalising it. What they were after was medicalisation, making child-rape an individual emotional problem (the child's). This not only de-issued the issue, it gave birth to a lucrative incest industry – counselling programmes, prevention programmes (including a Spiderman comic so kiddies could know Spiderman had been "touched inappropriately" too) – all of which was terrifically capitalism-compatible.

## I hear your anger

We'd been dialing the cops. Who answered was a social worker. These new social police not only tidied up after us, they all but wiped out any trace that we had ever been there. The odd leaflet, the odd flyer, the odd piece in an increasingly limited feminist press were all that remained.

Now, having long since been quashed as a political issue, even incest-the-novelty-social-

disease shows signs of going limp. (And this is one brilliance of the strategy of converting the personal-is-political into the political-as-personal: it palls so nicely.)

### War on women and children

For a while there was some renewed vibrance as woman after woman, doing as she was told, believed her child's saying daddy'd raped her (or him), and sought protection – only to find herself vilified as vindictive and deprived of custody, often even of visitation. In the USA it is mothers who are regularly labelled as 'the real abusers'. Case after case described its arc across the horizon so predictably that it didn't seem even the shallowest of wit could fail to catch on to what was passing:

See Susie (or Johnny) tell. Now see mommy shocked. See mommy act: Pick up the phone, report the abuse, call her attorney, seek to protect the child, to end time spent with the alleged perpetrator.

Now see the court (the very court which would have convicted her of neglect had someone other than herself reported the abuse) react with disbelief. See daddy get access. See mommy take psychological tests. See daddy take them. See mommy's tests label her hysterical. See daddy's anoint him as stable. See her anger called pathological. See his called righteous. See mommy lose custody. See mommy fight. See the court order her to be silent. See her argue. See mommy lose access. (And then, in America, see mommy take Susie and run. Run, mommy, run. Now see the FBI run after her ...)

It did not seem possible that even the most stupid of the species could miss the fact that courts which would summarily remove a child from a mother for neglect based on *possible harm* were now consistently ruling for fathers in consideration of *possible error*. It did not seem possible to miss the idea that, while speaking out about abuse in the past did nothing to disturb the status quo, speaking out about abuse in the *present* was tantamount to a declaration of war. And the other guys had the army.

But the mainstream media continued insistently to term these cases "custody disputes". And the public, befuddled, looked on dimly. Interest waned.

### Incest as illness

The combination of medicalisation of the issues for survivors, alongside the open declaration of

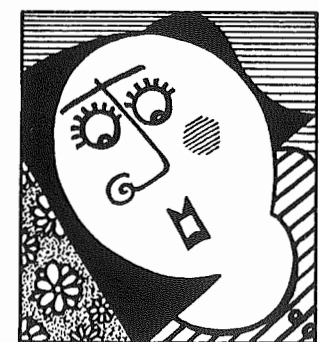
war on women and children in the present, is what I mean when I say the context of speaking out, of telling personal stories, has changed. This is what throws into question the idea a great many survivors embrace, that theirs is an "illness" from which they must "heal"; and that their speaking out about their "journeys" to "empowerment" in itself constitutes a political act. Each individual who has suffered socially sanctioned oppression feels individual pain from that oppression – may suffer "symptoms", emotional as well as practical. Whose purpose is served when the onus is on the oppressed to become well-adjusted (even as the oppression continues)? What goals are served by allowing the focus to be shifted to that pain, those symptoms which result? Absent emphasis on the root cause? All this does is to ensure business-as-usual – all the while converting a potentially uppity portion of the community into a new consumer group.

Medicalisation, personalisation of the issue of incest, has otherwise served to provide diversion. For a while multiple personalities (dubbed "multiples") kicked in, and suddenly – like would-be Miss Teenage Americas competing for Most Personality, survivors competed for The Most Personalities. That now appears to have topped out at ninety-two (with the book *When Rabbit Howls*). Multiples, I am told by counsellors, are out of fashion. So what will be next?

*Retreats for survivors*, often run by private for-profit psychiatric institutions charging exorbitant prices, have become a fad. Retreats? What we need are *attacks*.

"Gender neutrality" has triumphed. Equal emphasis on female offenders (who are statistically negligible in every study) obviates the fact that female sexual violence is *not* equally routine and equally normative within the culture. Worse than that. It means that to speak of sexual politics, of *male* violence, seems not only retrograde, but actually gauche and insulting and bigoted – so firmly is the subject now rooted in terms of the individual-psychological-emotional. And so we are now silenced by ourselves.

"Incested" – the conversion of a noun to a verb ("I was incested when I was five"). This struck me when I first heard it as truly horrific, deserving of ongoing remark. (Doesn't it sound like a rite of passage? I was baptized? I was confirmed?) But – it occasioned no remark.



You do it  
to me

Survivors, the "incested", continue to speak out.

Many of the "I-story" books now carry an introduction or endorsement by mental health professionals attesting that this is one brave woman's story of her journey through the stages of healing. Thus, the survivor is made into a case history, fodder for the professionals; pre-fabricated notions. Incest-as-illness has so successfully suffused the culture that the personal – illustrative of pathology – emerges truncated, stunted: personal. In effect, the stories illuminate not the need for social change, but only the need for personal growth. Childhood rape is presented as an opportunity: a challenge to your courage – to heal.

### Detoxifying feminism

In fact, the arc described by the issue of incest should provide, for feminists, a textbook case of the social system's newly refined techniques for detoxifying feminist protest. Unquestionably, the motives of survivors remain genuine – to help others. But placed side by side with the ongoing blatant threat that "abused children become abusers", the promise of 'healing' bears an uncanny resemblance to that of salvation from hellfire and damnation.

Witness this: speak out today, and here are some of the twelve steps that may be provided for your recovery:

- Admit you are powerless over your early experience and that your life has become unmanageable.
- Come to believe that a power greater than yourself can restore you to sanity.

## I hear your guilt

• Make a decision to turn your will and your life over to the care of God as you understand Her/Him.

• Admit to God, yourself and another human being the exact nature of your wrongs (yes, yours).

• Be entirely ready to have God remove these defects of character (yes, *yours*).

• Humbly ask Her/Him to remove your shortcomings.





• Make a list of all persons you have harmed and become willing to make amends to them all ...

I ask you. If this were a 12-step designed by rapists, could they have improved on this programme of sin and redemption? (Sin, yours. Redemption task, yours.)

Why (one does not know whether to bang the table with one's fists or one's forehead) – why have so many survivors so readily bought into this “model” in which their childhood rape becomes the fuel driving an ongoing industry? Why have they been so ready to embrace the recommended teddy bear, rather than embracing their rage?

Many, many survivors came to consciousness after that brief light shone on the politics of incest. However all of their experience since then has taken place within the context of incest-as-illness. They have been courted by a cadre of helpers; given codewords and buzz phrases; had an emotional universe custom-designed, their feelings predicted and pre-articulated, their path delineated. In embracing their identity as “survivors” they are granted belonging in a community which celebrates the primacy of Feelings.

To be fair: they have been horribly threatened. Abused children become abusers. On your head be it. Take the cure, or else.

And – to be fair: the most perceptive of them must ask why, if feminists were so right, we made so little headway. And who better placed to know that when you challenge such a power-invested centre; attempting to storm, as it were, the very room where the king is diddling his daughter, the guards will do something nasty indeed to you should you get in.

## I forgive you

Those victimised as children by fathers must know more surely than any the threatened price of defiance.

### Incest and identity

But perhaps most importantly incest-as-illness offered survivors support – an item noticeably in short supply in the feminist movement in recent years. By the time incest arose as an

issue, the women's movement had already become a loose collection of the single-issue identified: the battered women's contingent, the anti-pornography contingent, reproductive rights... It had already begun to splinter into a zillion often-antagonistic identity groups: Black, Jewish, Hispanic, lesbian, Marxist, socialist, communalist, spiritualist, vegetarian... Individuals were deriving their identities from these identifications. “Survivor” became a ticket, a passport, a membership card.

It was hardly survivors' faults that, in placing their primary identities in incest, they concluded with the medicalisers in their own clientisation.

And, of course, this ghettoising of the issue served to corroborate the more general feminist population's sense that the issue was off bounds for any but card-carrying victims.

Is the issue re-claimable as a feminist one? Can the greatest number of survivors yet be brought within a political base, and can their energies be converted to activism? I am told not by counsellors: that they are too weakened, and too emotionally fragile. I do not know this. I do not know anymore how much of the fragility is intrinsic and how much is fed by the prevailing wisdom.

I do suspect that nothing can change without concerted energy on the part of feminists as a whole, nor unless we can offer a satisfactory belonging and sense of community and purpose. What survivors are buying into presently is, after all, profoundly respectable. In a world in which people are volunteering wholesale to identify themselves as addicted to anything-you-name-it, to confess to an illness and subject themselves to a cure, those embracing incest as their illness seem positively wholesome (in the social sense).

The goals served by the illness model are deeply opposed to feminist goals. To fight on behalf of feminist goals is to focus attention on child-rape as a crime and on men and male power as the problem. The goal of most therapies is *forgiveness* of offenders. As with religious goals of enemy forgiveness. This is a beautiful way of containing the anger of an oppressed population by fostering an unholy delusion: that the oppressor gives a damn one way or the other; that your power to forgive is any kind of power at all.

Perhaps, ironically, a first step now is to speak out about all this. Perhaps now is the time to break the *real* silence. □

# Making feminist law?

*Is it possible to create feminist law on pornography? Maureen O'Hara examines recent attempts in the US and Britain, and suggests a strategy which doesn't play into the hands of men, the right wing or liberal reformists.*

Feminist arguments against pornography have moved increasingly into mainstream politics in Britain in the past few years. Two relatively high profile anti-pornography organisations working from a broadly feminist perspective – the Campaign Against Pornography (CAP) and the Campaign Against Pornography and Censorship (CPC) – have been set up. Both organisations have had formal or informal links with women Labour MPs who oppose pornography, and both have raised the question of legislation in various ways. Increased discussion among feminists about using legislation against pornography has also been sparked off by the debate in the US over the anti-pornography ordinance drafted by Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon. In Britain two pieces of legislation – Clare Short's ‘Page 3 Bill’ and Dawn Primarola's Location of Pornographic Materials Bill – have been introduced to, but not passed by, parliament.

The increased public profile of specifically feminist opposition to pornography has coincided with an increased concern in the major political parties with attracting women's votes and with being seen to be committed to doing something about male violence against women and children (even if they call it something else). While government economic policy and its decimation of local government finance are taking resources away from women's aid, rape

crisis centres and other voluntary sector organisations opposing male violence, the government has made much of its determination to deal with sexual offenders and ensure that the police treat domestic violence seriously. Government criticism of the recent Home Office sponsored ‘Cumberbatch’ report which claims there is no evidence of links between sexual violence and pornography, suggests that the government might be prepared to introduce some form of legislation against pornography or, more likely, strengthen existing obscenity legislation, if they thought political capital could be made from it. A crucial question for feminists at the moment is what kinds of legislation against pornography might serve our purposes and what kinds of legislation are likely to play into the overt and hidden agendas of the Right?

### Prostitution, pimping and production

How you think about particular kinds of legislation against pornography depends on what you think pornography is and how you view the industry which produces it. Much of the debate about pornography which has taken place in Britain has focused on pornographic images and the ways in which men use such images, both in public and in private, to undermine the resistance of women and children to sexual coercion and assault. There has been relatively



Clare Harris



little discussion of the ways pornography is produced, and consequently little overt acknowledgement of the abuses of women and children involved in the making of pornography.

Discussion about legislation has focused largely on regulating the sale and display of pornography and there has been relatively little exploration of the possibilities of developing legislation which would acknowledge and challenge the abuses of women which are the bedrock on which the pornography industry is built. Bringing about such legislation would involve raising public consciousness about the nature of the pornography industry and its links with prostitution and organised crime, as well as challenging the current use of laws against prostitution to punish women, and the lack of enforcement of laws against pimping and other forms of profiteering from trading in women. (Legislation against child pornography raises different issues partly because children could



Clare Harris

not be deemed to have consented to the acts depicted in it.)

The emphasis in debate on images and the frequent categorisation of those images as 'fantasy' has tended to obscure the fact that the women and children in the images are real and has prevented many people asking serious questions about how they got to be in the photograph, film or video in the first place. That this question is so rarely addressed, even in relation to obviously violent and sadistic forms of pornography, is a measure of how readily the sexual coercion of women and children is dismissed within male supremacist culture. Hard pornography depicts women and children being raped, beaten, violated by animals, mutilated and murdered. Many women and children are injured during the production of pornography. Some are killed. While there is an increasing recognition that child pornography is in effect a record of the sexual abuse of a child, there is relatively little acknowledgement, even among some feminists, of the extent to which much pornography is the record of sexual assaults against women.

The pornography industry, like the institution of prostitution from which it derives, depends on sexual violence for its existence. Without the coercion of women – whether by violence or poverty or both – the pornography industry would largely cease to exist. Pornography, like prostitution, is a form of trafficking in women and children, controlled by pimps and organised criminal syndicates and operating at local, national and international levels. International trafficking in women and children, of which the pornography industry is one part, is recognised and documented not only by feminists campaigning against sexual violence but by the United Nations, whose convention on the elimination of discrimination against women includes a paper commitment to:

...take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to suppress all forms of traffic in women and exploitation of prostitution of women.

In some countries, such as Thailand and the Philippines where as a result of western imperialism major cities have become centres of sex tourism for predominantly European men, many women and children must choose between prostitution or starvation for themselves and their families. Sex tourism centres have

also become centres of pornographic production in which, because of the absolute lack of economic choices of the women and children involved, the practices which are photographed or filmed are often particularly sadistic. Bob Guccione, publisher of Penthouse, has defended a set of sadistic photographs of Asian women he published in 1984 as "cultural illustration". So-called 'snuff' movies, which show simulated, and in some cases real, murders of women and children, originated in Latin America and were advertised in ways which appealed to the racism of their potential audience as well as to their hatred of women.

In the west, whose affluence is in large part a product of the same imperialist exploitation which has helped to produce sex tourism, there are a range of economic, political and legal buffers which, since the late 19th and early 20th century, have given a greater degree of protection to women and children from the kind of sexual exploitation which is pervasive in the sex tourism centres. However while the forms of sexual coercion in the west may be different and less obvious, they continue to exist.

Sarah Wynter, a member of WHISPER (Women Hurt in Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt), a US group set up by women who describe themselves as having "escaped systems of prostitution", has called prostitution "the commerce of abuse and sex inequality". She says:

Prostitution is the foundation on which pornography is built. Pornography is the vehicle by which men sexualise women's chattel status. Pornography cannot exist without prostitution. They are interdependent and create a sexual ghetto that ensures women's sexual inequality. It is impossible to separate pornography from prostitution. The acts are identical – except that in pornography there is a permanent record of women's abuse.

Once in the sex industry women find it virtually impossible to get out, either because of direct physical coercion or because the systems they work in ensure that most of their money goes to men: the pimps, brothel owners and pornography barons who control the sex industry world-wide. There are exceptions to this, and some women do make real money out of working in the sex industry, but the foundation of the sex industry is coercion and those who really control and profit from the industry globally are men.

Women who have been coerced into prostitution and making pornography and who escape have virtually no recourse to any kind of justice, even when they overcome their fear enough to try to seek it. Linda Marciano, under the name Linda Lovelace, was forced to make the film *Deep Throat* during two years of imprisonment and constant sexual and physical violence by her pimp/husband Chuck Traynor. During the making of *Deep Throat* she was forced to smile. She was also badly beaten up by Traynor within earshot of the whole film crew, whose main concern the next day was whether her bruises would be visible on film. Linda Marciano has said that every time someone watched *Deep Throat* – the most profitable porn film ever produced – they are watching her being raped. That film and others she was forced to make are still in circulation and making profits for her pimp, and there is nothing she can do under US law to prevent it.

### **The Dworkin-McKinnon ordinance**

By the time Linda Marciano felt able to attempt to prosecute her ex-pimp she was prevented from doing so by the statute of limitations, which exists under English law as well, and which prevents criminal prosecutions taking place after a specified number of years have elapsed since the crime was committed. Even without this limitation it is in practice virtually impossible for a woman who has been coerced into the pornography industry to prosecute the men involved. In Britain only those prostitution laws which target women are widely enforced. Those against procuring for the purposes of prostitution – living off immoral earnings, etc – are rarely used effectively against pimps, partly because of the networks of official corruption which protect organised prostitution and partly because of women's fear of reporting pimps and the scepticism with which they are likely to be treated.

The Dworkin-McKinnon ordinance was a civil law which, if enacted, would have enabled women in Linda Marciano's position to stop the sale of pornography which they had been forced to produce and to sue its makers for financial damages.

The ordinance defined pornography as "the sexually explicit subordination of women graphically depicted", and went on to list specific examples of sexual subordination, at least one of which had to be present before

material could come within the ordinance's definition. The definition was designed to exclude material premised on sexual equality, and the ordinance included four causes of action under which a woman could take out an injunction to stop a piece of pornography being distributed and/or sue its makers for damages. These were:

- *Coercion into pornography performances* – which would have allowed anyone coerced or fraudulently induced into making pornography to stop its distribution and sue its makers, sellers, distributors or exhibitors. As well as enabling women who have been coerced into the sex industry to take action, this would allow a woman whose rape has been filmed (which is happening increasingly in Britain and on an epidemic scale in the US) to stop distribution of the film.

- *Assault or physical attack due to pornography* – which would allow a woman who had been subjected to a physical or sexual assault in which a piece of pornography was involved to stop its distribution and sue its makers, distributors and so on as above.

- *Forcing pornography on a person* – Anyone who had pornography forced on them in any place of employment or education, at home or in a public place, could sue the perpetrator and/or the institution involved. One of the uses of this kind of provision would be to enable women who have pornography forced on them as a form of sexual harassment to sue the men directly involved as well as any employer or educational institution which condoned their actions.

- *Discrimination by trafficking in pornography* – The ordinance defined the production, sale, exhibition or distribution of pornography as "discrimination against women by trafficking in pornography", and defined the formation of private clubs or associations for the purposes of trafficking in pornography as "conspiracy to violate the civil rights of women". Under this part of the ordinance any woman could bring a "class action" against a particular piece of pornography on behalf of all women on the grounds that it constituted sex discrimination.

The trafficking provision was the most controversial part of the ordinance and some feminists feared it could be used to target non-pornographic sexual material, particularly lesbian or gay literature. Whether this would have been the case is debatable and, in my opinion,

unlikely given the precision of the ordinance's definition.

Under English law it's not possible for an individual to take a legal action on behalf of a whole social group and so the class action part of the ordinance could not apply here. Much of the discussion about the ordinance which took place among feminists here who oppose pornography got very caught up in this aspect, in a way which I think prevented the potential of the rest of it being seriously explored. This was largely because of the emphasis in feminist thinking in Britain on pornography as image and symbol, and a relative lack of focus on pornographic production and the nature of the pornography industry.

Unlike other forms of legislation which currently exist in countries whose legal systems are based on English common law, such as obscenity and zoning legislation (which restricts the sale of pornography to particular geographical areas), the ordinance defined both pornography and the actions which could be taken against it in terms of the harm it does to women and explicitly recognised its links with other forms of sexual violence. Because of this it had enormous potential both to raise women's consciousness about sexual violence in all its forms and to empower women to fight back.

That probably explains why the ordinance produced such a broad coalition of forces ranged against it, the like of which has never been formed to organise against either obscenity or zoning legislation. The ordinance was eventually declared unconstitutional on the grounds that it interfered with the first amendment, which supposedly guarantees free speech. In the US there are some legal exceptions to first amendment protection of 'speech' (as well as many extra-legal ones), and one kind of 'speech' which is not protected by the first amendment is 'obscenity'. The Supreme Court decided that because pornography as defined in the ordinance did not fall within the legal definition of obscenity, pornography was protected speech. This gives some clues to the real nature and purpose of obscenity legislation.

The fathers know that taboo is the essence of power: keep the source of power hidden, mysterious, sacred, so that those without power can never find it, understand it, or take it away.<sup>2</sup>  
 Andrea Dworkin *Letters from a War Zone*  
 Pornography unmasks the sexual sadism which lies at the heart of male domination and which

provides its most effective instrument of power. But this power is threatened if too many women understand its real nature. Men who want to keep both their power over women and their pornography have essentially two strategies open to them. They can keep the pornography hidden from women at least in the public sphere whilst consuming it in private, or they can try to convince women that pornography is really about freedom: the bondage-as-liberation argument increasingly favoured by the libertarian 'Left'. The second strategy works best with women fronting it, especially if they call themselves feminists and use the rhetoric of liberation movements.

Broadly speaking the first strategy is usually favoured by the male Right, the political representatives of economically powerful men, whose sexual access to large numbers of women is assured and who know the value of keeping power hidden. Men are also concerned with restraining the sexual aggression of other men, particularly those over whom they have power, lest it be directed at 'their' women, or at themselves – a much deeper fear.

Elite males, including those who make the law and mete out its punishments, have always been deeply implicated in the traffic in women and children, and had access to pornography long before technological developments made it available to the 'common man'. The beginning of obscenity legislation in Britain, in the 19th century, coincided with the increased availability of pornography outside of male elites and reflected their fears about the consequences of pornography's availability to lower class men and more particularly, its visibility to the women of their own class. Those fears were succinctly expressed by the prosecuting barrister at the obscenity trial of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, who asked the jury to consider how they would feel about their wives or servants reading such a book.

The primary purpose of obscenity legislation was, and is, to keep the nature of pornography hidden from women and prevent meaningful public discourse about it, while allowing men to use it in private. Obscenity legislation, like pornography, derives from men's perception of women's bodies, and sexuality itself, as dirty. One of the meanings of the word "obscenity" is "filth". Within the terms of obscenity legislation pornography is not objectionable because it hurts women but because it

makes visible men's abuse of women's bodies; which are in themselves filthy and shameful.

English obscenity law defines obscene articles as those "which tend to deprave and corrupt", which is anything which would suggest "thoughts of a most impure and libidinous character". One of the purposes served by such broad definition, which has nothing to do with any actual harm to anyone, is to enable discrimination against those groups perceived as threatening to the established male order: most notably lesbians and, for different reasons, gay men.

While obscenity law and related police powers of seizure impose some limits on the distribution of more violent forms of pornography and some penalties on its makers, they do so in ways which help to mask the real nature of pornography, ultimately upholding male supremacy and the institution of heterosexuality.

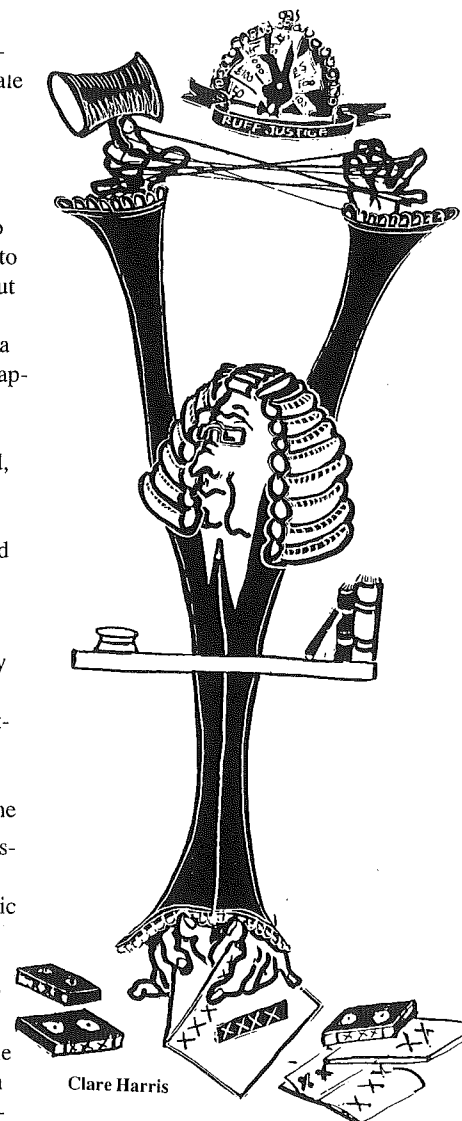
In the absence of a strong and public feminist position on pornography legislation, the most likely response of the government to the increasingly public opposition of women to pornography, and to the public discourse about sexual violence generally which the pornography debate is helping to create, is probably a strengthening of obscenity legislation (either apparent or real).

Such a move would serve the purposes which obscenity legislation has always served, hiding the truth from women and helping to silence us. "We've strengthened the laws against pornography, now you can shut up and go home."

### Zoning laws

Apart from the 'Page 3 Bill', which had a very limited purpose and did not try to deal with a broad range of pornography, the only feminist-inspired attempt at legislation in Britain has been the 'Locations' Bill, a presentation bill which Dawn Primarola introduced in 1990. The purpose of a presentation bill is to generate discussion rather than to make law. One of its functions is to test out parliamentary and public opinion and, if it is seen by the government to represent the views of significant numbers, it can help to push them into introducing similar or related forms of legislation themselves.

The 'Locations' Bill seeks to limit the sale of pornography to licensed retail outlets which would sell nothing else, thereby removing por-





nography from shops extensively used by women. Its definition of pornography is loosely based on the definition in the Dworkin-MacKinnon ordinance, but it lacks the precision and detail of that definition, and probably leaves more room for including non-pornographic images within its scope.

Forms of zoning already operate in Britain through existing planning and licensing laws, but the 'Locations' Bill would formalise such practices and result in all forms of pornography being dumped almost exclusively in working class areas, particularly those which have large Black or other racially oppressed populations, or which are already centres of prostitution. This has been the effect of zoning legislation in the US, where the levels of sexual harassment and assault against women, as well as other forms of street crime, have increased in neighbourhoods where porn shops have been concentrated.

My own experience of growing up in a well known centre of street prostitution is that men strut with an arrogant and open contempt for women in areas of trafficking which I have never seen in public elsewhere, and that women and girls living in such areas are constantly harassed.

For feminists to support zoning legislation is a betrayal both of the women and children living in the prospective trafficking zones and of the women and children who are abused in the making of pornography. Zoning legislation essentially condones the buying and selling of women and children, taking issue only about where the market place should be.

### Possible feminist legislation

Some women have suggested a form of legislation modelled on the legislation in the Public Order Acts against incitement to racial hatred, which would define pornography as incitement to sexual hatred or violence. As Sona Osman has pointed out, the public order legislation has been ineffective in challenging racist material and has frequently been used against black people. Even if legislation of this kind were framed in terms of "incitement to hatred of women" it would not effectively challenge the pornography industry as such, because it does not address in concrete ways the actual harm pornography does to women, particularly the women who are abused in order to make it.

Legislation in itself can't eliminate pornog-

raphy any more than it can outlaw male supremacy, but there are forms of legislation feminists could agitate for which could expand awareness among women about pornography and give those women who have been most directly harmed by pornography and the industry which produces it more hope of justice. Even if not enacted, debate about proposed legislation which took as its starting point the abuses of women by the industry and its links with prostitution and organised crime, as well as dealing with the ways men actually use pornography against women, could be an instrument of radical change in consciousness.

A starting point for such legislation could be strengthening of laws against coercing women into prostitution and linking them with new criminal laws against coercing women into pornographic performances of any kind, whether in live sex shows or for the purpose of producing a marketable product. The UN Convention's commitment to opposing trafficking in women could be invoked in promoting such legislation.

The drafting and promotion of such laws would need to make explicit the links between prostitution, pornography and organised crime. A model which could be used for this is US federal legislation against "racket influenced corrupt organisations" – known as the "rico" laws. The "rico" laws have been used against pornographers in combination with US obscenity law, but there's no reason why similar laws couldn't be used along with feminist forms of anti-pornography legislation based on outlawing trafficking in women. They are based on a recognition that racketeering can't be fought using ordinary criminal law, and can be used to confiscate any capital assets associated with the commission of a criminal act. Pornographers and pornography outlets have been put out of business by the use of these laws.

Criminal legislation against trafficking could, in theory, be backed up by civil legislation based on the Dworkin-MacKinnon ordinance adapted to English law. For women to be able to use this kind of civil legislation in practice, a means would have to be found of making money available for legal fees, which would be unlikely to come from the government, which is currently squeezing the legal aid which is already available. Nevertheless I think it's still worth pursuing an English version of

the ordinance as a consciousness raising tool if nothing else. In the unlikely event that feminists could get it enacted, it might be possible to raise money for at least some cases, which could have powerful repercussions among women.

Instead of using zoning legislation to stop the imposition of pornography on women and children in shops, we could explore laws against public pornographic display based on a feminist definition. I think that preventing the display of pornography in public places is important because of its effects on children, particularly girls. There are US laws which explicitly refer to the effect of pornographic display on children which might be a useful reference.

The political climate is currently one in which it might be possible to generate debate about these kinds of legislation, particularly if sympathetic MPs could be persuaded to introduce them into parliament. That might be more likely with legislation opposing trafficking in women, which would be more easily understood by MPs than civil legislation based on the ordinance. Feminist laws of the kind I've suggested would be much more difficult to sell to MPs than obscenity or zoning legislation because they are more complex and deal with the heart of the pornography industry, which some MPs would prefer not to think about and others would prefer women not to think about. But we have nothing to lose by trying and maybe a more radical feminist anti-pornography movement to gain. □



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# HARDWARE HEROINES

*Sue Botcherby and Rosie Garland cautiously welcome the arrival of the 'hardware heroine' in cop and sci-fi thriller movies. Clad in vest and sensible knickers, guns blazing, she strides out of the glamour-puss role into violent confrontation with gender, genre – and feminist sensibilities?*



Viewing popular cinema can be a problematic activity. The representation of women in mainstream cinema and the ways in which film makers choose to interpret and construct women's lives and identities has incurred critical attention from feminists. The sexual objectification and exploitation of women for the 'pleasure' of the male viewer provokes angry opposition. However, we have at times been tantalised by depictions of women defying patriarchal notions of acceptable femininity, only to see them realising 'the error of their

ways' by the end of the film or eventually being punished for their deviant behaviour.

Many feminists have preferred to resist the 'whole' reading of such films and have instead exalted particular screen stars: Katharine Hepburn in *Christopher Strong* (Dorothy Arzner 1933); Greta Garbo in *Queen Christina* (Rouben Mamoulian 1933); Vanessa Redgrave in *Julia* (Fred Zinneman 1977). The feminist viewer can gain pleasure from identifying with women in films in their on-screen successes, struggles and attempts at resistance. So it's not

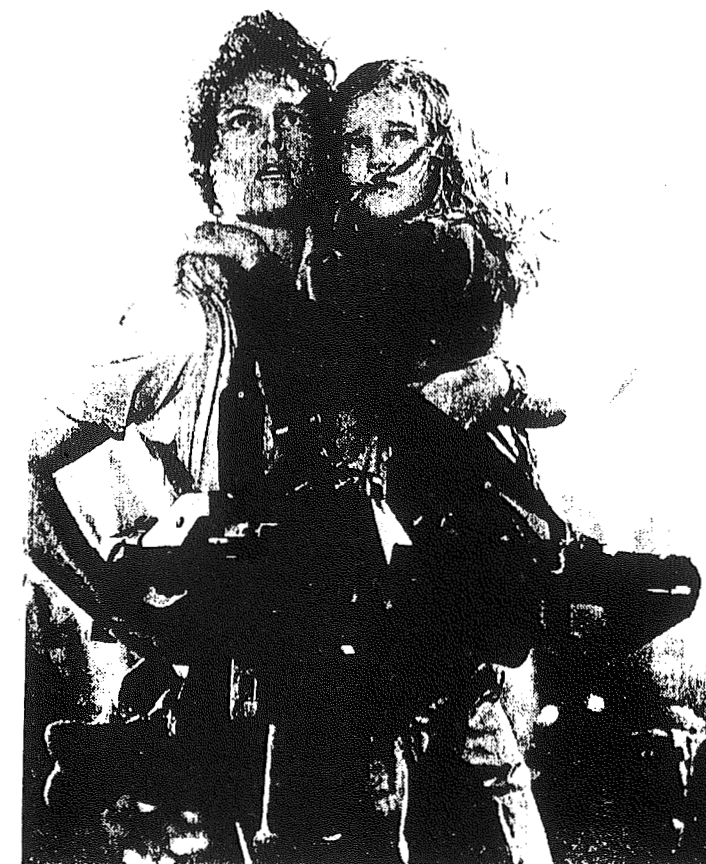
surprising that we're keen to see popular representations of women that break new ground in dominant cinema.

The late 80s and early 90s have produced an interesting, new on-screen role for women. We're witnessing the emergence of a new type of strong and aggressive woman: the 'hardware heroine'. *Aliens* (James Cameron 1986), starring Sigourney Weaver as Flight Officer Ripley; *Fatal Beauty* (Tom Holland 1989), starring Whoopi Goldberg as Detective Rizzoli, and *Blue Steel* (Kathryn Bigelow 1990), starring Jamie Lee Curtis as Police Officer Turner are prime examples of this new genre. The forthcoming *Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme 1991), starring Jodie Foster as FBI Agent Clarice Starling, also belongs to this genre.

These films are interesting because of the number of elements which make them appear different. As protagonists, the women play central and crucial roles, determining the course of the narrative and effecting its resolution: a status not usually accorded to women in mainstream films. We have rarely seen a screen heroine retain her autonomy right to the final credits. These characters are tough, aggressive, powerful and deadly – attributes normally associated with men. They exercise power and initiate and control events; men listen to them. In many ways these characters disrupt conventionally received notions of femininity – and survive comparatively unscathed.

They are emotionally and financially independent. They don't have jobs, but fulfilling careers. They go home to a place of their own, unfettered by marriage or children, which is unusual in popular cinema where the plot conventionally revolves around home, relationships and the family. Their access to power is unrelated to romance or sex; they are defined by their actions despite their sexuality. Of particular significance is the portrayal of these women as consistently strong and positive.

In their publicity these films have been hailed as "genre and gender bending". *Blue Steel* has been screened at a feminist film conference. But how radically do these films redefine what is possible for women and what if anything, does this mean for feminism? Are conventional notions of femininity ultimately challenged? Have these film makers been influenced by feminism and can viewers extract feminist messages from them? Does the rise of



the aggressive heroine really pose a threat to men or does she merely contribute to male fantasy via the eroticisation of hardware and violence?

## Heroic battles

*Aliens* is the second instalment in a trilogy of sci-fi films. Sigourney Weaver has been demoted after the first film *Alien* (Ridley Scott 1979) because the 'Company' (powerful scientists who rule the Earth) refuses to believe that her entire first crew has been wiped out by aliens. She suffers from terrible nightmares and is holding down a job in loading which is way below her abilities. News seeps through that contact has been lost with the inhabitants on the planet LV14. She is persuaded to accompany a task force of American marines in an advisory capacity to rescue the people on the planet and her status as Flight Officer Ripley is restored. The commander of the marines proves to be ineffectual when faced with the invading aliens and she assumes control. She has to contend with Burke, an entrepreneurial techno-scientist



who'd like to further progress (surprise! surprise!) via the sale of an alien embryo. Powerful, heroic and clad in her famed grey vest, she rescues the sole survivor of the colony, the child Newt, nukes the planet and undertakes a climactic battle with the queen alien to bring the film to an exhausted close. Corporal Hicks and the remaining half of an android are the only other survivors.

In *Fatal Beauty* Whoopi Goldberg plays a tough undercover cop, Detective Rizzoli of the narcotics squad. The film opens with Goldberg failing to bust a drug dealer because she goes to help a prostitute who is being beaten up. Thus her character is established. The action revolves around two drug dealers who murder their way into a consignment of the lethal drug 'Fatal Beauty' which they then proceed to peddle. Rizzoli uncovers a connection with a wealthy businessman, Kroll, who proves to be a powerful and deadly adversary. Her superiors warn her off Kroll, an 'important' member of the community, but despite their practical advice she works on her own to crack the case. In its course she meets Marshak (Sam Elliot), Kroll's bodyguard, who does not suspect his employer's underworld connections but is gradually convinced and reformed by

Goldberg, not unhampered by his romantic interest in her. The film ends in an overwhelming violent shoot-out in a shopping mall, Marshak is injured and Rizzoli triumphs by eventually fighting it out on her own.

*Blue Steel* opens as the camera tracks down a dark corridor and we overhear a man beating up a screaming woman. Jamie Lee Curtis bursts upon the scene, shoots the man and is shot herself... but this is a mock-up, a training session for rookie cops; all in a day's work. Curtis plays Megan Turner, a new police officer with the New York Police Department. She is asked in an early scene why she joined up: "I wanna shoot people" is her reply. Laughter: it's a joke; but within minutes she has killed an armed robber. His gun disappears and she is suspended for her 'unwarranted' actions. The gun has been picked up by passing psycho Eugene Hunt (Ron Silver), who embarks on a spree of random murders, carving each bullet with Turner's name. The plot thickens and it becomes obvious he is 'hearing voices'. He courts Turner, who is unaware of his double-life, and she is charmed by his affluent, gentlemanly exterior. When his true character is eventually revealed a bewildering and bloody game of cat and mouse ensues.

Turner and Nick Mann (Clancy Brown) join forces in a desperate bid to thwart this clever, respectable (he works on the stock market) psychotic killer. The film ends in a barbaric shoot out between Turner and Hunt, whilst Mann languishes in hospital, wired up to a life-support machine. The credits roll and Turner is the only one left standing.

### Busting tradition

As viewers, feminists have responded to these films with varying degrees of interest and suspicion. The protagonists are 'powerful' in that they occupy positions of status in their work and are portrayed as having the ability to lead and control. The roles of "Flight Officer", "Police Officer" and "Narcotics Officer" are not traditionally ascribed to women. There is no question that career is important and central to these characters. Nor have they had to sacrifice love or relationships to get to these positions, or (unconvincingly) to prove themselves worthy because of their gender (and, in Goldberg's case, her race). The main hostility they encounter is as representatives of the 'establishment': "My daughter a cop!...", spits Megan Turner's father in *Blue Steel*. The complicating factor in all three films lies within the roles themselves: they are officers of a 'State' depicted as brutal, corrupt and male-dominated.

On a simplistic level it is rewarding to see women competing successfully and with apparent ease in a domain traditionally associated with masculinity and male values. That some women are allowed to occupy such powerful positions could be construed as a coup for feminism. Yet applauding women's use of traditional male forms of power raises significant contradictions for feminism. It is interesting that these 'new' roles for women are being made possible in an era that has been heralded as 'post-feminist', in which significant opportunities are being made available to women, but only for privileged individuals in certain career structures. The questions that must concern us are: what is their relationship to traditionally male forms of power, and do they handle it differently?

Rizzoli, Turner and Ripley risk their careers by challenging male-dominated hierarchies in the name of justice and revenge. In *Fatal Beauty*, Rizzoli is quick to realise that she has uncovered City Hall corruption and involvement in drugs peddling. Unlike her boss, who warns her unequivocally to steer clear, she



tackles such dirty-dealing unflinchingly. She risks the wrath of the powerful and wealthy businessman, Kroll, and her own personal safety, in order to expose widescale drugs corruption and its devastating effects on the lives of young people. Likewise in *Blue Steel* there is an implicit criticism of Wall Street and the stock market, to which the killer Hunt is an enthusiastic devotee. Similarly, Turner risks personal ruin by rejecting the advice of her superiors to stay clear of Hunt, who is well respected in the City. She is driven by personal revenge (Hunt murders her best friend) and a commitment to social justice, leading her to change her opinions about why she wants to remain a police officer: "Because of people like him". In *Aliens* it becomes obvious that the real villain of the piece is the faceless and sinister Company. The clear intent is to bring aliens back to earth for "research" and if humans must be sacrificed to achieve this, there is no observable ripple in the Company's conscience. Ripley takes on the might of the Company as she battles with the scheming Burke. In defence of the aliens she announces, "At least you don't see them frigging each other over for a god-damn percentage".

Quite rightly, there is feminist antipathy towards characters who serve as enforcement





officers of State regimes or institutions. Unfortunately, in both *Fatal Beauty* and *Blue Steel* there is very little real challenge to the Police State. None of the characters question or are critical of their role in it. Similarly in *Aliens*, Ripley ultimately employs a militaristic sensibility and will not rest until she has destroyed the 'outsiders', the aliens. In many ways these characters simply mirror similar male characters: enforcers of the law with 'hearts of gold'. However, in their attempts to be 'good cops' these women do not resort to being flirtatious, seductive or tearful to convince or gain the sup-

port of their colleagues. Nor do they have to become 'one of the boys' in order to succeed, as the issue of their right to be there is never questioned.

#### **Pleasure serving**

One of the main concerns of feminist film criticism has been the extent to which images of women on the screen are constructed for the pleasure of the male spectator. Ripley, Rizzoli and Turner are portrayed as sexually attractive and desirable, but this is complicated by the unconventional ways in which their femininity is

constructed. As characters they do appeal to some women and lesbian spectators, but this takes us into the complicated realm of how women look and actively desire and whether this is different from the way men look in the cinema. Turner, Ripley and Rizzoli dress and look androgynous which adds to the ambiguity and confusion about gender identity raised by the films. Part of the appeal of Rizzoli, Turner and Ripley to women may be that they are defiantly unglamorous, and the statement underlying this is attractive to feminists. These characters are strong and sassy; they stomp around looking decidedly unfeminine, each with their own particular style (Curtis' cropped hair and flat chest, Goldberg's don't-mess-with-me walk and Weaver's grey vest and sensible knickers). We do not witness the transformation of these characters into acceptable femininity; nor is there ever any question that their appearance is a problem to them. In *Aliens*, a muscular woman marine who looks as if she could devour most aliens as a light snack does not escape such criticism. She is asked by a male colleague: "Hey Vasquez, have you ever been mistaken for a man?" We laugh at her reply: "No, have you?"

#### **Hardware fetish**

Parts of *Blue Steel* are filmed using the soft-focus technique of porn movies. The opening frame lingers on Turner's torso as she buttons over her white, lacy bra. Later she entices Hunt to take her gun and, as she opens her jacket, the camera picks up an erect nipple. Turner is portrayed as a character with conventional erotic potential. If Ripley and Rizzoli are not portrayed in this way, they are nonetheless undermined, like Turner, by the potential to fetishise hardware heroines through an emphasis on leashed violence, danger, excitement and domination. This is most evident in *Blue Steel*, with its obsessive attention to guns, uniform, leather and steel. Towards the end of the film Turner is raped in her own flat by Hunt, the killer. This is her 'punishment' for her refusal to give up hunting him down. Earlier in the film, Turner kills an armed robber by grasping her weapon at arm's length, her mouth slightly open, firing again and again. In *Aliens*, Ripley drags Corporal Hicks to safety, his body slumped against hers, her chest heaving and the ever present machine gun ready at her side. Each of these characters carries dangerous phallic weapons and in Ripley's case excessively

so. Ironically, the phallic dominance of Ripley and Rizzoli adds an erotic dimension to *Aliens* and *Fatal Beauty*, for men.

#### **Sex and romance**

None of the plots of these films revolve around heterosexual romance. Neither are Ripley, Turner or Rizzoli characterized by their romantic interests, which signifies a departure from the traditional ways in which women have been assigned power over men in popular cinema. Romance figures on the level of sub-plot, but even there its inclusion is not entirely convincing. Ripley's minor flirtation with Corporal Hicks in *Aliens*, far from being sexual, is so understated as to be almost invisible. Rizzoli eventually sleeps with Marshak in *Fatal Beauty*, but the sex scene is not depicted and you are left wondering why she bothered. She does betray some concern for him at the end of the film when he is being carried away on a stretcher, but there is no clear indication that the romance will continue, or that she has been transformed by meeting the man for whom she has been waiting.

In *Blue Steel*, Turner eventually has sex with Detective Nick Mann. It is a particularly gruesome, voyeuristic scene; the killer Hunt is listening and watching from the next room. This is where Hunt rapes Turner and shoots Mann in the process. The two 'sex' scenes stress women's sexual vulnerability and availability. Turner is concerned for Mann's welfare after he is shot, hospitalised and tied up to a life support machine but, far from sitting at his bedside, she knocks out a male cop, steals his uniform and tracks down the killer Hunt alone. The sexual scenes in *Fatal Beauty* and *Blue Steel* are incidental to the plot: surely a desperate bid by the directors to show that, under their tough exteriors, these women can be touched by the right man. They are not – heaven forbid – lesbians.

#### **On equal terms**

These characters do not achieve their powerful status through romance or glamour; they gain it through their actions. These women are aggressors who fight and use 'hardware' on equal, if not superior, terms with men. They inflict levels of violence rarely represented by women on the screen. Turner, Rizzoli and Ripley are no Charlie's Angels. This high level of violence and violently aggressive heroines present problems for the feminist viewer. Many



feminists would prefer to avoid watching films that reek of violence and machismo, whatever else they contain. Is the use of hardware and the perpetration of violence ever acceptable or something to be admired, even on the screen?

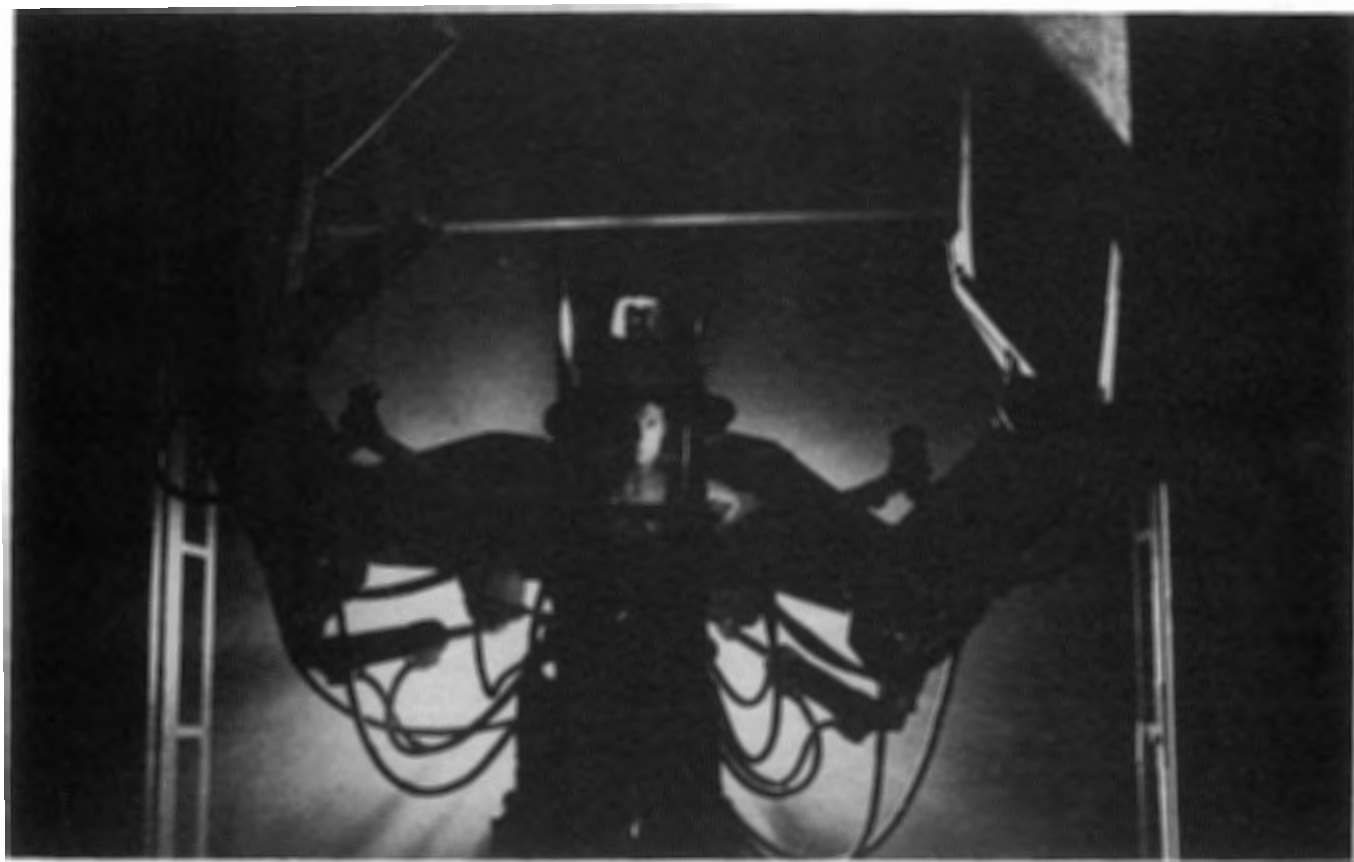
Such levels of violence in film have been justified on grounds of self defence or in revenge against male violence against women. In the film *Shame* (Steve Jodrell 1987) the heroine's revenge against rape is violent and deadly. In *A Question of Silence* (Marleen Gorris 1981), a man, chosen at random, is murdered by three women who don't know each other. Feminist and female audiences can respond very positively to films which applaud the violent actions of strong independent heroines. The difference is that the directors of *Blue Steel*, *Fatal Beauty* and *Aliens* make it clear that women, like men, can perpetuate violent policing and contribute to the glorification of violence, but they also make clear that this particular version of equality of opportunity is not a threat to men and male power.

These films are not feminist, but their publicity claims that they are 'genre and gender

bending' make them of interest to feminists and open to interpretation. As mainstream films and part of dominant cinema, they do offer new roles for women. Women's strength and independence is represented positively, a departure from the norm where women have been represented either as bad and strong (Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity*), or mad and strong (Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction*).

On some levels the hardware heroine disrupts conventional notions of femininity. These characters are not stereotypical glamour queens; they're in charge of their own lives and solve the problems that face them without being rescued by a male protagonist. They are defined by action, not by romance or sex.

These films have obviously had an effect on consumer culture. The Ripley image is being used by Smith & Wesson to sell a new range of handguns for women. The advertising promotes 'independence' and 'safety' for women by the purchase of a gun. The critical point is that feminism is about dis-empowering men, not arming women and ultimately this is not the message of these films. □



# Three Steps Forward

**Nema Mdoe talks to Liz Kelly about women's lives and hopes in Tanzania – nominally a socialist state but where tradition and western economic interference conspire to undermine principles of equality. But women are campaigning strongly to put issues like women's work, sexual harassment and violence on the political agenda.**

Tanzania was originally two countries, Tanganyika and Zanzibar. Tanganyika was a German colony until the first world war. When Germany was defeated it became a British mandate under the League of Nations. After the second world war, when the United Nations was formed, it became a trusteeship territory under British rule. In 1962 it became a republic and in 1964 joined with Zanzibar to become the United Republic of Tanzania.

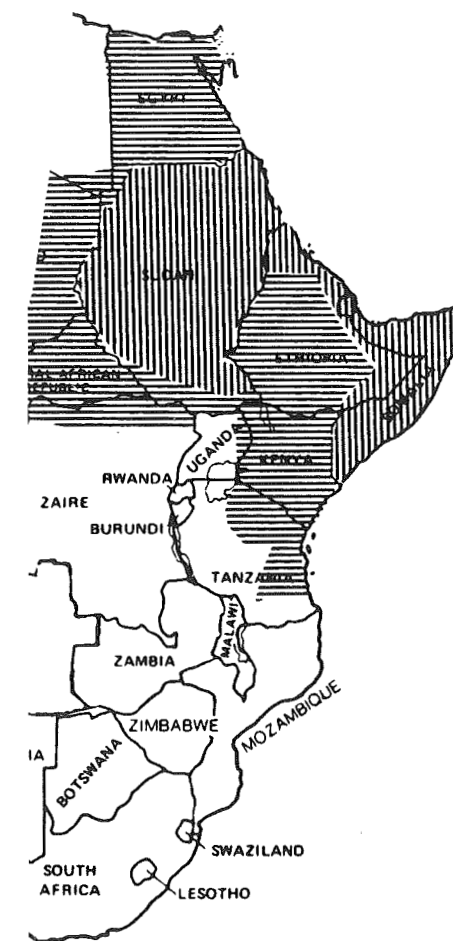
Before independence Zanzibar was first an Arab colony ruled from Oman. Then the Germans took over until just before the first world war when they exchanged Zanzibar with the British for the Heligoland islands in the north of Germany. After independence from the British the Arabs took over again, until the Zanzibarian revolution, which happened before unification with Tanganyika in 1964.

There is still a lot of tension. The Africans fear that the Arabs will come back and they will go back to being their slaves again. For example in 1988 there was a big upheaval because the prime minister was felt to be letting too many Arabs come and take over and the Africans felt very insecure, thinking we would be back where we were before independence.

*Liz Kelly: What are the religious beliefs in Tanzania?*

Nema Mdoe: If you break down the catholics, protestants, the christian faiths, then muslims are the majority. There is very very little traditional African religious practice now. There has been a big campaign to make everybody adopt modern religions: christianity, islam, catholicism and now all these American churches like the Assemblies of God, the Christian Tower. In the villages you might find a few old men who've been baptized, say, in the christian religion but who don't believe. But they are getting fewer and fewer. Most people have one of these modern religions. The children will change and convince their parents, their grandparents, that you have to become either a christian or a muslim; that atheism is not a religion, it is bad, it is primitive.

There was a time when, during the years of radicalism, people realised that religion was some form of colonialism and began to reject it. But now it has come back again, I think with a vengeance. And this time they have used economic power, economic incentives. The government services have almost come to a halt because of economic problems. So the religions are bringing in schools, hospitals. They don't state that you have to belong to that religion to have children in such-and-such school, but you can see that it would be an advantage. And then they give clothes, they set up projects for the poor, so it has become a very big attraction. We have a Swedish branch of the Assembly of God in our village and it is



*Zanzibar is the largest island off the coast of Tanzania*

really very popular. Where I come from it is cold and the people need sweaters and that fits very well with the Scandinavian climate. People get coats and sweaters and cardigans, keep warm, dress well. So they will go to the church.

But there is definitely a big campaign by the churches, all the religions. Even the muslims are building mosques, bringing beautiful carpets from the Gulf so the mosques are beautiful and there is more attraction. And there is prestige being seen publicly as a muslim. Now the president is a muslim everybody wants to identify themselves as a muslim.

### The Arusha Declaration

*LK: Tell us a little bit about what happened in Tanzanian politics after independence.*

MN: I think the most vital thing to understand Tanzanian politics is what we call the Arusha Declaration of 1967. It was the policy statement, made by the government, that Tanzania would be a socialist state. That's when we nationalised all the banks, big industries, big companies; they were all made into state corporations. Education and medical care were to be free; all services integrated. Private schools and things like that were all abolished; everything was to be the state. That's why I say there was a time of radicalism when religion really faded into the background. And that actually worked very well I must say. When the economy was good, things worked very well, and it was a very attractive policy to many because it ensured equality between the people. It promised that we wouldn't have a very few rich people and the majority very poor, so it was supported quite widely.

So if you want to understand anything about Tanzania you have to realize that that was the foundation. And there was a big indoctrination, education, rallies. Everybody, every child learnt at school what it meant for Tanzania, what its ideals were. But people really strongly believed in this; it really wasn't a pretence at all. But the economy didn't do well, especially from the early 1980s. It went down and down and down. The IMF wanted us to take a package which basically meant devaluation, privatisation and liberalisation of trade. In 1986 that was officially accepted and since then things are totally upside down. They have almost succeeded I think, so that socialism in Tanzania is now just a 'sing-song'; it is not operating as it is supposed to anymore.

*LK: What were the economic reasons that led to difficulties?*

MN: I think most people would say we nationalised all the industries and all the sectors much too early, before we could run them. We didn't even have enough management or staff to run them; most of them in the end didn't make money at all. And secondly Third World countries depend on exports to pay for our imports; but world prices of raw materials don't keep up with world prices of manufactured goods. So slowly, with only raw materials we couldn't import as much. Prices for, say, sisal which was our main crop and coffee went down. We've been producing so much cotton since the IMF, but we can't even process it because our equipment is so old they can't keep up with production. So we can't export it; its value goes down and down.

So the IMF say, you have to let people come in and invest in Tanzania and we've just passed the investment code which ensures that people's properties will be guaranteed against nationalisation, that they can keep their profits. We are really going back to square one. Now we allow private enterprise, and the British were in the forefront in hammering this because of Thatcherite times. They were privatising and wanting us to do the same, but of course without taking into consideration that we don't have the same capacity to privatise; people cannot afford shares, there aren't so many entrepreneurs. So now we are inviting foreign investors to come in and invest in Tanzania: British companies, Scandinavian companies, German companies, EEC as a whole, Americans, Canadians. Everybody.

### Equality for women

*LK: When the original socialist republic set up was equality for women one of its policies?*

MN: Yes, as in most socialist countries it is written in the constitution: equality of race, sex, everybody is equal. And actually they took steps to make sure that women had equality in education. It is compulsory for all children to go to school up to the age of 14. But even after that they made special efforts to positively discriminate and make more girls go to secondary school. And they tried to revise the curriculum so that the subjects are the same, though domestic science or home economics is still done in girls' schools only.

The problems then come with the implementation. When girls get pregnant, say,

they are sent away from school and never get back again. The drop out of girls is still quite high. In some areas where girls can fetch money because of bride wealth, men, fathers, tend to think what is the point of educating girls? Those girls who can make it on their own to school, most parents let them because education is free, except for the uniforms and things. But if you fail your exams, parents tend to work harder to get the boys into school than their daughters. You know, the girls are going to get married anyway, and the family are going to get cows out of it, or cash or whatever. In that sense many parents still tend to favour boys not girls at school.

### Bride wealth

*LK: Was there any attempt to question or change the issue about bride wealth?*

MN: It's very strange it still exists. Many people are accepting bride price for their girls, not just in the villages. These are people who have been to university, who have got good jobs, but they still take bride price! When I ask them "Why? Why you of all people? Why do you take wealth for your daughter?", they say "Because according to Tanzanian culture she is not my daughter alone, she belongs to the family, to my brothers, my uncles, people who are older than me and have more say in this matter. If I don't take a bride price for my daughter then I will be eliminated from the family." But what is worse is that they take your bride price but girls don't inherit. So you will have five cows paid for you, which will go to marry your brothers and to buy farms and things like that, but you can't inherit from the same family. You are generating income for your brothers, father, uncles and the rest of the family but not for yourself.

*LK: Do you think that this is connected to ideas about women as property?*

MN: Yes, oh yes it is. If you are married and you want to be divorced there is an amount of bride wealth that has to be returned. Some of the parents, because they have used most of the bride price cows to marry their sons, will force you to stay. Or if you get married and you don't bear children most likely you will be divorced and then your husband can demand the cows back and the family has to pay. But the family can refuse to pay and you will be forced to stay in a marriage which is not necessarily good for you.

But I think that is a campaign that is very difficult to get through. When women of my age talk about it, women of a certain educational level, we are told we are importing western ideas; that these are traditions which have seen our fathers and our mothers and grandparents through, and they are good customs. Certain families may decide they don't want to do it, but basically it is still thriving; there is no law against it.

*LK: Are there other traditional practices to do with marriage. Is there a polygamous tradition for example?*

NM: There is polygamy. We have a marriage act that was passed in 1971 which recognises three marriages; on the day of the wedding when you are signing the certificate, there is a space where you have to state polygamous or monogamous or potentially polygamous.

If a man wants a second wife, the first one has to consent in writing. But what choices do women have? Either you say yes or you can be divorced, especially for muslims since to be divorced they can just talak<sup>1</sup> you; you don't have to go to court or anything. So some women consent because they don't have a choice. If you get divorced where do you go? You leave your kids with another woman. We have a very big fear of stepmothers in Africa; women get very worried to leave their children to be brought up by a stepmother because they know the children will suffer. So they will stay there and look after their children and let their husbands marry a second wife.

*LK: Can you explain this fear of stepmothers?*

NM: I don't know if it appears in European culture. It is like your stepmother doesn't value you as much as she values her own children. Some of them can be very cruel; her own children will be sleeping and the stepchildren will have to do all the household work and they have to go and get water. It is a very difficult life. So many women take divorce as a very, very last resort, because they don't want their children to suffer.

*LK: So it is virtually impossible for a woman to get a divorce, leave a marriage, and take her children with her?*

NM: It is very, very difficult. I have seen cases of women who have really gone through hell to get their children because it all depends on who is better off between the husband and the wife and in most cases you find the men have the



1. In Islamic law it is possible for a man to divorce a woman simply by saying "talak" to her three times.

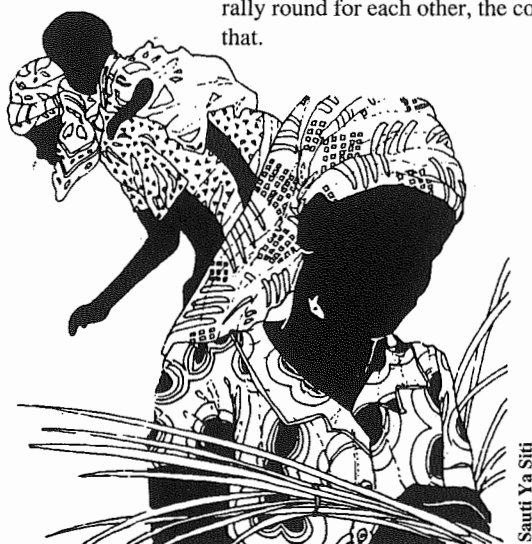




economic power. Maybe they have a job and especially in the lower levels women don't have official, paid work; they work in the house. If they leave they can't take anything. Most of the time it is the men who get the children, because of the tradition that children belong to the man, which is reinforced by the law, and economics.

*LK: So the only women who might be able to do it would be women who had an independent income, a well paid job?*

NM: Exactly. But I know of a woman who had very good job, a much, much better job than the husband, but it was still a big problem for her. And she was a well-placed woman, so for other women it is impossible. And men always rally round for each other, the courts and all that.



### Unequal labour

*LK: What are the issues that concern you at the moment for women in Tanzania?*

NM: First of all I think the economic wellbeing of women all over Tanzania. It is very difficult right now for women in Tanzania to earn an income, even in rural areas. Prices of cash crops have gone down, so in order for them to get income to bring up their families they have to work hard to produce cash crops and food crops. In most cash crops the women and the men will work together, but with certain food crops it is only the women who can do it. Men can help in growing maize and cultivating and harvesting: that is an acceptable crop for a man. But a man can't do cassava: cassava is women's work, the lowest; bananas for home consumption, and growing vegetables are

definitely woman's business; water - no man would go to look for water, that is considered a very feminine job; women have to look for fuel, no man would do that. Today women have to work extra hard to make sure that the cash crop side is going well so they can earn money to send their children to school. There are fewer government schools now, more private schools where you have to pay fees. And people have realised that education is very important, so they want their children to go to school. In the end women's health suffers. They die faster than they are supposed to.

Childbirth is still a man's decision. A woman in a village can't decide she doesn't want any more children. You are there to have children, that is why you are married, and you must have children until your cycle stops. Contraception is still something that is hush-hush. It is not something that is open, that you can go and say I am going to a clinic to take contraceptives. Many women still use traditional methods, such as breastfeeding to prevent your periods coming.

Also what used to happen was when a woman had a baby, was breastfeeding, her husband had other women, usually women in the village who were widowed, divorced, or had never married. Men were allowed as long as they were very discreet about it: you know, no scandals! But now, with problems like Aids, that system has almost died out; more men are depending solely on their wives, except if he has more than one. So women are having more children, and the spacing is not as it was for our mothers.

Our government had the policy that there should be safe drinking water for everybody. But now the economy has gone so badly a lot of villages don't have safe water to drink. So you take it from the river and if it is contaminated, like most of it is, then the children get diarrhoea. So that it is a big concern for women. And now we have Aids. I don't know the figures but I think it is accepted that more women get infected by men than men by women. And African men don't wear condoms so readily, even educated men.

### Fighting sexual harassment

Another issue in Tanzania that is now being recognised is sexual harassment and sexual violence. To understand Tanzanian psychology you have to understand this Arusha Declara-

tion. Being a socialist state you were supposed to be living in paradise; there were not supposed to be all these problems. So you couldn't talk about women being oppressed. Oppressed by who? This is a socialist state where everybody's equal. You couldn't talk about things like violence; it was the opposite of what we were trying to build.

From 1989, officially, we have this group of women called Tanzania Women Media Association who have taken up the issue of sexual harassment and violence against women. It has really reached such proportions. In the university it was unbelievable; it went on openly and nobody did anything about it until one girl was so harassed, her life had become so, so impossible that she committed suicide.

We have two universities but the most famous is the one in Dar- Es-Salaam. The male students there had this system, very cruel, they call it Punch. They'll pick on a girl for some reason: maybe she dresses in a way that they don't consider to be Tanzanian; acts like she is too westernized which they don't like; or she does things which break the regulations, which they have set for women, not for themselves. They research her life: where she comes from, her parents, members of her family, what school she went to, her grades in school, all sorts of things and then the things she is supposed to have done, which most of the time are not true, or even if there was something little, they would exaggerate and make it so big.

They pass round a notice two days before to say that there will be something on somebody on the wall. So that day everybody wakes up with the anticipation of "Let's go and see who is it this time". They write it all on big placards and stick it on a very high wall. You can read it but you can't get it down unless you have a ladder. It's there for everybody to read. The girls were really traumatised and they were scared of these people, so much that one of their regulations was that women couldn't have afternoon tea in the cafeteria and girls told me that from that day they stopped going in for tea! The university administration did nothing about it. Girls were raped but they were so scared that they wouldn't talk about it. And even if they talked about it nobody would believe them.

And then the lecturers and professors, the male ones, they were bringing other problems. If they like a girl they go and tell her, "Do you want your degree or not?". It means you have

to do certain favours, most of them sexual favours. If you refuse the sexual favours you would fail exams, and if you fail exams you have to repeat the year, or if you really fail badly you are discontinued. For some girls, when you have struggled so far, they think maybe they will do it once to get off the hook but then they find they can't get off the hook and continue to be abused. Some have finished the course but, in my own view, it is sad in the sense that it is not their true work but because they have had these relationships with the professors.

But you could not talk about it, nobody was interested. But now I think more people are interested and I think it will be investigated. The university has just opened again - it was closed from last March/April I think and its doors opened in January. I left then, so I don't know what has happened, whether it has improved or not.

*LK: And Punch is almost always women?*

NM: I would say 90% women. It was really very sad, because even the female lecturers and professors were intimidated. They had their own problems with their colleagues so they did nothing and failed to take into account what it meant for their students. There was a big division: some of them thought the girls wanted it, especially the bit with the professors. They said, "Some girls want to have their degrees easy", and some believe the lecturers are to blame. Which I think they are: they are older, they have the power; what choice does an 18 year old have? The power relations are against the girls. But there are certain women's groups who are really interested in addressing this issue. Eventually it will be sorted out, or at least there will be mechanism to deal with it. I know it happens in other universities, even in Europe, but there is a mechanism to sort it out. We didn't have one and some girls' education was just over, they had to leave and go and do things they were not interested in. They failed their exams because they wouldn't co-operate with the professors. The Punch thing was the most horrendous thing that could happen to a woman.

*LK: And this young woman who killed herself was made a target for that?*

NM: She was, yes. They harass you, and then if you are my friend and I am being harassed, you are not supposed to identify with me or they



## TANZANIAN



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Sauti Ya Siti

harass you also. So people abandon you when you really need them. What came out later was that this girl had nobody to talk to. It's like being at university here, in Bristol say and your parents are in Scotland. That's not really accurate because you have transport here and telephones. You can't contact your parents, you are in this place all alone; you are in the middle of strangers and this happens to you.

I know people who have not committed suicide, but they are so badly traumatised, some of them deny it. If you talk to them about Punch they say it's just some silly thing because they can't deal with it. They will pretend that it didn't happen to them. There was a big meeting in 1990 and people started to talk about it.

We have cases of rape going to court now. In the last ten years in Tanzania, if you talked about rape, child abuse, no one would have believed you; they would think you were crazy or something. But we have had very successful court cases against men who have molested children, who have raped children. Now we can talk about it. I think that is a good sign.

Before we had only one women's organisation, a very political organisation, a sub-party of the ruling party. It mobilised people for education and maternity leave but it was within a controlled context and it couldn't reach outside that context. Now we have started to see new organisations, especially professional organisations. We have suddenly started to see counselling becoming very big. People organise counselling for children, for adolescents. We have now legal clinics. I don't know about upcountry, but I know that Dar-Es-Salaam has a very good legal clinic which helps women who have marital problems.

There are also a lot of non-governmental organisations that are very interested in helping women. Most donor agencies have got a women's section and certain funds are set aside to help women, especially in rural areas. So it is now becoming positive again.

*LK: A lot of the writing by women from socialist countries suggests that laws may have changed but the men haven't.*

NM: No they haven't. We have very good laws; if you read our laws you would say Tanzania is heaven for women, but implementing them is a big problem. The men's attitudes haven't changed. In Tanzania a man doesn't cook, regardless of education. You could be at

university together here, and you would cook together but once you get back to Tanzania you can forget about that. A lot of foreign women find that a big problem, because they get married to this very nice, intellectual man in the US, Europe, some place, and it is all wonderful. They think this is the most intelligent, liberated man and they arrive in Tanzania, pooff, the whole bubble bursts. The man no longer walks into the kitchen; it's a prohibited area. The man never goes shopping; that's women's work. He goes out more and more with his buddies and you are left at home. If you are a foreign woman you don't have other local networks which we survive through, visiting our friends. The laws are very good but the men.....

*LK: What are your hopes for the future?*

NM: I want to see more women in decision making; for me that is vital. The problem in Tanzania is that we have all these good laws, but in decision making you don't have the women there, so decisions are made by men. In Tanzania, because of this socialism base, we have this word which translates as comrade - it's Ndugu - which is unisex, so to speak, and no-one asks if it is a man or a woman. Decisions are made for workers, not for women.

Housing, for example, we have government housing and there are categories for it. This woman came back from a posting abroad; she works, her husband doesn't and she went to ask for a government house. She was told, "What is your husband doing? We can't give you a house". That's not the issue. The issue is whether she qualifies for a government house or not. She's an officer; when male officers ask for houses they are not told, "Why doesn't your wife provide a house for you?" Things like that are small, but in the end they accumulate, and there are many other things. More women at the decision making level might help.

And women shouldn't be too shy. I think this is international actually; when a woman is strong and wants something openly then it is not seen positively but negatively. Women are supposed to be meek; you're not supposed to want something so openly and so strongly. So even women who are educated sit back, don't say "I want that", "I would like to be that", in case someone says, "Oh that woman she is so ambitious, she wants everything". So women get intimidated, they stay behind... it's still a man's world out there. □



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# Summer 1991

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Letters . . . . .   | 2  |
| Deadly neglect    US Aids activist <i>Risa Deenenburg</i><br>talks to <i>Katy Watson</i> . . . . .            | 3  |
| Immaculate conceptions <i>Jill Radford</i> asks why the<br>fuss about 'virgin births'? . . . . .              | 8  |
| Unspeakable acts: women who abuse <i>Liz Kelly</i> . . .  | 13 |
| "Dear Ms Woolf, we are returning your guineas"<br><i>carol ann douglas</i> reflects on the Gulf War . . . . . | 21 |
| Re-inventing the wheel    Saudi women take to<br>the road . . . . .   | 23 |
| Why Laura Palmer died <i>Diana Hume George</i> . . .  | 26 |
| Surviving the incest industry <i>Louise Armstrong</i> . .   | 29 |
| Making feminist law? <i>Maureen O'Hara</i> on<br>legislation against pornography . . . . .                    | 33 |
| Hardware heroines <i>Sue Botcherby and Rosie</i><br><i>Garland</i> go to the movies . . . . .                 | 40 |
| Three steps forward <i>Nema Mdoe</i> talks to <i>Liz Kelly</i><br>about women in Tanzania . . . . .           | 47 |

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