

Trouble

The radical feminist magazine

& Strife

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Hail Mary Robinson
Hungary for change
Southall Black Sisters

Anita Hill-after the verdict
Portrait of a lesbian artist
k.d. lang and the music con

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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 by Lisa Adkins, Lynn Alderson, Cath Jackson, Liz Kelly, Sophie Laws and Sara Scott; with help from Judy Stevens, Paddy Tanton, Diana Leonard, Marian Foley, Kate Cook, Kath Dimmelow, Joan Scanlon and Caroline Forbes. With many thanks to the Women's Health and Reproductive Rights Information Centre for the use of their space and resources.

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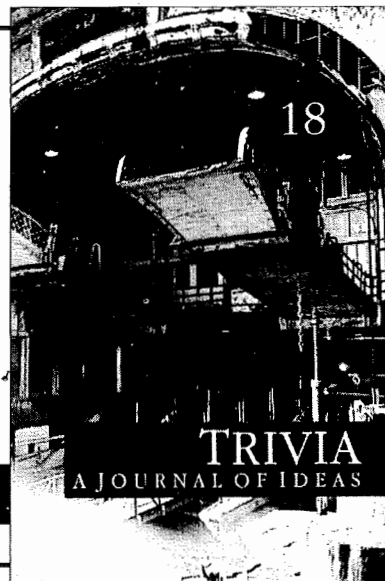
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Re-writing history

Dear T&S,

In "After Margaret", Bea Campbell talks about "our (feminism's) way of going about things" being different from the megalomania of the left which was afraid to allow a conversation with the rest of society lest it prove contaminating. She skims over a lot of other areas including the demise of feminist national conferences which, she claims, became too nasty to organise. These alone raise huge questions of fact, but when she goes on to use a common mistranslation of the words "Sinn Fein" to illustrate her point, her dishonesty provokes me to respond.

As one of the organising group for the last socialist feminist national (1980) conference - on the theme of "Imperialism and Women's Oppression Worldwide", I can clearly recall Bea Campbell's expressed hostility to the emphasis being placed on the experience of Black and foreign women, which, she claimed, was usurping the place of working class women. When I pointed out to her at a pre-conference interview with the planning group, that lots of working class women were (and are) Black and foreign and that reaching them on feminism via an anti-imperialist agenda at that time was as likely (more likely?) to be fruitful as was the approach of previous socialist feminist conferences (which denied the inequality between women and the urgent need for feminism to address issues of racism and imperialism), Bea's response was not to publish the interview or to give the conference an advance write up. She was not alone in taking that attitude. The factor which really upset mainstream socialist feminist commentators of the time was that they were all aligned, loosely or closely, to particular political parties and the organisers of the conference were not. That meant that they had to deal with the issues, but rather than deal with the issues ie amending the feminist agenda of priorities, they treated the conference to silence and "no comment".

The attendance of 1,200 women did pursue many of the issues, some with tremendous success, despite the withdrawal by many of the well known names in

socialist feminism and despite their attempts to declare feminism fragmented beyond comprehensibility. What they meant was that feminism had moved outside what they felt they were experts on and that if they could not be the leaders, then the movement must be dead. But the movement is not dead and Bea Campbell does not have the decency to admit that it is not the Form of the feminist movement which has triumphed, but it Politics that has changed.

And given that sleight of hand, should it surprise me that she attempts to use Sinn Fein as a typical example of the British left? Whatever else it may be, Sinn Fein is neither British nor is it a typical British left organisation. Although the mistranslation she uses is common enough, one would expect that she would at least seek the facts. Sinn Fein means "We Ourselves". It dates from the end of the last century and was the name of a (fairly conservative) political party which was in favour of separation from the UK.

Sinn Fein came into alliance with the Irish Republican Army during the twentieth century by a series of twists and turns of history, but the validity of the self reliance aspect of self determination is as important as ever. If people in Ireland are tempted to invoke it as a slogan of separatism from other movements, then we need to ask serious questions about why a popular movement which has been more progressive than any other Irish party on women's and gay rights should feel so isolated. The answer, I suspect is in part to be found in the attitudes of socialists and feminists, like Bea herself, who adopted their stubborn position to the challenges which the 1980 conference represented. A contaminated feminism is exactly what they did fear.

Those of us who know the desperate isolation being experienced by Black, foreign, third world and other anti-colonialist feminists had no such fear. Nor are we any less vigilant than Bea Campbell about the shortcomings and drawbacks of the movements currently in the forefront of struggles against oppression in our home countries. She, however, still seems to be unaware about the extent of which the inappropriateness of her comments about

Irish movements, given her own very limited understanding and experience of Irish affairs, is as much a part of the problem as it was back in 1980.

I appreciate the fact that this letter may seem like a personal attack, but I would defend its content on the grounds that it deals with events which were fairly public, if not well publicised at the time, and, that while Bea has often researched the condition of women in England, this Irish woman is not alone in thinking that she does not have a similar knowledge or understanding of our situation and should therefore be more careful of translating a culture, politics and language with which she has only a passing familiarity. How can she speak for us when we have barely begun to speak for ourselves? Not "Ourselves alone", Bea, but "We ourselves". On that basis, there might grow a realistic alliance based on mutual respect... which was what feminists were seeking from other liberationist movements, wasn't it?

In Sisterhood,
Marian Larrayg.

New Age Nuisance

Dear T&S,

Thank you for publishing Daphne Francis' article "Crystal Balls".

I recently encountered the type of 'New Ager' she describes, although being 'beyond labels' he of course did not describe himself as such. My reaction to him was one of pure and overwhelming aggression, and not sufficiently trusting my own judgement, I attributed this to a paranoid over-reaction on my part. Although I wasn't quite able to identify the manipulative methods used by this man, I was aware that I was being put under pressure and that I perceived it as a form of "psychic assault". Until I read Ms. Francis' article I thought this man was a unique product of his own self-delusion and arrogance, and that I had perhaps been a little harsh on him. After all, apart from one or two who admitted he gave them the creeps, no-one else seemed to understand what I was angry about, and one acquaintance - a social worker - actually encouraged me to apologise to him. (To her he was just a harmless and loveable old man. I hate to

think how she would react, should a similar scenario present itself in her professional life in the form of a sexual abuse case).

Daphne Francis' article highlighted the real danger these 'New Agers' represent. Their manipulation is subtler than the usual sort we women have learned to decode and expose; it needs to be countered by articles such as Ms. Francis', and shown up for what it is: the latest 'refinement' of that age-old pastime, the patriarchal power-trip.

yours sincerely
Isobel Brooks

Fighting back

Dear T&S,

Louise Armstrong ('Surviving the Incest Industry', issue 21) said all that I would like to have said myself and more. Yes, incest, MUST be reclaimable as a feminist issue. How can it be anything else? Rape by my father was an early and effective lesson about my worth and power as a woman in this society. But you yourself have given all the reasons why so many of us have picked up a teddy bear rather than an axe. I do feel pretty bloody fragile at the moment and support from feminist identified sources such as Rape Crisis Centres is not always available when wanted, as these, like other services for women, are desperately over-stretched and under-resourced.

I also feel full of rage and energy and I would rather be using these with other women than talking to a therapist about my pain, but I don't know where to start. This may sound a bit hopeless, but the reality is that the women's movement is fragmented and that remembering abuse does often bring strong feelings of isolation and powerlessness. We need to act together, not just as survivors of childhood abuse, but as survivors of violent relationships, of rape, and of the harassment, humiliation and fear which are part of women's everyday life. Whatever our personal experience we all know how little our safety and our personal lives are valued in this society. Where is everyone else please?

Veronica Morris

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Hail Mary - a President of women

The election of the independent Mary Robinson, the first woman president in Ireland, has led a new spirit of change. Ailbhe Smyth argues the recognition of women as a collective social force is the key to this break - one which is transforming Irish political culture.

There are outsiders, always. These stars - these iron inklings of an Irish January, whose light happened

thousands of years before our pain did: They have always been outside history

Eavan Boland *Outside History*

Mary Robinson was elected President of Ireland in November 1990 with 53% of the total vote. An opinion poll just one year after her election showed her standing to have risen to an extraordinary 'high' of 80%. It is difficult even now, with some sense of perspective, to explain satisfactorily how the most conservative state in Europe voted for a woman in the first place, still less for a woman so clearly identified with socialism and feminism, twin threats to the traditionalism on which the Irish state was unequivocally founded.

The Constitution, as Irish women know to our cost, is categorical in its strict circumscription of women's place 'within the home' (Art.41). De Valera's sentimentalising dream of an Ireland 'bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths, the laughter of comely maidens', refused to fade away and die as even the worst of nightmares is supposed to do. It seemed to go on and on holding women in its ludicrous yet utterly

disempowering spell long after the cosy homesteads had turned into monstrously sprawling estates, and the athletic youths had patently failed to make industry play the tune of enough jobs for the hordes of undeniably sturdy but increasingly disabused children of the nation.

Different possibilities?

Back in the 1970s, in the early heat and passion of the Women's Movement, an alternative vision had shimmered before us, not impossibly far beyond our reach. We would ride forth from our homesteads and reinvent the world, not perhaps in a year and a day, but shortly, imminently, in the foreseeable future. There would be different structures and possibilities, new values, choices and freedoms.

The retreat

The 1980s, recessionary, regressive, repressive put an abrupt stop to our gallop when we were barely over the first hurdle. At least, that's how it seemed in Ireland, and we stopped believing so wholeheartedly in our dream of change, found our early naivete faintly embarrassing, retreated into apology, defensiveness or silence. The voters, including women, outlawed abortion and all information about abortion. The voters, including women, banned divorce. The politicians, including (very few) women, were still vacillating around the provision of contraception, and much else as well. The courts, almost totally excluding women, were slow to test

the limits of the law. And unemployment made the poor poorer, especially women, and sent so many into emigrant exile. Ireland was not a good place for women. The 1980s were bad, bleak years, not just in Ireland of course, but globally. The worst of it all was that they seemed set to continue into the 1990s, with no respite.

The new spirit of change

Then suddenly change erupted, bringing yet more change in its wake, building on subtle shifts we had become too demoralised to notice or too disillusioned to believe in: 'My election was on the exact first anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, something has crumbled away in Ireland too', said Mary Robinson, immediately after her election victory. Whatever direct connection, the spirit of one kind of change enabled others, elsewhere, to regain the sense of hope so severely tested by the previous decade.

More than anything else, Mary Robinson's victory signalled a great desire and a need to believe in the possibility of change again. The Irish electorate is not stupid: people do not accidentally or unthinkingly vote for a candidate of the Left, a lawyer and a politician committed for two decades to challenging the authority of the State through its own mechanisms, a woman who had persistently interrogated the status quo over issues of social, sexual and reproductive freedoms. She canvassed the country on the basis of her record, she said things that convinced all the commentators without exception (and the politicians and the activists, feminists included) that she hadn't a whisper of a chance of persuading the voters to forsake their traditional values and party lines. But she did and they did. Mary Robinson offered difference and change in a mood of optimism and got a totally unanticipated and positive response. Our wilfully credulous faith in the exhausted narratives of Irish history had failed to lead us out of the dependencies of a post-colonial heritage and the gross deficiencies of a post-capitalist economy. Gloom had brought nothing but more gloom: it was high time to take a risk with an untried, fresh and potentially

liberating approach to the future.

Mary Robinson as 'our' president

Whatever the complex reasons for Mary Robinson's victory, and a good year after our euphoric celebrations, her Presidency is turning out to be of immeasurable importance for women. While Mary Robinson herself has consistently emphasised that she is a 'President for all the people', giving voice to all those who are 'voiceless' and in positions of special vulnerability, it is undeniable that women of all ages and classes, whether feminist or not, identify with her to an extraordinary degree and perceive her as 'our' President in a very particular way. Her occupancy of the highest office in the land has visibly disturbed in an almost physical sense the most deeply-rooted beliefs of our patriarchal system. In the hours immediately following her election, in an informal television interview, the President-Elect said: 'It was a great great day for the women of Ireland... The women of Ireland went out there to vote; they went out because they had a sense of purpose'. The next day, in her 'official' victory speech, the theme had become even stronger and more direct. She saluted women as clear-sighted agents of social and historical change: '... I was elected by men and women of all parties and none, (...) and above all by the women of Ireland, mna na hEireann, who instead of rocking the cradle, rocked the system and came out massively to make their mark on the ballot paper and on a new Ireland'. From the very beginning, President Robinson unambiguously foregrounded women. She addressed 'Women' directly, at once publicly signifying her sense of ease with herself as a woman and inviting other women to share in that confidence.

Recognising the collective force

The attribution to women of a central role in the making of history is a challenge to the most basic assumptions of the patriarchal state around notions of women's (self-)erasure and passivity and constitutes a major shift in the political discourse. This kind of rhetoric has nothing to do with merely acknowledging women, making a token gesture of inclusion or integration on the same terms as men. On the contrary,



it gives full and serious recognition to the significance of women as a *collective* social force, the kind of recognition which derives from an experience of feminist collective action. Mary Robinson's valuing both during her election campaign and in her first year of office of women's community-based activism is particularly striking. She has repeatedly drawn attention to the creative ingenuity and imagination shown by countless women's groups, north and south, in urban and rural areas, whether feminist or not, in surmounting obstacles and surviving countless injustices. If she has frequently referred to Northern Ireland as her 'fundamental priority' as President, there can be little doubt but that she empowers women to see themselves as occupying a crucial space in the shaping and reshaping of the State.

Her success as President (ie her ability to function effectively on a multiplicity of different levels) has further developed this new discourse. In contrast to Margaret Thatcher who rarely allowed herself to be associated with women in any capacity, Mary Robinson is frequently photographed with groups of women; her immediate entourage visibly includes women as personal advisers, aides de camp, security officers and so on. A sizeable proportion of her public engagements

are conspicuously supportive of women's activities in a wide variety of spheres. One of the consequences of this firm and continuing connectedness with women (and especially at the 'grass-roots') is that 'Woman' and 'Head of State' are no longer antithetical but rather synonymous terms, and those terms are not male-defined. President Robinson is not 'one of the boys'.

At the same time, she assumes or 'inhabits' her gender without playing on a stereotypical femininity. Again, unlike Margaret Thatcher (the contrast is too tempting to avoid), she does not use frills and bows to 'soften' the image of a toughie reality. Her clothes are smart, bright and generally look comfortable. She refers to her husband and her children, other family members, to her home, the kinds of things she misses now she is President (browsing unrecognised in bookshops!) as part of the flow of ordinary conversation. They are not carefully planned elements in an image-projection campaign. I really have no idea if she throws tantrums or cries in order to get her own way, as Mrs. Thatcher is said to have done. Somehow, it seems extremely unlikely.

Breaking the exclusion

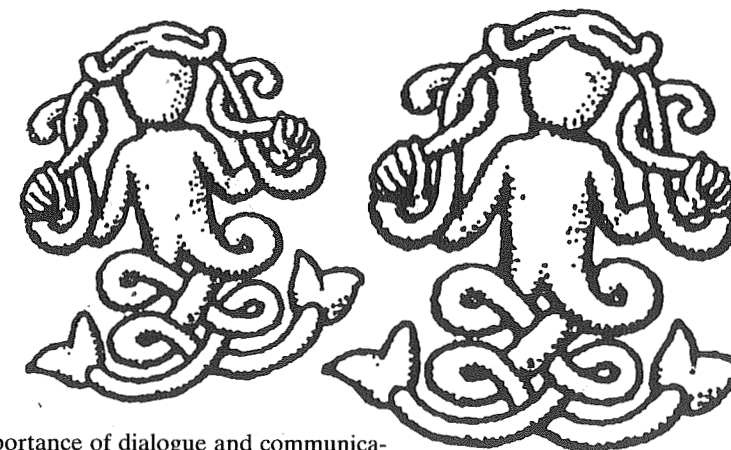
Mary Robinson's consistently high level of public activity and strong media profile (no previous Presidency has attracted anything like as much media attention) have meant that in a very tangible way, the invariable rule of women's exclusion from the public sphere has been broken beyond any possible repair. She is the concrete as much as political proof that the myth of women's public ineptitude is a lie. Her style of Presidency in this first year has focused primarily on visibility. She has in effect created a visible Presidential function where none appeared to exist before. In fact, one of the anxieties most frequently expressed by feminist activists (and others) before her election was that 'she would be lost up there in the Park', that there would be no useful, active role for her to fulfil in what was seen to be a position empty of 'real' power and meaning. It is precisely because the Presidency was a vacant space that she has been able to invest it with a whole new set of meanings. In material terms, her power as President is severely limited. Technically,

the office is 'beyond politics' with no direct governing or legislative functions. However, her ability to redefine the political in 'non-political' terms is remarkable: 'I can operate at two levels and one is the level above politics, the level of values. The other is the level below politics... local empowerment.' Operating at both the macro and the micro levels, the middle ground is politely left to an increasingly discredited party political system while the underlying issue of the distribution of power remains open.

Redefining the political

In this sense, the Robinson Presidency may be seen as offering an alternative possibility within the political 'mainstream', another way of construing and constructing the political - or of (re-)defining as political what has traditionally been ignored, dismissed or denied. Her 'real' power lies, of course, not only in her personal visibility as President but interactively with the values, issues and social groups she chooses to render visible by paying public attention to them. She effectively sets out to reorganise the priorities, if not the whole agenda, of the political value system by attending to unpopular because apparently intractable issues (emigration, poverty, Northern Ireland) and by centralising powerless 'out groups' in her discourse (travelers, disabled people, elderly people, young people, emigrants, the poor). And whether dealing with issues or with groups, women and their lives are a primary consideration. Women are not a 'separate sphere': they are caught up in a series of socio-economic and cultural positions which work themselves out in complex ways. Mary Robinson's long-standing emphasis on equality, justice and human and civil rights are indicative of a strong liberal ethos. But there is nothing simplistic about her analysis and it is accompanied by an equally strong sense of collective power and accountability.

The Presidency is a largely symbolic function but the kinds of meanings and values that Mary Robinson is developing within that function are quite other than those previously associated with it: openness, accessibility and connectedness, the



importance of dialogue and communication, of making links and coalitions, of dignity and respect for the office without authoritarianism and of non-judgemental, undogmatic flexibility. These are not the values or the qualities regularly exposed to us by the majority of our elected representatives in government or in parliament. They are undoubtedly what make Mary Robinson an atypical force in the predominantly male power elite.

If it is difficult to predict the precise effects of Mary Robinson's Presidency on the Irish political system and on the lives of Irish women, it would be crassly arrogant to even try to do so for women and for feminism elsewhere. Mood and passion, in politics as in any other arena, are not quantifiable - they reverberate, creating powerfully diffuse resonances which seep beyond the boundaries of predictable 'political outcomes'. Can these resonances cross the borders of nation-states? Are they transferable onto other political agendas, translatable into the terms of different social and economic relations? I simply do not know. I do know that I am wary about drawing 'lessons' from our specific contexts in Ireland and applying them to Britain. The reverse process has been a historical disaster which the whole island of Ireland lives with every single day in the present. Still, facing into a general election, I hope that feminists in Britain will look across the water and take heart - and a renewed sense of the pleasures and possibilities of politics. As Mary Holland put it: 'We have seen the future and she works' (Observer, 3/11/91). □

Notes

1. For an overview of this, see Ailbhe Smythe (ed), with Pauline Jackson, Caroline McCamley and Ann Speed: 'States of Emergence: women speak about fifteen years of Women's Liberation in Ireland'. *Trouble and Strife* No. 14, Winter 1988.

2. For discussion of the election and its impact, see Valerie Bresnihan: 'Mary Robinson: A Subversive Quality?' and Ailbhe Smyth: 'A Great Day for the Women of Ireland: The Meaning of Mary Robinson's Presidency for the Women of Ireland', both forthcoming in *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, June 1992. Also Margaret MacCurtain: 'Mary Robinson - Metaphor for Change' in *The Furrow*, June 1991.

Women's Support Network meet Mary Robinson at Aras An Vachtarain



Fattened by Force

Karis Otobong, in an article from a new West African women's newsletter 'Encounter', exposes the traditional practice of fattening young women through force feeding, and urges women to unite and resist it.

Traditional practices and social attitudes that directly or indirectly affect the health of women exists in one form or another in most African countries. These practices existed in African societies long before the introduction of Christianity or Islam. One of these practices is force feeding, otherwise known as fattening. Force feeding is a practice by which a young girl is put into seclusion and confined to a room where she is forcefully fed in order to induce her to become fat. She is kept in confinement for a lengthy period, say for three to six months. She does not work and she is pampered on every side.

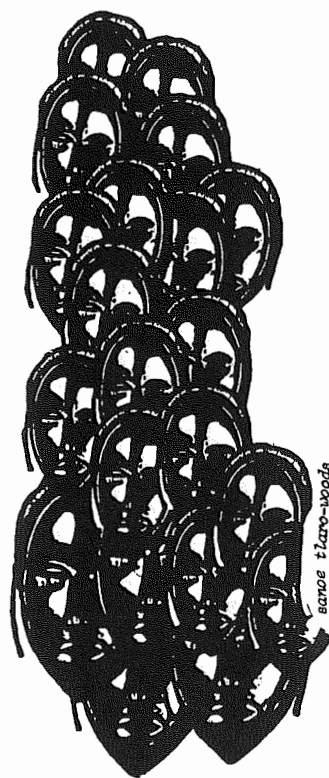
This practice is associated with several events. In some African societies it may be associated with female genital mutilation when a young girl is induced to go into seclusion under the false pretence of preparing her for marriage and while in seclusion she is circumcised. The merriments which accompany fattening are those few things that induce many young girls to submit themselves to the practice. During this period of seclusion, young maidens of the age-group of the secluded girl are made to visit the girl and perform cultural dances for her entertainment. In addition, a galore of gifts await a girl in fattening room after her release.

In some African societies, force feeding is associated with motherhood. When a young woman puts to bed her first baby, the girl is confined to a room in the family compound by her parents. Therein, she is forcefully fed so that she may be fat; and

her fatness is regarded with pride by her parents who claim to have had enough to feed their daughter in seclusion. A maiden who leaves the so-called fattening room and is not very fat is a disgrace to her parents; for the villagers would regard her parents as poor and unable to live up to the traditional expectation of the society. Girls therefore must be forcefully fed so that she may be fat and so that her family may get the commendation.

Among the Moors of Mauritania and Northern Mali in West Africa, man's importance in the society is measured by the waistline of his wife, so he tries to increase it by literally force feeding her. History even relates that a past Sheik of Tagant in Mauritania boasted of having the most beautiful wife in the tribe, a fourteen year old girl who weighed 120 kilos. The practice spread to such an extent that actual force-feeding centres were begun to fatten young girls up, especially in the Nema Valley in Southern Mauritania.

The adverse effects of this practice on women's health are many. Force-feeding contributes to high blood pressure and diabetes. Apart from this, force feeding can cause instant death. For instance a few years ago, a Moor appeared in Court in Gao, Mali, accused of having killed his wife by suffocation while force-feeding her. Undoubtedly grieved by the loss of his wife, the man denied the charge, claiming that he had sacrificed her to a tradition going back to the mists of time, only in order to increase her beauty. The practice



savage t. lano-woods

also results in an inequitable distribution of food in the family, as the greatest share of the family's food is earmarked for the fattened girl, thus other members of the family including children are malnourished.

Now, as in the past, the main victim of these practices remains the woman, and efforts by women's organization to debunk them have been seen as a threat against the superiority and dominance of their menfolk. As a result, many male organizations or groups are reluctant to support women's drive for change. Although legislation in some African countries may now reflect a political desire to bring about greater equality between the sexes, the continued existence of customs that have been sanctioned by law and codes of conduct complicates the process of abolishing them. The law generally remains impotent in the face of powerful traditions. So women are excluded from the process of their own

emancipation, and the insatiable dream of male domination still permits men to maintain practices which they see as the only way to safeguard "the established order". In addition, women activists who could lead the drive for women's rights in many African countries are excluded from participation in the high level decision-making body of their countries. How many women have become Ministers of Health, Prime Ministers etc in Africa since the independence of these countries from colonial rule?

In fact, the first weapon in the fight against these practices is the woman herself. She must decide to abandon her position as the eternal dependent, to stand up for herself, resist submission to the practices that could endanger her health and struggle for equality with men. Women should join Women's groups and organizations; and through these groups and networks, they can become a compelling force for change. □



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Back behind the wheel

In T&S 21 we carried an article about women protesting in Saudi Arabia by driving cars, which is still an illegal action. This article, reprinted from Ms, describes what happened to the women, and called for demonstrations of international solidarity. The Saudi author must remain anonymous for her own safety.

The drivers were women from widely different backgrounds: some had a high school education, 11 had doctoral degrees, 10 were university professors; and the rest worked in girls' schools, were students, businesswomen, or worked at home. All were Saudi women.

After the demonstration - and the 12-hour detention, interrogation, and reluctant release of the women (with severe warnings) - the 47 were denounced in mosques across the country as "corrupters of society". In Riyadh, the *mutawa* (religious

fundamentalists) demanded that the women be beheaded, that "their heads roll in the gutters". These sermons were broadcast on loudspeakers outside the mosques and were distributed on cassettes. The denunciation included the names of women who did not even participate in the protest but who were known as progressives. The women's phones were tapped; they were fired from their jobs and stripped of their travel papers. Their families were threatened. They have lived for a year in terror.

Ten days after the protest, one of the women invited a few of the others to her home - and all 46 came. The women shared stories: when the father of one, himself a religious leader, heard that the minister of the interior, Prince Nawaf, had said the 47 came from "un-Islamic homes", he told her, "This is terrible! Whoever says that you were raised in a non-Islamic home does not know what he is talking about." But the father of another was so angry at the "family disgrace" that he screamed he wanted to kill her. Another woman's cousin had already loaded a gun to shoot her before he was restrained.

Most of the women's families refused to support them after they were fired. The majority of the 47 had either a mortgage or loans outstanding. So donations were solicited from a few businessmen who had been supportive of their protest. Although some people were afraid of helping, funds were eventually raised; the donors were kept anonymous.

But when the government discovered the women were receiving financial aid, the governor of Riyadh moved to reimburse nine months' back pay to those women who had worked for the state, claiming the aid was from a volunteer. The women were never officially told who this "benefactor" was - but the money came from the governor's office. While the women could not afford to turn it down, they knew that the reimbursement was a government attempt to break their support network and their solidarity (the women remain locked out of their jobs, and the government's payments are irregular).

The driving incident was the first time in the history of Saudi Arabia that anyone - female or male - had had the courage to actively demonstrate, since public protest is prohibited. The fact that such a

demonstration was staged by women enraged the *mutawa* - who now consider women the core of all the country's problems. Suppression has increased: when women walk to the supermarket they are physically and/or verbally harassed by members of the Committee for Commendation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, who accuse them of being "immorally dressed". (If a woman does not have her face covered, they tell her to cover her face; if her face is covered, they tell her to wear gloves. If she ignores them, they follow her from store to store, warning storekeepers not to sell her anything.) They also take women to their headquarters and force them to sign false confessions (admitting, for example, that an ordinary taxi ride was really a rendezvous with a boyfriend).

Women have always been the tokens thrown to the *mutawa* by the government, to pacify them on other fronts - but that system is no longer working; women are getting angry. The government will have to take women more seriously now - and in the future.

The driving action inspired women to ask questions: Is driving against Islam? (No - it is nowhere forbidden in the Koran or the Shari'a). So why is it against "tradition"? Our grandmothers rode camels: cars are the vehicles of today: Besides, only the elite can afford to hire a driver.

What this group did will eventually be considered the spark for the women's movement - thanks, ironically, to the *mutawa*, who, in publicizing the protest all over Saudi Arabia, showed what women are capable of. And the fundamentalists discredited themselves: accusing women of being "whores" with no proof whatsoever is considered a crime in Islam - while driving is not. Neither for that matter, is a protest for women's basic human rights. □

WHO'S CONNING WHO?

What's the appeal of mainstream popular music for lesbians? Can stars like Madonna and kd lang subvert the music industry and create space to cater for an alternative (lesbian?) audience? Or are they as incorporated as other successful performers? Rosa Ainley and Sarah Cooper examine the politics behind the attraction of mainstream artists and the workings of the music industry.

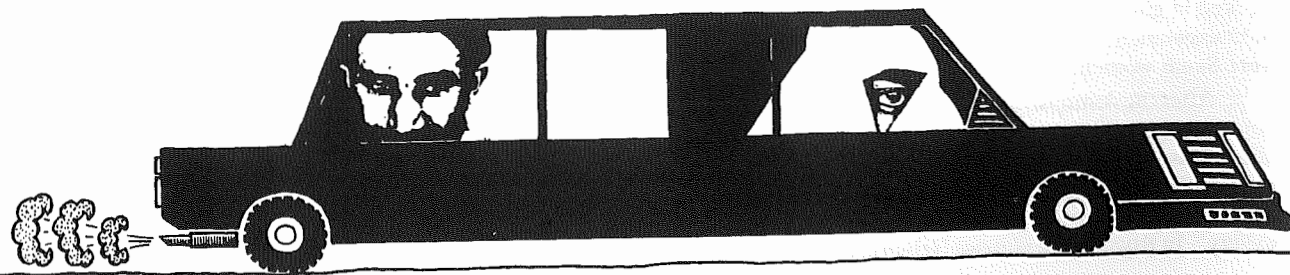
We all listen to music, like it or not, we're surrounded and bombarded by it, even though it's often unsolicited as in shops, from supermarkets to designer stores, even on the tube. And have you rung your poll tax office lately? - if you have you may have been put on hold to the strains of the Brandenburg Concerto, usually running slow. Lesbians have long socialised, not necessarily through choice, in pubs, clubs, and parties against a background of music and a lot of us also make positive choices about music we want to hear by actually going out and buying the stuff.

But what do we buy? It's a strange contradiction in (what is known as) a community that makes a virtue out of favouring artistic expression in other areas that is at odds with or critical of the values and cultural styles of the mainstream culture. But if you go into a cross-section of lesbian homes, taking broadly into account the axes of class, race and age, you will find, in 8 out of 10 homes at least some of the following records: Madonna, *The Immaculate Collection*; Tracey Chapman's first album; Anita Baker, *Rapture*; Sinéad O'Connor, *I do not want what I haven't got*; Nina Simone *My Baby Just Cares for Me* - all products of the mainstream capitalist music industry and, in fact, probably no different from many heterosexual women's collections.

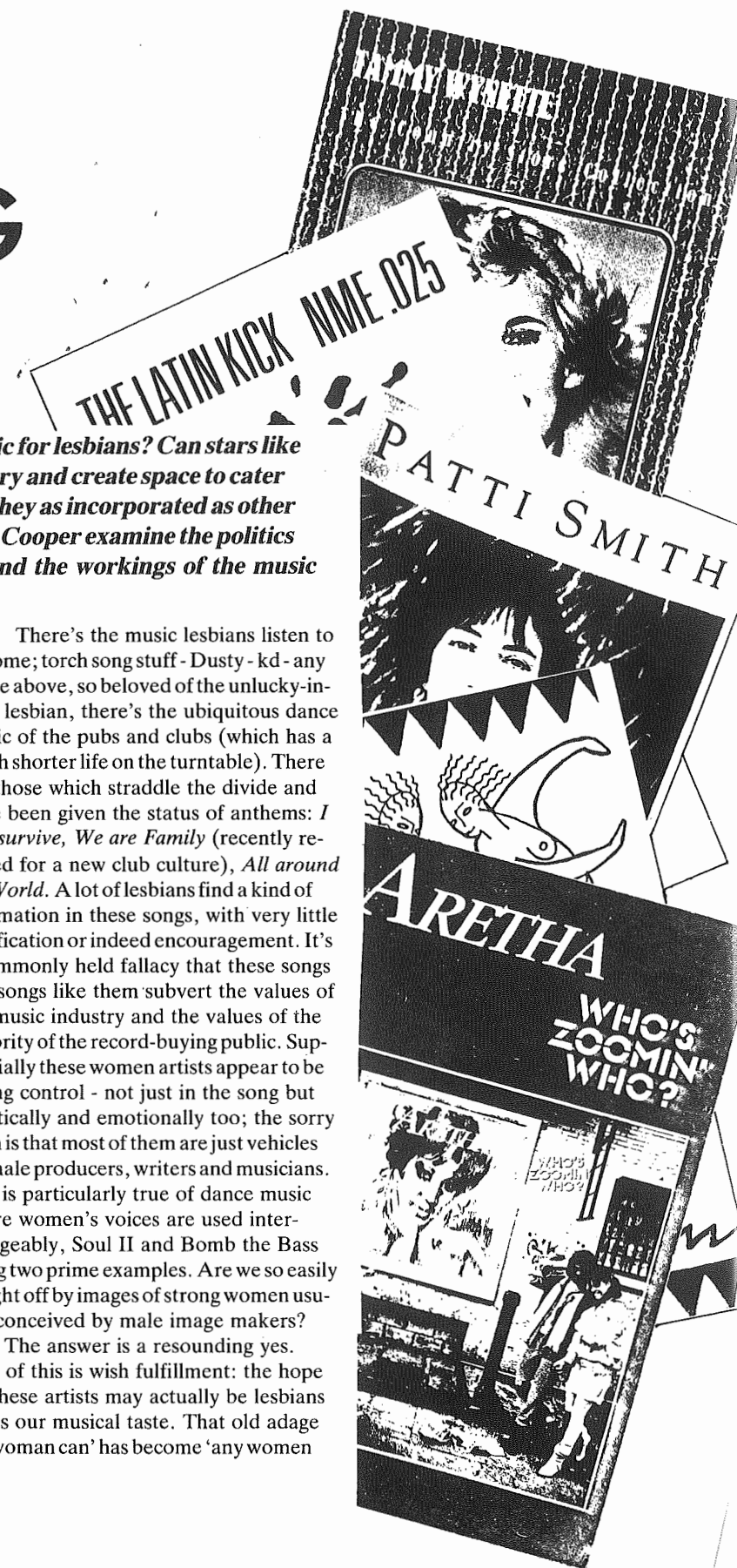
There's the music lesbians listen to at home; torch song stuff - Dusty - kd - any of the above, so beloved of the unlucky-in-love lesbian, there's the ubiquitous dance music of the pubs and clubs (which has a much shorter life on the turntable). There are those which straddle the divide and have been given the status of anthems: *I will survive*, *We are Family* (recently re-mixed for a new club culture), *All around the World*. A lot of lesbians find a kind of affirmation in these songs, with very little justification or indeed encouragement. It's a commonly held fallacy that these songs and songs like them subvert the values of the music industry and the values of the majority of the record-buying public. Superficially these women artists appear to be taking control - not just in the song but artistically and emotionally too; the sorry truth is that most of them are just vehicles for male producers, writers and musicians. This is particularly true of dance music where women's voices are used interchangeably, Soul II and Bomb the Bass being two prime examples. Are we so easily bought off by images of strong women usually conceived by male image makers?

The answer is a resounding yes. Some of this is wish fulfillment: the hope that these artists may actually be lesbians directs our musical taste. That old adage 'any woman can' has become 'any women

Since this article was written, *Off our Backs* has reported in January 1992 that the women have been reinstated to their positions and will be compensated for loss of earnings. They will however, be expected to refrain from further protests.



Cath Jackson



performer might be'. We recognise the difficulties that women performers have in making an impact in an industry entrenched in sexism and racism, and we instantly and probably rightly, confer strength and sense of purpose on them. This alone can make these performers very attractive to a lesbian audience.

Quality equals quantity

Is the overwhelmingly popularist nature of lesbians' musical taste precisely an attempt for us to momentarily escape a marginal existence in straight society? Or are we deluded into believing that something more subversive is going on in, say, Madonna's video for *Justify My Love* than just an avaricious industry and a cynical artist employing another tired cliché to increase sales? We're being conned. All the artists mentioned so far, regardless of lyrical content and 'alternative' image, are mainstream. Their popularity owes little to their lesbian following. Heterosexism aside, in an industry where quality is defined by quantity, literally in units shifted, there's little commercial appeal in a small and economically weak lesbian market. Although the idea of a specifically lesbian gaze has been much argued, the appeal of these artists is pretty much shared by their mainstream audiences. These artists aren't unaware of their popularity with certain communities - Madonna being particularly notable here. But they and their managers are careful to remain acceptable both to the industry and their majority heterosexist audience.

Apart from the possibility of unlimited riches of course, a career in the music business has little to recommend it for a woman. In terms of its structure and practice, there is little to distinguish the music industry from any other 20th century industrial phenomena, indeed it typifies it in many ways. A performer's creative output is the 'product' and the artist part of the packaging for the goods. Often tied to particular companies by complex legal arrangements, they are reduced to little more than indentured labour.

History of exploitation

The music industry also has a long and continuing history of exploitation and this is particularly well-documented in relation to

black music and its performers. In this way, it is the mirror image of the institutional and personal prejudices of western society as a whole; a white male-dominated establishment controlling the creative output of less powerful groups for their own reward - a kind of aural imperialism. It is not difficult to speculate on the place of women artists in this scheme of things, and there is no need to dwell on the rampant sexism of popular music's imagery, literally exemplified in the video context. It's bad enough listening to it, imagine working in it. Popular music is no different from any of the other 'arts' where women are used as tokens, their creativity trivialised, their status at best a curiosity of gender.

Against this background it's a wonder any women get a voice that exhibits any strength or self-determination at all, and we are more than grateful for those few who apparently do. Yet for every Des'ree or Paula Abdul, there are scores of women attempting to break through against the odds.

The companies that dominate are multinationals whose marketing strategy is interchangeable with any other consumer product... profitability achieved through optimum standardisation and global market saturation. Just as a potential car buyer in any consumer economy will have pretty much the same choice of, for example, a Ford, Nissan, or General Motors, walk into a record shop anywhere they exist, and allowing for some regional variation, you will be faced with the same Hammer, Madonna, Bryan Adams or U2 records. Such global uniformity can only be achieved either by the astonishingly universal appeal of the product released into the global marketplace by the industry giants or, more probably, their success in promoting homogeneity in pop music.

Alongside this pervasive homogeneity is, courtesy of the silicon revolution, the increasing availability of a technology to produce recorded music cheaply. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons for the recent popularity of dance music mainly produced and performed by black artists. But if the ability to make a 'professional' record is more accessible, it should theoretically create possibilities for

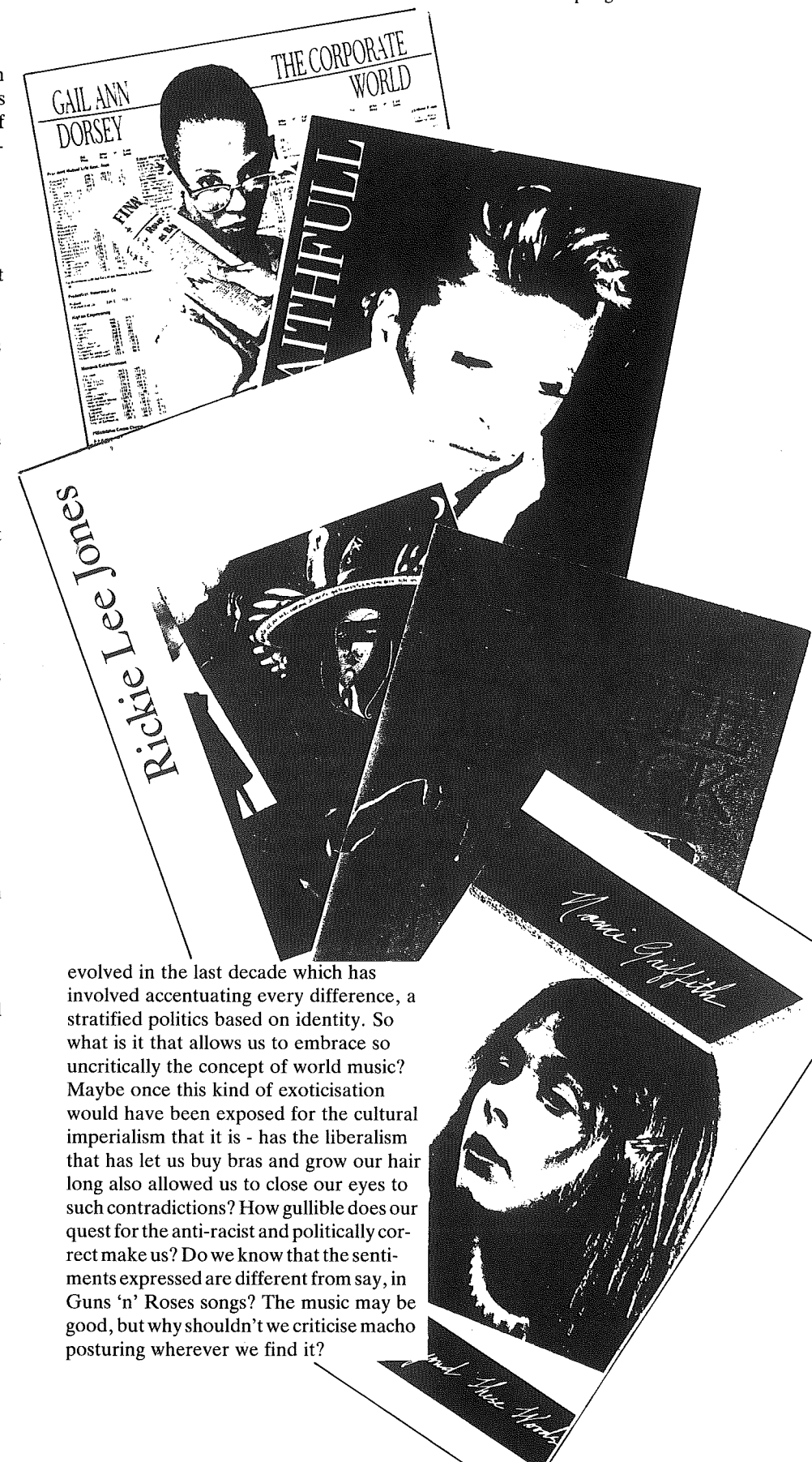
women to make a more visible contribution and this hasn't happened. Instead there is a new musical culture frighteningly full of 17 year old suburban boys and their computers, with women featuring only in decorative dance roles or one-off vocal appearances.

Blanket embrace

There are two particular types of music that have in recent years found popularity with lesbians: one is 'world music' - an unfortunate term which is used to cover all types of indigenous folk/popular music previously largely unheard or ignored, and which has become synonymous with political correctness on the turntable. It's true that some of the music packaged in this country as world music is liberation music, but a lot of it is local pop music. It certainly doesn't automatically have values different from, or critical of, those expressed in any mainstream culture. But for the language barrier to white english speaking listeners, it is lyrically and politically all too close to music we'd be likely to reject from our own musical mainstream. One example of this is Les Amazones de Guinea, a policewomen's band who have played to packed venues. We suspect that no matter how danceable the sound, a band of girls in blue from this country would not command quite the same audiences.

Music of other worlds and cultures being more widely available to us is a good thing for all concerned, assuming western cash actually reaches creator/original artists. But it's not just a case of winning anti-racist credibility points, far from suggesting that cultural choices are outside politics, there are much more sinister and racist undercurrents at work here.

First the seemingly blanket embrace of 'music of other cultures' can't be anything but dubious and naive. Second even the phrase itself 'world music' smacks of geographical and socio-political ethnocentricity, echoing all too uncomfortably that British imperialist concept of 'us and the rest of the world', lumping together as it does the music of the Indian sub-continent, Bulgaria, Latin America, North Africa, Spain to name but a few obviously dissimilar examples. This is the exact opposite of the way that lesbian politics have



evolved in the last decade which has involved accentuating every difference, a stratified politics based on identity. So what is it that allows us to embrace so uncritically the concept of world music? Maybe once this kind of exoticisation would have been exposed for the cultural imperialism that it is - has the liberalism that has let us buy bras and grow our hair long also allowed us to close our eyes to such contradictions? How gullible does our quest for the anti-racist and politically correct make us? Do we know that the sentiments expressed are different from say, in Guns 'n' Roses songs? The music may be good, but why shouldn't we criticise macho posturing wherever we find it?



Strange too that our embrace of 'music of all other cultures' has included every other folk music except english. Just think back to the last time you were somewhere where 'world music' was played and we can bet you that England was not part of that world... and yet english folk music as a music of liberation is as alive and as potent as any other - what about the benefits for the Miners' Strike, which featured a lot of folk music for precisely those reasons? Englishness is not necessarily synonymous with skinhead scum marching in Thamesmead or Britain's imperialist legacy. There is another England - the first capitalist world economy and the music that documents and protests the experience of those who endured it.

Some artists straddle, with varying degrees of success and discomfort, musics that lesbians have traditionally found difficult but the artists somehow manage to retain their popularity with us. Ofra Haza was adored by many although her main staple and earner were songs verging on a Eurovision Song Contest style. It's become a truism to proclaim that this sort

of contradiction is due to commercial pressure - like the standard response to Miriam Makeba singing cabaret-style songs. But what is it that makes us so confident that Ofra Haza is compromised into singing in this style? Why do we assume that she has so little control over her material that it could not be her own musical preferences that take her in this direction? Are lesbians so defensive about musical choice that such dubious justifications become necessary?

Dyke's delight

kd lang is currently every dyke's delight, even though country music has historically been an anaethema to any right thinking lesbian - not that that stopped some of us liking it. Its sentiments are the apotheosis of women as downtrodden victims and men as redneck jerks. Nevertheless, country music is probably the single biggest selling musical genre in the english-speaking world; it thrives across regional, racial, cultural and societal boundaries. It has always been the target of many jokes; those songs about dead puppies and little orphan Dolly; those middle-aged men from Essex wearing bootlace ties and spurs on their boots. And the politics - completely redneck reprehensible.

But why is country music singled out? It's not as if politics were totally unproblematic in relation to any other musical type; we don't only appreciate politically pure culture (and what might that be?). Lesbians who love kd but say they loath country should see that however subversive in appearance she is, she is deeply immersed in the whole country music tradition. Her visual appeal is certainly unusual for a country artist, but her music is conservative. She's gained her lesbian audience in spite of her use of country music as a vehicle, rather than because of it. The title of kd's most recent album, *Absolute Torch and Twang*, neatly exploits both markets: torchsongs for the girls, and the twang of the country guitar.

Is it that kd lang permits lesbians to enjoy country music or is it that she is in fact the only country artist that lesbians permit themselves to listen to? Or does the fact that kd is an out musician allow lesbians to forget their great contempt for country music?

kd is actually more mainstream in lyrical and musical style than most of the other women in that category. Listen to, for instance, *Ford Econoline* by Nanci Griffiths or *Rosie strikes back* by Rosanne Cash for songs where women win out. Even the masochism with which mainstream women country singers are allegedly saturated is revealed as only veneer through songs like Dolly Parton's *Dumb Blonde*, Loretta Lynn's *Don't Come Home A-Drinking*, Emmylou Harris' *Feeling Single Seeing Double*.

Downtrodden they may be in song, but they've also had a relatively large measure of control over their careers: writing and choosing their own material and even playing their own instruments. There's nothing peculiar to country music in women having to present themselves as weak and helpless. Rap is the only example that springs to mind of a music where strong female artists figure. Women rap performers are by definition assertive and extravagantly so - although rap itself can be outstandingly mysogynist.

To have a serious interest in popular music is to be considered odd in lesbian circles, however. There are plenty of column inches devoted to lesbian perspectives, in film, photography, television, even some sports, like body building, but music coverage remains very limited. The perspective is generally retrospective. *Spare Rib* has recently taken to featuring artists such as Sinead O'Connor and Queen Latifah on the front cover, but overall the emphasis has been on providing positive role models; the same old story. *Spare Rib* articles look at the performers as political icons. Articles in mainstream national press have been more analytical: musician as cultural icon. This has been taken to an extreme in the case of Madonna, around whom a whole academic pseudo-analytic cottage industry has grown up. But it's as though we only relate to music in a conceptualised way, what she wears and what it means, not how the music makes us feel, unless we're offloading sentimentality by losing ourselves in masochistic torchsongs.

Beyond the torchsongs

It is not necessary to identify politically with music for it to move you emotionally

or physically. It has in recent years become more common for us as feminists not necessarily to have to suspend belief or convictions to enjoy 'mainstream culture'. We can watch and enjoy, for example, *Twin Peaks*, *Thelma and Louise*, *Eastenders*. It's ok to like *Elle* judging by its availability in lesbian bathrooms, but who knows what *NME* stands for? Although it is not surprising given the codified and laddish way the music press presents its material.

Maybe there is no hope - lesbians are boring and unadventurous when it comes to music. But if one of the driving forces of lesbian choice in music is in fact lusting after images of independent women performers, there are whole areas of music and musicians that remain unexplored, overlooked by the music industry and lesbians alike. 'Indie' music, long considered a students' ghetto, has always in fact always been an area where women have had a significant presence as both singers and musicians, from X Ray Spex and Siouxi Sioux to Cocteau Twins and currently the Sundays, Lush, Curve, The Cranes, The Pixies and many others. 'Indie' labels are often not what they appear - many have been eaten up by large companies, or have even been started by those companies to lend artistic credibility. Whatever, they generally continue to have more adventurous A&R (who they choose to sign) policies and are an important means of access for bands and forms of music that may find the mainstream impossible to penetrate.

Other 'author-approved' alternatives are: Mary Margaret O'Hara, Lucinda Williams, Ricky Lee Jones, 10,000 Maniacs, Cath Carroll, Kirsty MacColl, Cowboy Junkies, Throwing Muses, Diamanda Galas, Annette Peacock. Their records are 'difficult and awkward' products, and just as ignored by lesbians, who might be more likely to take them to their hearts, as by the music industry. These women are apparently more in control of the creative process and output. So, are any of them necessarily going to end up in your record collection? If you are already thinking that we're veering towards obscurity and elitism (although all of these are available in your local *Our Price*), don't blame us, blame the music industry. They set us up, and we swallow what they offer. □

Hungary For Change

As in other former Iron Curtain countries, the women of Hungary are facing a return to conservative values and deepening economic crises. Zsuzsa Beres describes the daunting situation facing the new Feminist Network.

Hungary's women are frustrated. Hungary's women are fed up. Hungary's women don't want to be liberated. Hungary's women are unloved. Home and hearth, glorious motherhood, Husband the Provider - the foolproof answer to the woes of the tottering nuclear family. And we shall all live happily ever after.

"God, Homeland, Family" were the election slogans of the political parties of Hungary's ruling conservative government in the spring of 1990.

The conservative backlash comes after 40 years of communist rule, where the emancipation of women was an officially declared policy. The communists' vision of women as being equal to men jolted Hungary's women out of their traditional confinement to the home in the late 40s and early 50s.

This was a period of forced industrialization in times when, in the chilly Cold War breeze, the communist regimes of Eastern Europe tried to become self-sufficient.

Due to the enormous demand for labour, propaganda posters appeared, depicting man and woman side by side. Clad in blue overalls, robust in build and with exuberant smiles on their faces, these men and women seemed ostensibly well-prepared for the challenges of their times. There were subsidized creches, and kindergartens, subsidized holidays for families and services to take over the housewifely

and motherly chores.

Women worked three shifts in the factories, worked the land on the cooperative farms, attended political rallies, joined the trade unions and were elected to Parliament. For the latter, there were strictly enforced quotas.

Women took the babies to the creche at six in the morning, and rushed to pick them up after work in the afternoon. (Women with young babies were allotted a certain time off each day to breast-feed). Women went shopping for groceries, prepared dinner, did the laundry, checked the children's homework, and fell asleep in front of the television set.

There was never any question of choice, only sheer financial necessity. And there was discrimination in the job market. The women were allowed into the labour force, but the managerial positions were reserved for the men.

The economy could not do without female labour, yet, structurally, nothing had changed to soften the conflict between parenting and work. Women invariably became the 'unreliable' worker, 'bad' mother, and inattentive wife, constantly tormented by a guilty conscience over not performing up to the mark in any capacity. Patriarchy has been not shaken by the changes of the past three years. On the contrary, its grip seems stronger than ever. Politicians in government and parliament are predominantly male. There are almost



Leo Eken, Impact Visuals

no women in the major decision-making bodies.

The economy is in deep recession, with massive unemployment predicted for this year. Women are no longer portrayed on propaganda posters alongside men. They are told to bear more children or the Hungarian nation will die out. They are told to devote most of their time to their children and their household, or else juvenile delinquency will grow even faster. Women are told to lend a sympathetic ear to tired hubby's woes when he returns home from work, or else the catastrophically high divorce rates will never be reversed.

Anti-choice groups aggressively clamour for the outlawing of abortion. The abortion issue has spilled into the media, where the argument has been raging for months - almost exclusively among men.

Pornography abounds, and the vacuum left by now defunct socialist morality was quickly filled by sex magazines, topless bars, massage salons and live acts. In less than six months after the first democratic elections in forty years, Hungary has earned the reputation as the Bangkok of Eastern Europe. Hungary's men seem to be proud of being macho. They lash out at what they call the over-emancipation of Hungary's women under the former communist regime. Men must be men and women must be women. The natural order of things must be restored.

A majority of Hungary's women probably agree. There is no choice, however, only financial necessity. The women must work, but where have all the jobs gone? And what does the future hold when, for lack of funds and political will, the subsidized childcare services disappear?

Feminism is a dirty word in this country. This is surprising in light of the fact that the women's movement has been almost entirely unknown this side of the former Iron Curtain. Nonetheless, a tiny minority of women, mostly in the capital city, Budapest, decided it was time to raise a voice that was strikingly different from conservative mainstream politics.

It is difficult to predict what the future holds for the Feminist Network, a small group of about 50 women set up in June 1990. Will it grow into a network? Will it become a tightly-knit organization? Has it any real prospects to speak of? Only time will tell. Here in Eastern Europe, feminism is starting out in the face of enormous odds: economic recession, galloping inflation, rapidly growing poverty, a return to Christian conservatism.

Ambitious, large-scale projects are not possible at the moment. But to help some of Hungary's overburdened and under-appreciated women to love themselves just that little bit more would perhaps not be a bad start. □

Feminist Network, Green Women, 1093 Budapest, Lonyay utca 34, Hungary. Reprinted from *New Directions for Women*

Broadening



Broadening Out
1991
Oils. 6' x 4'

I painted this at the end of the two years' work preparing for the Rochdale exhibition. It's a summing up: fat politics; putting my feelings about fat into the visual. Feelings of being a fat woman and trying to be proud of that; also feelings of vulnerability.

It's taking the piss out of myself but also hating it when people laugh at me. It's putting the fat back into the cult image of the thin woman, trying to counter some of the body fascism and elitism in lesbian culture, the lesbian scene.

It's about demanding space, about taking space; allowing myself to get bigger within the work and saying, "Hey, look at me! I'm lovely!". It's about being proud - and not so proud; about wanting to wear sequins - and about popping out of your shirt.

The Leeds Pavilion gallery is to hold an exhibition of Rachael's work from 3rd April to 15th May 1992.

Rachael can be contacted c/o Rochdale Art Gallery.

Out

Rachael Field is a fat lesbian artist. She paints big oil paintings based around the figure of a fat lesbian women, using herself as the model. Sometimes she paints herself with her lover, puppeteer Nenagh Watson.

Rachael has been painting full-time since she left art college in 1986. A commission from the Rochdale Art Gallery for an exhibition of her paintings last autumn has allowed her to spend the last two years developing the scale and unique style of her work.

Most of her recent paintings are very big: six foot square and bigger. She uses oils - "Oil paint is like skin. It's more alive than other paints"; often the colour blue. She often uses religious imagery and the poses of many of her figures are based on the work of well-known male artists, past and present.

Rachael's pictures are chronicles of lesbian life; statements of power and protest, intimacy and alienation, pain and exposure. In these excerpts from an interview with Cath Jackson she talks about some of the key paintings in the development of her current style and thinking.

This one's based on Michelangelo's "The Risen Christ". It's one of the first paintings I did for the Rochdale exhibition.

I don't have a problem about using male artists' work. I'm not copying, I'm using it. There are so few famous women artists: Gwen John, Artemesia Gentileschi they're my favourite.

Images of women in classical art are usually what I call the "great white slug pose": reclining, waiting for a male upright to come along. The exciting images are images of men - bursting forth, rising again, being a saviour, being powerful and active and heroic.

By turning those into images of women I'm saying "We're like that too" -



Real Lemon
1990
Oils. 8' x 6'

but also making a parody of the male image.

"Lemon" is a derisory term for lesbian - I think it's a north country, maybe specifically Manchester term. Lemonism is also something Nenagh and I use to describe those embarrassing moments when Auntie or someone asks us, "Have you got a boyfriend?" or, "When are you going to get married?" and you feel like a real lemon. Or you go into a very heterosexual setting and you're out of place because you don't want to talk about boyfriends or about your latest diet.

I put in the XXL on her knickers because I thought it would shake people. The belly comes just at most people's head height so they are staring straight at it.



Domestic Scene. Whalley Range
1987
Oils. 6' x 6'

I painted this early on, when I was developing this style. It's based on medieval, allegorical art. The space is very shallow; everything's pushed to the front. I'm using the picture in the same way that religious allegorical art was used to explain the bible stories to people who couldn't read. That's what appeals to me about medieval religious art: it tells a story.

This is based on our bathroom here, which has nice blue walls. It's telling a story about the domestic conditions we live in. It's a David Hockney parody - his pictures of men in showers, in America, very glamorous. This is the lesbian equivalent.

There's nothing to stop a man finding my pictures a turn on. But there's a balance between making something objectively sexual, titillating, and telling the story as it is.

The reason I put that little bit of Nenagh's breast in was just to show she is a woman - and even so people say they can't tell. That's a problem with my work. People say they can't tell: "But are they women?" That's because they don't want to tell, definitely.

"I didn't really start working like this until after college. I had terrible rows with the other students because they'd make the life-class model take her clothes off and pose sticking her bum in the air. I wanted her to keep her nice coloured dressing gown on because that's what I wanted to paint.

So I just retreated to doing self-portraits but that was horrible because you were treated like you were doing it for self-indulgent, voyeuristic reasons. I just got incredibly embarrassed and ended up working outside of college. I had a nervous breakdown in my second year. I couldn't paint; I couldn't do anything: they'd taken even that away from me. I met Nenagh in my last year at college and she really helped me through the last bit. Most of my degree work was painted in her flat.

I very purposefully use myself in my work and Nenagh, whose full consent I have. I would like to paint other women; I sometimes worry about the exclusiveness of my work. But I don't just want to do portraits of people. These are self-portraits, but they're not. They're not just me sitting in front of a mirror looking at myself and painting; in fact I never look in mirrors to paint. They're about ideas. If I were to paint other women I would need to work out the ideas and the reasons for doing those images first. I'd feel very uncomfortable about objectifying somebody in that way.

I always wanted to paint people, figures. Just because people are important. From childhood, I've always done pictures of women, mostly. A figure isn't just a figure. It's emotions; it's a state of mind. It's a person, not just an object. By depicting people you are doing more than painting a turnip.

My women are fat and thin and black and white and able-bodied and disabled. It's important to show other than the normal types of women you get in most popular culture.

Titles are very important. They're my opportunity to have my say. I have the right to say what I want in that little card next to the painting. If I throw it away and call it 'Untitled' it's just a waste - unimaginative.

Titles are the names of my pictures. My pictures deserve a name. They don't deserve just "Untitled".

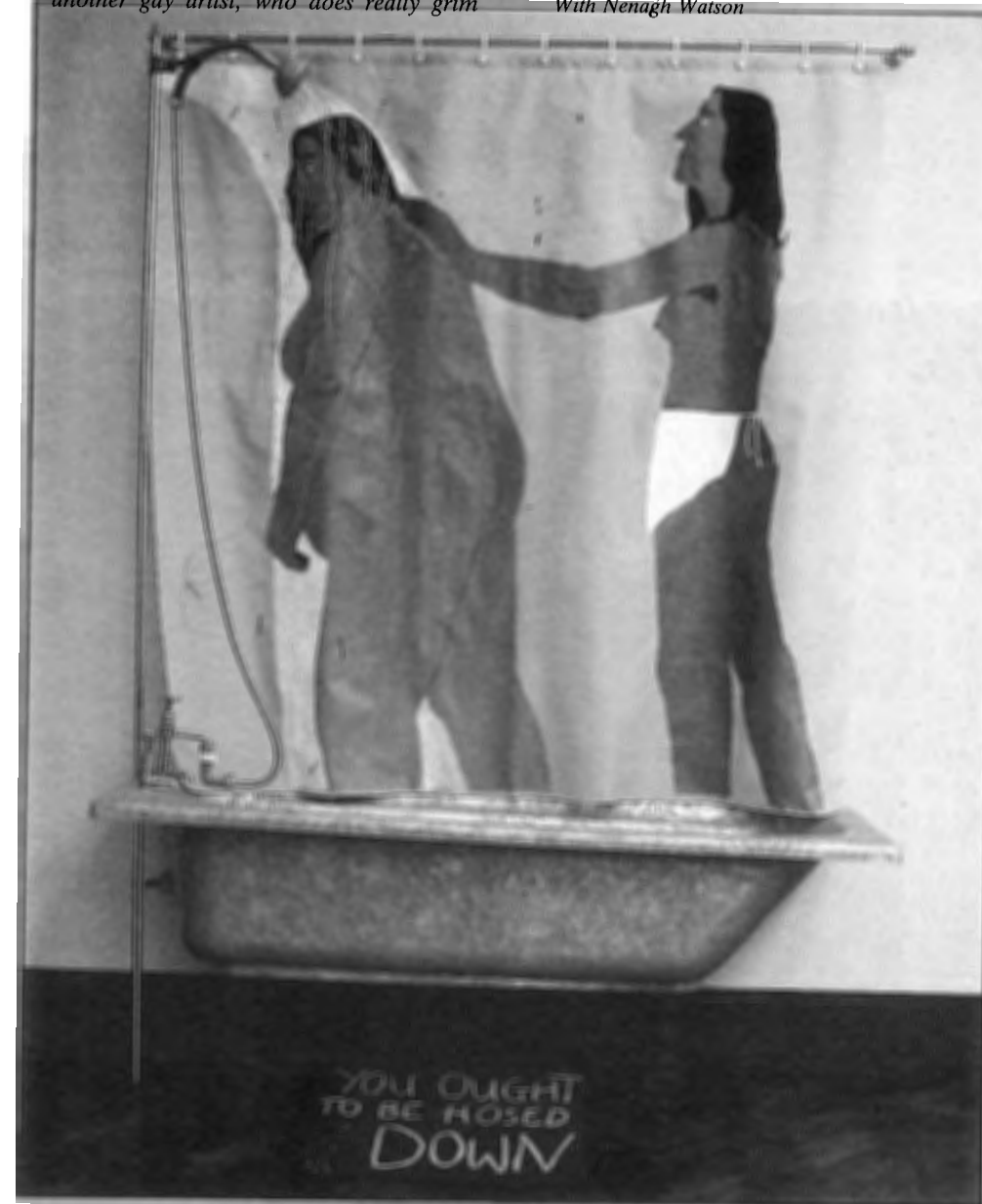
It's something that was shouted at us when we were on the gay rights march in Stockport. This woman opened her window and we all thought that she was really friendly and so we were waving at her and then she shouted at us, "You ought to be hosed down!". It was really horrible. It's one of those comments that stays with you.

It's another Hockney parody. For me there's two extremes: there's Hockney doing his 'nice' work - and there's Francis Bacon, another gay artist, who does really grim

work. I see myself in the middle: my work can be nice and it can be grim.

The original of this installation also has a very lovely toilet in it: red velvet padded cover and gold tassels. The water is wire, ending in sharp nails. People look at the lovely padded toilet, then turn round and get a face full of nails.

You ought to be hosed down
1991
Life-size installation
With Nenagh Watson

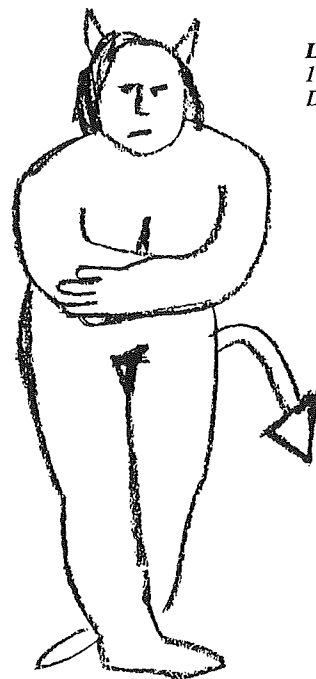


I did go through a "Born Again" christian period, before I became lesbian, although I'm an atheist now. Now I sort of joke and say "I'm an evangelical lesbian"

I've always produced paintings but I haven't always been a lesbian. But it's what really formed my work over the last six years. My work has developed with my sexuality so I just see them as totally intertwined. I'm a lesbian artist and my work is lesbian art.

I'm not just painting for myself. I'm painting primarily for women but I wouldn't only show in women-only spaces. My paintings go into mixed spaces because women who would be too frightened to go into women-only spaces will see them. Men dismiss us all the time and say we haven't got a sense of humour - so it doesn't hurt for them to be confronted by a bit of truth.

What the artist thinks about a work isn't the whole story. When I finish a painting it becomes almost dead to me; I don't have that one-to-one contact with it any more. But it becomes alive for other people then. So it's finished, but not dead: it goes on after and starts to live for other people.



Little devil
1990
Drawing. 9" x 6"

Little devil was something I was called as a kid. I put "little" in front of "devil" because it's a little drawing. It's me being stropky.

The shoe on the left is my shoe when I was about a year old. The shoe on the right is my shoe now. The adult shoes are the first pair of shoes I've ever bought that I've felt comfortable in.

It's a man's shoe. I got them from a trendy man's shop so it didn't feel too awful going in to get them - just a little bit awful. I have very wide feet and it's very difficult to get shoes to fit them. I wanted a pair of gold women's shoes for my private view but I couldn't get anything to fit.

I don't think a work has to be big to make a big statement. I like to work big - but I also like to work quite small. I like the change in scale. People want a sameness about things: everyone's got to be the same size. But people aren't all the same size and some are very big and some are very small.

Stepping Into My Shoes
1991
Oils. 2' x 2'



“ I like the religious style because it's heroic and passionate and - big. Religious paintings were putting forward a message to support the status quo. I'm using that style and then perverting it to show how silly it all is - but I'm also giving that same religious status to what I'm saying.

I did go through a "Born Again" christian period, before I became lesbian, although I'm an atheist now. Now I sort of joke and say "I'm an evangelical lesbian".

I use genuine rose madder for Nenagh's socks, because it's an expensive pigment and I want her socks to be nice. But it is expensive, so she only gets pink socks.

Blue is the most expensive colour and that's why the Virgin Mary is always painted in blue. They loved her, so they painted her in blue.

I went swimming and someone called me a whale - so I don't go very often any more.

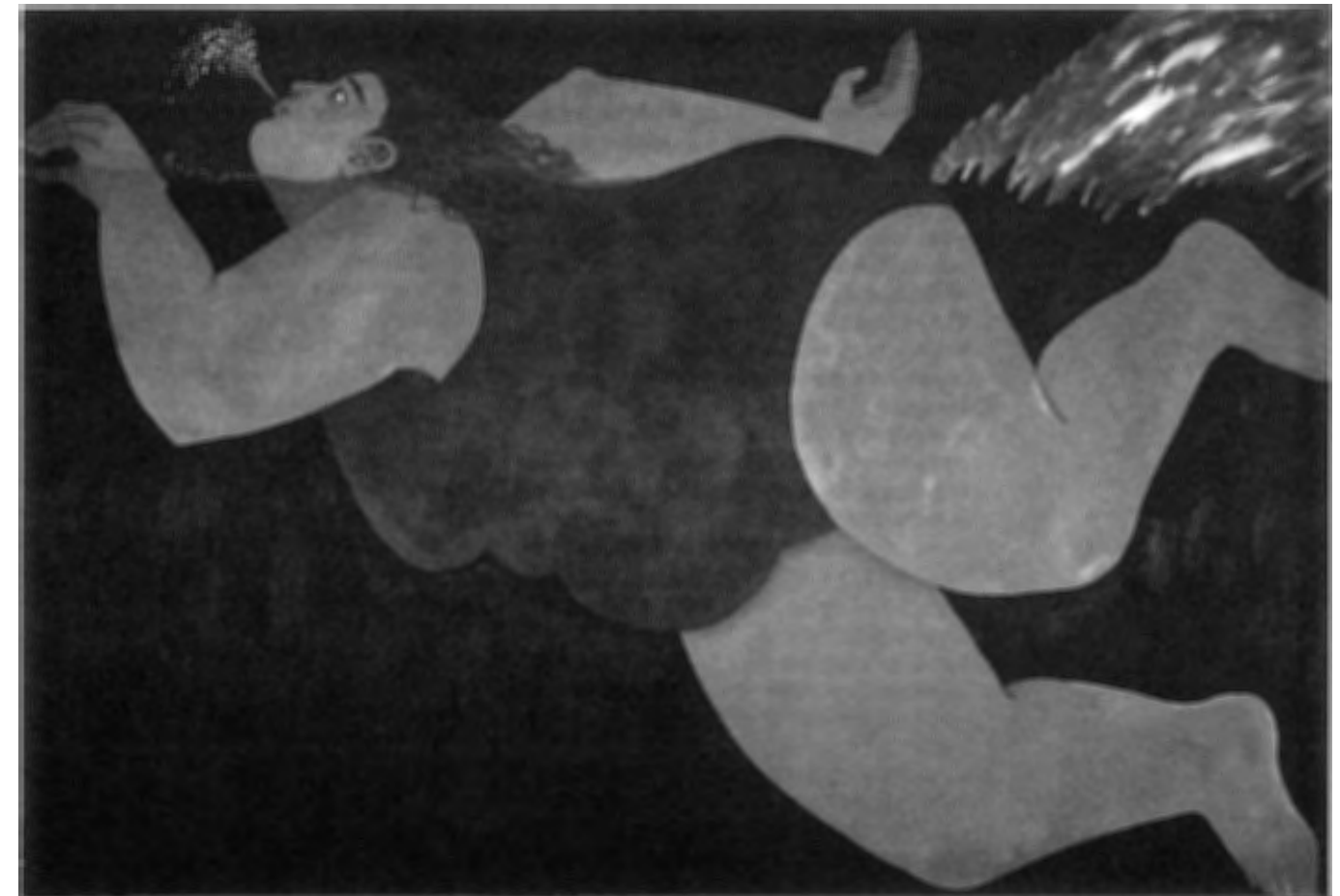
I really love whales - because they are big. I wanted to do a picture about a whale and call it "Fat Animal".

Then the two things came together: whales are in danger because they are so big; big things are wonderful and beautiful, and also vulnerable: people want to get rid of us.

What makes my work unique is who I am; what makes everybody's work unique is who they are and their experience. I use who I am and my experience in my work.

This painting's a complete fabrication though, because I don't swim the crawl and I haven't got a purple swimming costume. It's very much something I have made up, but it's also really true.

Whale
1991
Oils. 9' x 6'



“ I've always produced paintings but I haven't always been a lesbian. But it's what really formed my work over the last six years. My work has developed with my sexuality so I just see them as totally intertwined. I'm a lesbian artist and my work is lesbian art.

What the artist thinks about a work isn't the whole story. When I finish a painting it becomes almost dead to me; I don't have that one-to-one contact with it any more. But it becomes alive for other people then. So it's finished, but not dead: it goes on after and starts to live for other people.

The Demand That Time Forgot

Has anything much changed around motherhood? In Reviewing 'Motherhood: Meanings, Practices and Ideologies,' Dena Attar remembers many of the debates the Women's Liberation Movement has had on children, childcare and being a mother.

On the corners of streets near where I live you can often see groups of women hanging around, toddlers in tow, after they've taken their children to school in the morning. They stand talking for up to half an hour whatever the weather, because there isn't anywhere else to meet and it's better than being alone. Then they go and there is no more sign of the mothers and children shut away behind doors somewhere, isolated. It is easy to forget, with all the current emphasis on mothers returning to work, how many women's lives are still like this.

When I was younger and more desperate I used to buy "parents" magazines with covers advertising features on getting babies to sleep through the night. Later experience revealed to me that none of these magazines had the secret formula inside; they just recycled the same topics every few months knowing they would sell. Other kinds of writing on motherhood can have the same irresistible pull. There's a great deal available and much which tries to substitute for the live exchange of infor-

mation and validation of experience mothers are traditionally supposed to be dishing out to each other. The introduction to *Motherhood: Meanings, Practices and Ideologies* (edited by Ann Phoenix, Anne Woollett and Eva Lloyd) lists five types of writing on motherhood in recent years - developmental psychology texts, childcare manuals, research studies concentrating on the transition to motherhood and the early years, autobiographical writing, and feminist theory. As I now have a terrible cynicism I can't shake off about the value of much of this writing, especially to mothers, this attempt to review *Motherhood* keeps turning into something else - a yawn, a howl, a list, a long phone call, a search through back numbers of *T&S*. It helps, I find, to substitute Margaret Thatcher whenever I read the word mother.

Mothers have only one thing in common, by definition - we're all women. We don't necessarily share anything else at all. We're not all biological mothers and don't

all raise our children if we are. All other definitions or generalisations immediately start to exclude certain groups of mothers, or else are simply false. To its credit *Motherhood* is a book which addresses this fact, though in a fairly limited way. It is not a book for mothers so much as a book for psychologists, aimed at making them understand that mothers are people. I am entirely in favour of this but it still seems a bizarre enterprise. The editors note that mothers have more or less been treated as functions in much pre-existing literature:-

Women's experiences of motherhood and feelings about being mothers are rarely directly explored but can sometimes be found tucked away in studies about children. Similarly, the varieties of situations in which women mother are generally not considered. The phrases 'the mother' and 'the child' reflect the tendency to view motherhood and childhood as homogeneously universal categories.

"Normal" mothers

In correcting this view the authors of *Motherhood* have adopted one of two approaches: adding on, or reviewing past data. The add-on approach starts with the premise that "normal" mothers are very narrowly defined with reference to age and family circumstances, for example. The articles on younger and older mothers set out to challenge the restricted models of motherhood found elsewhere but I can't help feeling that in doing so via different studies of particular groups of mothers they risk setting up their own models instead. It would be unfair to criticise this anthology for lack of inclusiveness since it grew out of papers for a conference, but I have to record that the add-on approach still excluded my experience and Margaret Thatcher's. Only one of the articles referred to mothers of more than one child; there was nothing on twins and multiples. But more articles on class, race, lesbian mothers, disability (I did find Susan Gregory's on deaf children exceptionally illuminating though) would not have resolved the basic problem, which is that, remember, mothers are *people*. The possibilities for variation amongst us are end-

less. In my days as a bibliographer I researched books like Florence Jack's *The woman's book* (1911), which was subtitled "contains everything a woman ought to know". I would wonder if any publisher had brought out a male equivalent - everything a man needed to know, in a few hundred pages. I traced only one feeble attempt, in contrast to the scores of similar manuals for women - it was so self evidently ridiculous to think you could encompass everything about a man's life - a *person's* life - in one book. We seem now to have reached the point where women are people, but mothers still are not.

The editors are frank about the second approach, explaining the researchers included:

have often collected the original data for other, more narrowly developmental purposes and for this book have turned these data around and re-defined their focus to discuss the implications of their findings and of this kind of research for mothers. (p.218)

What they haven't discussed is whether the implications of returning to previous studies with a fresh goal of including mothers as people - noticing that they think, have a point of view, actively make decisions - are that the entire validity of the research, or of earlier findings, might need to be reassessed. There seems a basic contradiction between the project of this book as a whole and some of the psychological studies it contains. In dealing simultaneously with motherhood, the social institution, and mothers, that branch of people. *Motherhood* the book does not always keep the distinction clear. It's best on constructions of motherhood - the article by Suzan Lewis on motherhood and employment contrasts mothers who try to redefine the male work ethic with other mothers and childless women who adopt it, and analyses their perspectives in relation to the dominant constructions. Ann Phoenix's article on young mothers gives a graphic account of some teenage mothers' awareness that they're constructed as deviant, and of their resistance to this.

There's one other absence in this book which, even while I recognise this is



a selective anthology, has to be noted because it is such an important absence. There is after all one activity, and only one, which is conscious, deliberate and unique to mothers - not merely a function, not a definition. Yet there is nothing whatsoever in this book about breastfeeding, and there must be a reason for this neglect. Perhaps they just forgot. People are always forgetting about it, even women, even feminists. Feminists especially have so much to deal with we forget about all kinds of things. I've been thinking about feminist politics, memories and forgetfulness, and why *Motherhood* reminds me both of how far we've come, and what a short way.

Demanding childcare

At the first WLM conference I went to about twenty years ago we agreed to have four demands, for equal pay, equal opportunities in work and education, free contraception and abortion on demand, and twenty-four hour nurseries. From then on I was active in all sorts of groups and campaigns - consciousness-raising, women's centres, women's aid, free pregnancy testing, reclaim the night, rape crisis. We made up more demands, then stopped having demands. We won the arguments about equal pay and opportunities but realised there was a lot still holding us back. We found new issues all the time. There was more and more to do but then I had children and started cracking up and stopped going to lots of meetings and being in several groups at once. Now I have to figure out very carefully where the time's coming from. For instance I have worked out how much time I have to write this and the answer is none. In theory I had weeks but in practice I had little of that time to myself. I've lost the stamina I once had for working twenty-four hours a day. You see the problem.

We were always a bit embarrassed about that demand anyway, even when it was first adopted. We had to keep explaining that we didn't mean that babies and children should be left in the twenty-four hour nurseries *all the time*. It was just that mothers needed provision to work the hours their jobs required, day or night, and to go to meetings, go out, whatever.

Nothing less would really do if we wanted to free mothers to participate as equals in the adult world. The embarrassment was resolved simply enough - we kept it as a demand but left it at that, without groups or campaigns or anything much at all.

Failing mothers

I have other embarrassing memories and some that make me very angry. I remember a group meeting where we discussed motherhood, and had decided to interrogate each of the mothers present (they were in the minority) about their reasons for having had children. They all said it had not been consciously or deliberately chosen. That let *them* off the hook then. They obviously had the rest of us figured out - that version of events gave them some lever to demand support, whereas any woman confessing she'd deliberately opted to have a child could expect to be left to get on with it. An even more shameful memory is of early experience in free pregnancy testing groups, where we just assumed that every positive result was a disaster. I heard later of one woman wanting a baby who sneaked in alone and used the kit herself so she wouldn't have to face us. We learned eventually and mended our ways.

I first realised how much of a minority mothers were in the WLM at a meeting where a majority vote decided to charge women for using the creche at a new women's centre. Looking around the room I could see exactly why the vote was lost. In fact, most women are mothers. In meetings like that one, most women weren't. Most of them missed the point that their decision meant charging women with children for using a centre which childless women, who are usually more affluent, could use for free. Few mothers had any say in the matter, because few of us were able to be at the meeting.

A couple of years later I went to an open meeting at another women's centre where I knew no-one but hoped to start getting involved. It was a daytime meeting and I had three-year old twins with me. The creche wasn't open. Nobody spoke to me when I arrived. I struggled to keep the children quiet and non-disruptive while the other women got on with the agenda - they

Trouble & Strife

Questionnaire for readers

Dear Readers,

Yes, it's another of those questionnaires! However, it's not a 'marketing' exercise so we can convince firms to advertise in T&S (some hope!) but for two very different reasons. We are constantly hearing from women who have just discovered T&S and like it, so we are planning a campaign to increase our visibility and readership, and want your ideas on ways to achieve this. We'd also like to have a clearer idea of who our readers are, what you want more (or less) of in T&S, and whether any of you would like to contribute directly to the magazine. None of the information you give us will be passed on to anyone else, nor will it be put onto a computer database. It is simply to help us promote and improve the magazine.

If you fill the questionnaire in, and send it to our address (Trouble and Strife, PO Box 8, Diss, Norfolk, IP22) you could win a free years sub to the magazine!! These will be drawn in July. Looking forward to hearing from you all.

Getting hold of T&S

How did you first discover T&S?

in bookshop through a friend in library at a conference
other

Do you:

subscribe to T&S buy it regularly buy it occasionally
this is the first copy I've seen

If you are a regular reader but do not subscribe what puts you off having a subscription?

Which other magazines/journals do you regularly read?



Can you buy T&S in your town/area YES/NO
If YES where?

If NO are there bookshops which ought to stock it? YES/NO
If YES please give names and address

Have you tried to get these shops to stock T&S? YES/NO
If YES what reason did they give for not stocking T&S.

In your view is the cost of T&S:
too low about right too expensive

On the content

What T&S articles have you particularly enjoyed?

What T&S articles have you least liked?

What sort of articles do you like best (eg interviews, film & book reviews, WLM history -
British and/or international, accounts of events/conferences/campaigns, theory, personal
accounts)?

What topics/issues would you like to see covered more often?

What are your own areas of particular interest?

How you can help us

Would you be interested in writing/reviewing books/doing interviews/being interviewed/
doing cartoons or graphics for T&S? YES/NO
If you have ideas/skills to offer please tell us a little about them

Are you involved in any political groups/campaigns? YES/NO
Would you be interested in reporting on them for T&S? YES/NO
If YES please tell us what the campaign is

How do you think T&S could enlarge its readership?

Could you help advertise or promote T&S in any way? YES/NO
If YES could you do any of the following?

Design/print a poster Take fliers to conferences
Enclose fliers in mailouts Put up posters
Chivvy libraries to subscribe
Other

Would you be interested in a free subscription in return for selling five (or more) copies
of each issue? YES/NO
If YES how many copies do you think you could sell?

If you have said YES to either promoting T&S or being interested in writing/illustration
please give us an address where we can contact you - otherwise we won't know who you are!



A bit about yourself

Age under 20 20-29 30-39 40-49 50-59 over 60

Sex

How do you define your race/ethnicity?

How do you define your sexuality?

Do you have a disability? YES/NO

If YES please tell us if it is sensory

Are you a mother/primary carer for child/ren? YES/NO

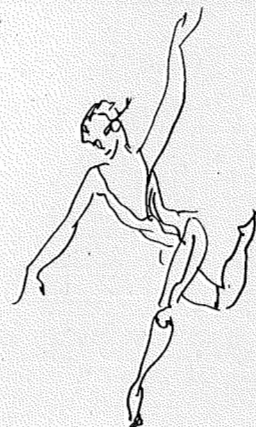
Are you primary carer for an elderly/disabled person? YES/NO

Income bracket:

unemployed fulltime unwaged carer student below 10000 10-15000
15000-20000 above 20000

If in paid employment, what kind of work do you do?

ANY OTHER COMMENTS/SUGGESTIONS



Thank you

spent a long time on details about one worker's maternity leave and replacement. Eventually the effort became too much and as I couldn't follow or take part in the discussion I decided to leave. Nobody spoke to me when I left either - I didn't go back for a long time and I'm still angry.

Strip away the anecdotal detail and this is the picture - feminists have failed to campaign for childcare because mothers, who need it, don't have enough of it to find the time for campaigning, and others, who don't think they need it, don't have the motivation - some are even hostile. (This account of the past doesn't include that odd group Wages for Housework, who somehow kept on confusing housework with issues of childcare and economic dependency). The situation I'm describing also coincides with a historical period where the marketplace, not the community or the state, is supposed to provide. Instead of a collective response to the needs of working mothers, there's been a privatised response. The waiting lists for nursery places are still huge while domestic service is once again becoming a significant sector of employment for young women working as nannies, in a reversal that takes us back to the 1930s.

And still we don't have nurseries

There has been a National Childcare Campaign but it was never an autonomous, feminist campaign. It was a mixed rather than a women's organisation which for a while lived up to its name and did some campaigning. In the mid-80s the government offered it, amongst other organisations, what seemed a large sum of money to administer for childcare projects outside London. There was a debate; the amount was really tiny in comparison with the need, enough to fund some office expansion and new workers and a few new nursery places around the country. In the end the NCC took the money, the organisation grew (amidst splits and quarrels), and increasingly devoted itself to topics like the pay and conditions of nursery workers (but most of us still didn't have nurseries), the management and running of nurseries it was involved in (but most of us still didn't have nurseries), and virtually stopped cam-

paing (but most of us still didn't have nurseries). Its offshoots survive, and there is still some piecemeal campaigning for moderate demands, but without much visibility or grassroots support.

Miriam David argues in a recent article on the Children Act that "feminists have remained ambivalent about childcare", pointing out that it has been a relatively neglected issue within the women's movement. (She also cites the lack of response to the book she co-authored with Caroline New, *For the Children's Sake: Making Child Care More Than Women's Business* (1985), a rare book on childcare which is genuinely useful and supportive as well as informative as it analyses mothers' options and experiences in context). The ambivalence Miriam David refers to though stretches well beyond the single issue of childcare provision as an aspect of social policy. Of course feminism has attended to the concerns of mothers and children, but what I want to address in the rest of this article is the gaps and silences, the biases.

In her article "Feminism and motherhood" Ann Oakley critically examines the predominantly negative evaluation of motherhood which was presented by feminists up to the late 1970s. She speculates that the shift in emphasis was connected with whether or not feminists theorising about motherhood were writing from experience, noting that those who were (such as Adrienne Rich) were more positive than those who were not (Firestone, Greer, Mitchell and Millett). She may be right, but I think there were also other shifts for which we need wider explanations. Shulamith Firestone was unequivocal about the centrality of motherhood, as a role, in the oppression of women when she wrote in *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) "The heart of woman's oppression is her child-bearing and child-rearing role." In some ways the rev/rads of the 1970s and 80s took this statement and turned it around in arguing that we needed a politics of reproduction, the point being that men oppressed women in order to control reproduction, rather than that the way for men to oppress women (for whatever reasons) was through reproduction and



Cath Jackson

motherhood. But other issues took over anyway: the cornerstone of women's oppression was next said to be heterosexuality, or pornography, or violence. I guess there are four corners to my house.

Children and the revolution

Firestone didn't argue for twenty-four hour nurseries but much more radically against a society which excluded both mothers and children, against the institutions of both motherhood and childhood. *The Dialectic of Sex* is a brilliant book, funny, passionate and very much of its time - the era of anti-Vietnam protests, student uprisings, dropping out. It isn't really about sex or dialectics so much as it's about freedom. The sections on children and mothers are still widely remembered and referred to, although often in a distorted way (notoriously the suggestion that child-bearing could be taken over by technology). The most unusual feature of her analysis is the stress on children's rights - she has considerably more empathy with children than with mothers, although she doesn't distinguish between girls and boys, nor always even between mothers and fathers. Her views on the freedom of ghetto life - kids bringing themselves up - now seem startlingly naive, but at least she did recognise that children too were oppressed, and didn't simply equate their needs with those of adult women.

Firestone influenced my generation of radical feminists far more than I realised at the time. Since there wasn't a handy technological fix, there seemed only two choices. The first was not to have children at all, but the problem with that was if creating the feminist revolution meant not having children, it wasn't clear to some of us why a feminist revolution was in our interests. The second was to construct the complete alternative society within which to raise them. The realisation that we didn't quite have time for this before our own childbearing days ran out started hitting lots of feminists in the eighties - and then there was trouble.

I have been painfully re-reading articles and letters to get the flavour of those times. Most memorably Sheila Shulman's *Lesbian Feminists and the Great Baby Con* (*Spinster* 4) and Ruth Wallsgrove's *Thicker*

than water: mothering and childcare (*T&S* 7, 1985) spoke of betrayal - that is, the betrayal of a feminist ideal, or of other feminists, by women who decided to have children and have them *now* when we hadn't yet achieved the revolution and were going to have to raise them in the same old ways. These confrontations happened in real life, as well as on paper. Oddly enough in wanting to know why exactly mothers thought they had to have a different relationship to children from that which other adults could have, feminists kept on forgetting about breastfeeding - or remembered, but set limits so that it wouldn't interfere with a co-parent's equal rights and responsibilities. There were also the feminist voices claiming you really did have to choose - you not only couldn't be a revolutionary, you couldn't be a creative artist and a mother (see *Why Children?*). Alice Walker conceded you could write and be a mother if you only had one child. I should have known this: this article never stood a chance.

Exploring the whole issue of choice was important, and still is; I do not minimise the impact of negative attitudes towards women without children (which to some extent those of us with children have also experienced for part of our adult lives). Taken to extremes (remember *WIRES*' letters pages?) the wholesale querying of biological motherhood as a reasonable choice led to some distinctly anti-woman attitudes, covert or outright hostility towards mothers and children alike. It also served to push aside other questions about choice. Whether or not to have children and the right to choose is not as urgent a question to mothers who already have them, who generally have less money, less time and fewer choices than other women. (The income gap between men and women, for example, is really a gap between men, some women, and mothers).

Meanwhile socialist feminists, less troubled by the personal politics of it all, were analysing reproduction and childcare in relation to production and capitalism. Many were working within trades unions and local government to put childcare on

the agenda, trying for what was possible (and therefore not very radical). Liberal feminist mothers worried about conditioning and wrote about how you needed to set up a thoroughly illiberal regime in your own home, censoring children's TV, toys, books and access to the world outside. Radical feminism (see *T&S* back numbers) grew more interested in less mainstream issues: new reproductive technologies, child sexual abuse, lesbian custody cases. From a radical feminist perspective it was always clear that extreme cases grew out of a general situation, but also served to patrol the edges of the mainstream - they kept mothers in line, but also happened because mothers were kept in line. Yet the effect of concentrating on minority experience in this way can also be that mainstream experience ceases to be seen as problematic, and is reconstructed as normal. The effort of writing this for *T&S* is partly due to thinking that I could simply reflect on how privileged I am in relative terms; if I'm not writing about anything extreme, where's the problem?

Narrow debate

The point is not to blame individual women, let alone feminists - there is certainly no point at all in simply leaning on other women to take the personal responsibility for childcare which they may have deliberately decided against for themselves, nor do many of us want our children cared for on that basis. It is much more important to look at the politics of childcare and the politics of motherhood which we have collectively developed. Most mainstream current discussion is extremely narrow, focused on working mothers, childcare provision for the under-fives and a few allied concerns. Even there the gap between provision and need is still huge, and a right-wing government has been able to reject the progress signing a social contract with the rest of the EC would have implied.

It is not only twenty-four hour nurseries which have fallen off the agenda. We've stopped even discussing what we might want, and meanwhile the agenda could just as easily move backwards as forwards. The national press for the past year

has carried articles about working mothers who've given up the game as not worthwhile and gone home to be full-time mothers. Last year there was a skills shortage, this year there's recession. There's always a possibility of a backlash against working mothers, not only in this country, even though for most mothers there is never anything but an illusion of choice. In middle-class sectors of employment, things are supposedly getting easier for working mothers all the time. Meanwhile there are right-wing arguments that better maternity leave will make it too expensive for international capital to employ women here, forcing it to seek out cheaper labour elsewhere in the world where women don't have such costly rights.

A radical agenda for discussion ought to include more than how to get our children taken off our hands - which isn't always what we want. It has to include poverty (I've stopped thinking about Thatcher). It ought to include how mothers are constantly policed, how we have responsibility without social power, but also frighteningly real power. Who do we want to have caring for children when mothers aren't doing it - the state? Men? Other women? We need more honest discussion of choices or alternatives without having to pretend it's all fine, whether it's co-parenting, employing a nanny, using a nursery, being full-time mothers. We've fallen into a lot of traps in the past, such as setting up mothers who don't raise their children themselves, maybe working to support them in other countries, as models of how motherhood is constructed rather than natural without giving adequate thought to poverty and other pressures. In the same way, in countering ideas of what's natural let alone the more mystical nonsense, breastfeeding has been treated as discreditable to women or as inevitably oppressive rather than as an autonomous activity. Another trap has been that in wanting anything any mother does to be fine by us, it's easier if we forget about the children, as if mothers and children conveniently have identical interests. □

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OUR
MUMMIES!



Cath Jackson

Finding Feminism

In this article, Libby Brooks, a young Scottish woman, tells us about how she found feminism and what makes her angry.

This is how it began. The book was lying idly on my grandmother's table, while I languished half-listening to a conversation about rheumatism. It caught my eye. I picked it up and began to read. Impressed by the number of four-letter words in the first chapter, I asked if I could borrow it. The 'it' in question was *Praxis* by Fay Weldon, and by the time I had reached the final page, flash-lit under the covers that night, I knew that I wanted to be a feminist. I was so angry that night, I knew that *Praxis* wasted her time typing work for her boyfriend when she was capable of producing better herself. Why did she let him use her? How could she justify not wanting better when she knew that she deserved it? It reminded me too much of too many things. I would never allow a man to treat me like that (I thought).

My conversion was a giant leap for womankind (I thought), and a few extra steps to the back shelves of my local bookshop. Leaving behind the hapless world of 'teenage fiction', I discovered Walker, Angelou, Atwood and a whole host of other women who delighted me in calling us all sister. Any book with an iron on the front cover was fair game. From my reading I soon discovered that 'being a feminist' simply involved developing more fully the thoughts that had already crossed my mind. It was all so perfectly easy. I have since discovered that there is nothing simple about believing.

As the only daughter of a single female family, I did not have to search far for spurs to prick the sides of my enthusiasm. I was an open wound, and flinched with excitement every time injustice dragged his salty fingers across my exposed flesh. Suddenly, knowing was power, and I was thrilled by a sense of ability to act. I would not let this pass by. Idealistic, feminism represented an easy friend that I could learn about and grow with. But I lacked the social insight and working knowledge of life that caused my mother to warn me rather vaguely about "women's groups" and wrinkle her nose when I purchased a lesbian romance. And, of course, along came hard experience, trampling my roses and laughing in my face.

Looking back, I can admit that it was a stupid thing to do, but the strength of my budding beliefs overpowered any such niceties which might normally have imposed their unwelcome but necessary influence upon my conduct. And thus, I caused a stir when I wrote on my maths folder in red capital letters "Why have a good man when you can have a good woman?" People began to talk about me behind my back, and then to my face. "It's not that there's anything wrong with it," "It's just... well, you sound like... you might be... well, a...". "Lesbian" I wanted to shout at the top of my voice, but such was the nature of the suspicion that this was a word one

ought not to speak too loud. Who knows, it might even make you one. Luckily (in real world terms) nobody took my protestations seriously, nor was I important enough to merit more than a token pondering of my sexuality. I was given the benefit of the doubt, and let off with a life sentence of mirthful re-quotations of the said phrase.

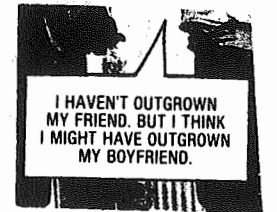
However, what had been awoken among us was an awareness, that sparked off a whole succession of damaging and often irrational suspicions. It was around that time, with homophobia running fever high, that Polly was silly enough to call someone pretty (and in the girls' changing rooms of all places). Polly had been one of my main critics throughout the folder affair. "It's all very well being dead mature and going-hey-everybody-fe-mi-ni-s-m, but..." She spent the rest of her sentence attempting to justify her ill-timed compliment and refuting all accusations of non-norm sexual preferences. Nobody wanted to be her partner in PE for a while. "Why have a good man when you can have a good woman?" I asked, and took her hand (but only because the teacher told me to). As for practical experience, there has never been a toe-dip like it.

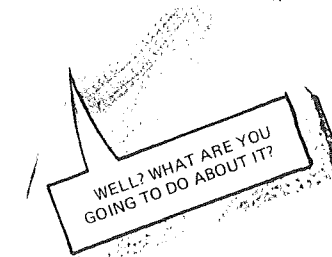
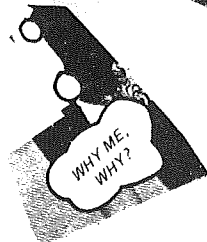
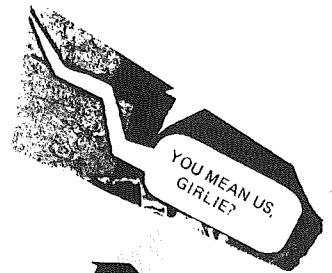
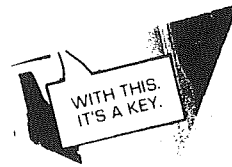
I had learnt that, little adults every one, my classmates were only too happy to subscribe to preconceptions of what ought to be. Differences mattered, and if once on the receiving end of this philosophy, you made damn sure that you followed the crowd the next time around. There was safety in numbers, and birds of a feather flocked together in glass houses, eager to gather up and throw out every free-rolling stone not nailed down. It was terrifying, it was pathetic, but it was how it worked. Washing instructions make the tumble dryer go round, and I now knew two labels by heart. Firstly, feminism is not to be

taken seriously (hence why one friend insists on thrusting *Viz's* Millie Tant under my nose every month). Secondly, your sexuality ought not to be doubted, and must under no circumstances stray from straight down the line. I have seen the sacrifices girls that I know have made proving this particular point. And they are spin dried into a crumpled heap over and over and over.

It felt like forever.

This was what I knew now, but in essence I had learnt very little. My toe was the only part of me that had been dipped, but it felt like forever, and in this way I drifted for several years, lulled into a pleasantly false sense of security. With passion that faded so easily could the affair last? Though it pains me to admit it, I lost interest and focus. It seemed that everyone with breasts could call themselves 'feminist' (just like most folk 'love animals', but some are more worried about their carpets than others). Instead of seeking to define myself in relation to my own gender, I began an unsuccessful quest to seek my identity in my relationship with men. My quest led me everywhere and nowhere. Up four flights of stairs and along an empty corridor to a room with a high window, for example. "Even if you screamed, no one would hear you." There was no threat in his voice, only the innate, assured complacency that comes of belonging to the half of the world that is taller, stronger and more aggressive than a course in self-defence could ever make me. Fortunately, I am blessed with feminine intuition and an unladylike cunning - they did me proud on this occasion and others, propelling me back along the corridor and down the four flights of stairs before he had even had time to screw the cork out of the wine bottle. I once spent four months of my whole life trying to look into another man's soul, until eventually I

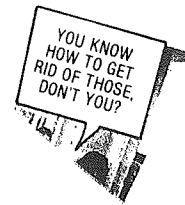
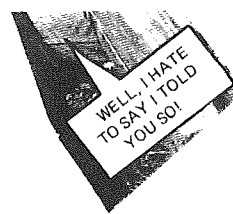




had to admit that it simply wasn't deep enough. While I hesitate to use the word shallow, I refuse to stand back for the rest of time in order to create an illusion of depth. Nor do I intend to live in fear of being afraid.

And so I found feminism again. What did she say? She told me that I was a woman, and how phenomenal it is to be a woman. I feel her warmth in all the little things of life. Plenty of them have nothing to do with men. I thought that I was striving for equality but I do not want to end up like men. I want the right to be myself, within myself. This demand is not a euphemism for the right to be different through sexuality, race or politics, which is also necessary. It refers to the soul inside me that deserves freedom for freedom's sake.

For I believe that every fighting step towards that freedom teaches me more, and I want and need to learn about myself in my own terms as a woman. Truthfully, I cannot envisage that any man will ever fulfil me. And I doubt that a man is capable of love as I see it. (I noticed that many of my male friends signed their Christmas cards "lots of love". Love? Darling, I hardly know you.) I believe that one factor in this difference of definitions is the fact that, despite his protestations and the fact that it is the Nineties, a man still finds it impossible to fully respect a woman who he has slept with. This is one of the reasons why female friendship is so vital, and so different, with the line between sex and affection not so harshly drawn. I have known the love of good women. I have grasped hands young and old, and felt the warmth of a body close to me conscious that the one thing on her mind involves no violation. I know the sweetness of a friendship that soars where I don't have to concentrate on being myself. The idea that the love and companionship of a man will define and bring to fruition one's identity as a woman



is so wrong, but is also, in spite of it all, alluring to many of us. I remember my minister chatting to a group of new communicants. "Your relationship with God" he said "is a bit like having a wife. Sometimes you just want to bash her over the head! Not that I'm suggesting that you bash your wives about! Ha, ha!" he smirked. A tisk and a titter rippled through our number. Most of them were women in their late twenties. Many of them were wives. All of them had given up. Mentally they pursed their lips, ruffled his hair and adjusted their hemlines. Boys will be boys! They had given up, given in and sold out. Or so it seemed. Something had got to them between walking down the aisle and the washing up.

Staying Angry

I know now that I will always be a little scared. I don't know if I will find relationships with men that will undo that fear. Perhaps the kind of love I want is impossible. Perhaps 'all men are rapists.' There are many ways to violate a woman. It has already happened to me more than once. I am only seventeen. I want to know when it will stop, and when I can stop feeling abused.

Last weekend, while browsing through a Sunday newspaper, I saw a letter from a man commenting on an article about date rape. "It must be a dreadful feeling", he wrote sympathetically. "But there can be few men who have not watched in horror the growth... of a violent social cancer called feminism which seeks female domination under the guise of offering solutions to real social problems". Until then, I had not realised how angry I am. And I am staying angry. Teach me more, and I will try to be all that is asked of me. One day, I hope that you will look on me, and say: "She fights with the weapons we gave her. She fights well." □

HEART OF THE BEAST

A recent survey in the US found that the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas sexual harassment case was rated the third most important event in 1991 - after the Gulf war and the fragmentation of the USSR. In these two pieces, reprinted from Ms, Anita Hill speaks of what she has learnt from her own and other women's experiences; Rebecca Walker writes of its meaning for young women, and the possibility of a Third Wave of feminist activism.

The response to my Senate Judiciary Committee testimony has been at once heart-warming and heart-wrenching. In learning that I am not alone in experiencing harassment, I am also learning that there are far too many women who have experienced a range of inexcusable and illegal activities - from sexist jokes to sexual assault - on the job.

My reaction has been to try to learn more. As an educator, I always begin to study an issue by examining the scientific data - the articles, the books, the studies. Perhaps the most compelling lesson is in the stories told by the women who have written to me. I have learned much; I am continuing to learn; I have yet ten times as much to explore. I want to share some of this with you.

"The Nature of the Beast" describes the existence of sexual harassment, which is alive and well. A harmful, dangerous thing that can confront a woman at any time.

What we know about harassment, sizing up the beast:

Sexual harassment is pervasive ...

1. It occurs today at an alarming rate. Statistics show that anywhere from 42 to 90% of women will experience some form of harassment during their employed lives.

At least one per cent experience sexual assault. But the statistics do not fully tell the story of the anguish of women who have been told in various ways on the first day of a job that sexual favors are expected. Or the story of women who were sexually assaulted by men with whom they continued to work.

2. It has been occurring for years. In letters to me, women tell of incidents that occurred 50 years ago when they were first entering the workplace, incidents they have been unable to speak of for that entire period.

3. Harassment crosses lines of race and class. In some ways, it is a creature that practices "equal opportunity" where women are concerned. In other ways it exhibits predictable prejudices and reflects stereotypical myths held by our society.

We know that harassment all too often goes unreported for a variety of reasons...

1. Unwillingness (for good reason) to deal with the expected consequences;
2. Self blame;
3. Threats or blackmail by co-workers or employers.

What it boils down to in many cases is a sense of powerlessness that we experience in the workplace, and our acceptance

of a certain level of inability to control our careers and professional destinies. This sense of powerlessness is particularly troubling when one observes the research that says individuals with graduate education experience more harassment than do persons with less than a high school diploma. The message: when you try to obtain power through education, the beast harassment responds by striking more often and more vehemently.

That harassment is treated like a woman's "dirty secret" is well known. We also know what happens when we "tell". We know that when harassment is reported the common reaction is disbelief or worse...

1. Women who "tell" lose their jobs. A typical response told of in the letters to me was: I not only lost my job for reporting harassment, but I was accused of stealing and charges were brought against me.

2. Women who "tell" become emotionally wasted. One writer noted that "it was fully eight months after the suit was conducted that I began to see myself as alive again".

3. Women who "tell" are not always supported by other women. Perhaps the most disheartening stories I have received are of mothers not believing daughters. In my kindest moments I believe that this reaction only represents attempts to distance ourselves from the pain of harassment experience. The internal response is: "It didn't happen to me. This couldn't happen to me. In order to believe that I am protected, I must believe that it didn't happen to her." The external response is: "What did you do to provoke that kind of behaviour?" Yet at the same time that I have been advised of hurtful and unproductive reactions, I have also heard stories of mothers and daughters sharing their experiences. In some cases the sharing allows for a closer bonding. In others a slight but cognizable mending of a previously damaged relationship occurs.

What we are learning about harassment requires recognizing this beast when we encounter it, and more. It requires looking the beast in the eye.

We are learning painfully that simply having laws against harassment on the books is not enough. The law, as it was con-



Judy Stevens

MS SMITH SAYS "YES, THAT WOULD BE LOVELY"

ceived, was to provide a shield of protection for us. Yet that shield is failing us: many fear reporting, others feel it would do no good. The result is that less than 5% of women victims file claims of harassment. Moreover, the law focuses on quid pro quo, but a recent New York Times article quoting psychologist Dr. Louise Fitzgerald says that this makes up considerably less than 5% of the cases. The law needs to be more responsive to the reality of our experiences.

As we are learning, enforcing the law alone won't terminate the problem. What we are seeking is equality of treatment in the workplace. Equality requires an expansion of our attitudes toward workers. Sexual harassment denies our treatment as equals and replaces it with treatment of women as objects of ego or power gratification

Yet research suggests two troublesome responses exhibited by workers and by courts. Both respond by...

1. Downplaying the seriousness of the behaviour (seeing it as normal sexual attraction between people) or commenting on the sensitivity of the victim.

2. Exaggerating the ease with which victims are expected to handle the behaviour. But my letters tell me that unwanted advances do not cease - and that the message was power, not genuine interest.

We are learning that many women are angry. The reasons for the anger are various and perhaps all too obvious...

1. We are angry because this awful thing called harassment exists in terribly harsh, ugly, demeaning, and even debilitating ways. Many believe it is criminal and should be punished as such. It is a form of violence against women as well as a form of economic coercion, and our experiences suggest that it won't just go away.

2 We are angry because for a brief moment we believed that if the law allowed for women to be hired in the workplace, and if we worked hard for our educations and on the job, equality would be achieved. We believed we would be respected as equals. Now we are realizing this is not true. We have been betrayed. The reality is that this powerful beast is used to per-

petuate a sense of inequality, to keep women in their place notwithstanding our increasing presence in the workplace.

What we have yet to explore about harassment is vast. It is what will enable us to slay the beast.

Research is helpful, appreciated, and I hope will be required reading for all legislators. Yet research has what I see as one shortcoming: it focuses on our reaction to harassment, not on the harasser. How we enlightened men who are currently in the workplace about behaviour that is beneath our (and their) dignity is the challenge of the future. Research shows that men tend to have a narrower definition of what constitutes harassment than do women. How do we expand their body of knowledge? How do we raise a generation of men who won't need to be reeducated as adults? We must explore these issues, and research efforts can assist us.

What are the broader effects of harassment on women and the world? Has sexual harassment left us unempowered? Has our potential in the workplace been greatly damaged by this beast? Has this form of economic coercion worked? If so, how do we begin to reverse its effects? We must begin to use what we know to move to the next step: what we will do about it.

How do we capture our rage and turn it into positive energy? Through the power of women working together, whether it be in the political arena, or in the context of a lawsuit, or in community service. This issue goes well beyond partisan politics. Making the workplace a safer, more productive place for ourselves and our daughters should be on the agenda for each of us. It is something we can do for ourselves. It is a tribute, as well, to our mothers - and indeed a contribution we can make to the entire population.

I wish that I could take each of you on the journey that I've been on during all these weeks since the hearing. I wish that every one of you could experience the heartache and the triumphs of each of those who have shared with me their experiences. I leave you with but a brief glimpse of what I've seen. I hope it is enough to encourage you to begin - or continue and persist with - your own exploration. And thank you. □

THE 3RD WAVE?



Judy Stevens
**ANY ONE COULD SEE THAT
 MS JONES WAS ASKING FOR IT.**

I am not one of the people who sat transfixed before the television, watching the Senate hearings. I had classes to go to, papers to write, and frankly, the whole thing was too painful. A black man grilled by a panel of white men about his sexual deviance. A black woman claiming harassment and being discredited by other women... I could not bring myself to watch that sensationalized assault of the human spirit.

To me, the hearings were not about determining whether or not Clarence Thomas did in fact harass Anita Hill. They were about checking and redefining the extent of women's credibility and power.

Can a woman's experience undermine a man's career? Can a woman's voice, a woman's sense of self-worth and injustice, challenge a structure predicated upon

the subjugation of our gender? Anita Hill's testimony threatened to do that and more. If Thomas had not been confirmed, every man in the United States would be at risk. For how many senators never told a sexist joke? How many men have not used their protected male privilege to thwart in some way the influence or ideas of a woman colleague, friend, or relative?

For those whose sense of power is so obviously connected to the health and vigour of the penis, it would have been a metaphoric castration. Of course this is too great a threat.

While some may laud the whole spectacle for the consciousness it raised around sexual harassment, its very real outcome is more informative. He was promoted. She was repudiated. Men were assured of the inviolability of their penis/power. Women were admonished to keep their experiences to themselves.

The backlash against U.S. women is real. As the misconception of equality between the sexes becomes more ubiquitous, so does the attempt to restrict the boundaries of women's personal and political power. Thomas' confirmation, the ultimate rally of support for the male paradigm of harassment, sends a clear message to women: "Shut up! Even if you speak, we will not listen."

I will not be silenced.

I acknowledge the fact that we live under siege. I intend to fight back. I have uncovered and unleashed more repressed anger than I thought possible. For the umpteenth time in my 22 years, I have been radicalized, politicized, shaken awake. I have come to voice again, and this time my voice is not conciliatory.

The night after Thomas' confirmation I ask the man I am intimate with what he thinks of the whole mess. His concern is primarily with Thomas' propensity to demolish civil rights and opportunities for people of color. I launch into a tirade. "When will progressive black men prioritize my rights and well-being?" When will they stop talking so damn much about 'the race' as if it revolved exclusively around them? He tells me I wear my emotions on my sleeve. I scream "I need to know, are you with me or are you going to

help them try to destroy me?"

A week later I am on a train to New York. A beautiful mother and daughter, both wearing green outfits, sit across the aisle from me. The little girl has tightly plaited braids. Her brown skin is glowing and smooth, her eyes bright as she chatters happily while looking out the window. Two men get on the train and sit directly behind me, shaking my seat as they thud into place. I bury myself in *The Sound and the Fury*. Loudly they begin to talk about women. "Man, I fucked that bitch all night and then I never called her again." "Man, there's lots of girlies over there, you know that ho live over there by Tyrone? Well, I snatched that shit up."

The mother moves closer to her now quiet daughter. Looking at her small back I can see that she is listening to the men. I am thinking of how I can transform the situation, of all the people in the car whose silence makes us complicit.

Another large man gets on the train. After exchanging loud greetings with the two men, he sits next to me. He tells them he is going to Philadelphia to visit his wife and child. I am suckered into thinking that he is different. Then, "Man, there's a ton of females in Philly, just waitin' for you to give 'em some." I turn my head and allow the fire in my eyes to burn into him. He takes up two seats and has hands with huge swollen knuckles. I imagine the gold rings on his fingers slamming into my face. He senses something. "What's your name, sweetheart?" The other men lean forward over the seat.

A torrent explodes: "I ain't your sweetheart, I ain't your bitch. I ain't your baby. How dare you have the nerve to sit up here and talk about women that way, and then try to speak to me." The woman/mother chimes in to the beat with claps of sisterhood. The men are momentarily stunned. Then the comeback: "Aw, bitch, don't play that woman shit over here 'cause that's bullshit." He slaps the back of one hand against the palm of the other. I refuse to back down. Words fly.

My instinct kicks in, telling me to get out. "Since I see you all are not going to move, I will." I move to the first car. I am so angry that thoughts of murder, of phys-

ically retaliating against them, of separatism, engulf me. I am almost out of body, just shy of being pure force. I am sick of the way women are negated, violated, devalued, ignored. I am livid, unrelenting in my anger at those who invade my space, who wish to take away my rights, who refuse to hear my voice. As the days pass, I push myself to figure out what it means to be a part of the Third Wave of feminism. I begin to realize that I owe it to myself, to my little sister on the train, to all the daughters yet to be born, to push beyond my rage and articulate an agenda. After battling with ideas of separatism and militancy, I connect with my own feelings of powerlessness. I realize that I must undergo a transformation if I am truly committed to women's empowerment. My involvement must reach beyond my own voice in discussion, beyond voting, beyond reading feminist theory. My anger and awareness must translate into tangible action.

I am ready to decide, as my mother decided before me, to devote much of my energy to the history, health and healing of women. Each of my choices will have to hold to my feminist standard of justice.

To be a feminist is to integrate an ideology of equality and female empowerment into the very fibre of my life. It is to search for personal clarity in the midst of the systemic destruction, to join in sisterhood with women when often we are divided, to understand power structures with the intention of challenging them.

While this may sound simple, it is exactly the kind of stand that many of my peers are unwilling to take. So I write this as a plea to all women, especially the women of my generation: Let Thomas' confirmation serve to remind you, as it did me, that the fight is far from over. Let this dismissal of a woman's experience move you to anger. Turn that outrage into political power. Do not vote for them unless they work for us. Do not have sex with them, do not break bread with them, do not nurture them if they don't prioritize our freedom to control our bodies and our lives.

I am not a postfeminism feminist. I am the Third Wave.

T&S has published several pieces on women's routes to, and understandings of, feminism in the late 80s and early 90s. Libby Brooks and Rebecca Walker, in this issue, both speak with a passion and urgency that too many have dismissed as 'history'. We welcome more pieces from women discovering feminism for themselves who want to add their voices to the 'Third Wave'.

Abuse in Lesbian Relationships



Continuing the discussion about women who abuse, Alison Hall explores some of the painful and political issues which arise when confronting abuse in lesbian relationships.

This article was written in response to that by Liz Kelly. 'Unspeakable acts: women who abuse' in the summer 1991 issue of T&S. As a woman who was in an abusive relationship for 3 years, I had a strong reaction to reading the article. Many of the thoughts I had were confused by the feelings evoked by what it is like to be abused, and what it is like to read about it, particularly because most of the time the subject is ignored. In the first part of this article I will talk specifically about my own experience in an abusive relationship. In the second part I will address some of the issues which I think are important. I am writing from my own experience, and in my discussion of the issues, the analysis I give is very much influenced by my own relationship, so there will inevitably be overlap between the sections.

For the three years I was in the relationship and for two years after it ended I was unable to label it as abusive. Neither of us were out, and the only way I felt I could explain, or cope with what was going on was by telling myself it wasn't a lesbian relationship. Thus, in my head it became an isolated experience, which made it hard to talk about, but not letting it be a relationship, somehow helped me to block out the emotions. At the end of three years in the

relationship I 'came out', and the easiest thing to do was acknowledge our lesbian relationship, but not the abuse. This gave me a kind of acceptance and shared experience which I had desperately needed for three years. I managed to idealise the relationship and 'forgot' about the abuse. I still could not get the two things together in my head - lesbian and abuse.

There were times in the relationship when I needed to talk, but because the abuse had resulted in isolation I couldn't. I was frightened to challenge the woman who abused me and scared of being seen as stupid for putting up with it if I told anyone else. The result of the fear was that when I most felt I needed to talk to someone, I couldn't walk out of the door, and there was no longer any need for her to exert physical control. I couldn't leave, even temporarily.

I began talking about the abuse about two years ago. Now I feel it is not until I actually read something, something that acknowledges that women can abuse that I realise how much I am affected by the absence and silence around the issues. It's like trying to work something out in a vacuum. Before I became aware that other women had similar experiences there was no place for it. I felt that nobody

had the same experience, so my own could only exist in my head. For me, reading the experience of other women helped to bring back the memories, explain the way I felt; without the explanations there was only a blank space.

Although Liz's article addressed the wider issues of abuse by women, here I am only dealing with some of the issues connected to lesbian relationships.

Liz Kelly discussed the importance of a feminist framework around women abusing, stating that if we don't have our own analysis, women abusing will be used in arguments against feminism, on the grounds that 'women do it too'. Open discussion of the issues around abuse in lesbian relationships is important, not only because it can provide explanations, where none exist for women who are abused, but also to enable other lesbians to offer support to women who are abused. It is hard for us as lesbians to discuss the issues openly, not only because it may be used to undermine feminist theories about abuse by men, but also because we have to look closely at ourselves, and our own relationships. Reluctance to address these difficult issues leaves us without a feminist framework for abuse in lesbian relationships, so the abused woman has to work out why the abuse happened. She has to put it into context herself, in addition to dealing with her own feelings in a very painful situation.

It is common for women that have been abused (by women or men) to blame themselves. During my relationship I never linked events together as a series of abusive actions with any pattern. I isolated each one and thought about how I could behave differently in the future to stop it happening again. While I was in my relationship I shut down emotionally. There were times when I felt desperate, but was too scared to acknowledge the feelings. I learned to cope by numbing myself and most of the time was unaware of what I was feeling. I do remember thinking 'this is how battered women must feel, only worse', but I was unable to make the link in my head to myself. I have read some experiences of women in heterosexual relationships and I think there are many similarities in the feel-

ings and reactions I had, but the fact that the feelings I read about were experienced by women abused by men makes it harder to relate them directly to me. The feelings may be the same, but the reason for the abuse is very different.'

Differences of power in lesbian relationships

I think it is important to have an analysis of why women abuse, not to make excuses or to forgive the behaviour, but because an understanding of the wider political context is important for abused women. It helps to remove the isolation. The understanding that there are reasons beyond yourself for the abuse, and the realisation that other women have had similar experiences allows you to break the silence surrounding your own. The isolation can never be reduced if there is no open discussion amongst lesbian feminists of the differences between the power imbalances of lesbian relationships and heterosexual relationships. We must acknowledge that power inequalities exist in our relationships, that are different to those between men and women. If lesbians as a group are not aware of the issues around power in lesbian relationships they cannot fully support women who have been abused, and may even blame them for 'allowing it to happen', reinforcing rather than challenging, the fears of abused women.

The origins of power imbalances in lesbian relationships are complex. There are inequalities that arise due to the different oppressions we experience from society, outside the relationship; differences in race or class for example. The way in which these manifest themselves within the balance of power in the relationship may vary, but it is important we are aware of the ways in which the oppressions we have experienced cause us to relate to women with different backgrounds, and from different social groups. In the same way that the balance of power in a relationship is not always apparent from the relative physical strength of the women involved, different experiences of oppression cannot always provide an obvious reason for the dynamics of power in a relationship. The woman who abused me was from a similar white, mid-



dle-class background to my own, there was no large age difference, yet there was a large abuse of power within the relationship.

Liz suggests that the way in which we construct our relationships is important, that this is based on our experience in heterosexual society, and uses the example of butch and femme. It is not surprising that women who reject their prescribed feminine role, look to male heterosexual models for an alternative. It seems inevitable this will affect relationships. We are not born knowing how to form equal, non-destructive relationships, so we borrow from heterosexual models, which is how most of us begin to learn about relationships. Having been restricted and controlled all our lives, the option seems to become, control or be controlled. Many women develop ways of dealing with the controls on their lives by controlling their own emotional reactions. These coping mechanisms may be developed as a response to a pattern of abuse in childhood, or in a former relationship, which was known and predictable. If abuse is a normal part of your life, even when the abuser is no longer physically present, this does not allow you to believe abuse won't happen again. It removes the predictability and the small amount of emotional control you had, so that in your mind everyone may be a potential abuser and is therefore a threat. This may lead to abuse in a lesbian relationship when a woman feels that the only way to remove the threat is to control the life of her lover.

The need to control

Power imbalances in relationships do not alone explain why some women choose to abuse. Inequalities exist, and create power differences in relationships, between all women. It is not inevitable that a power imbalance will become 'power-over' and result in abuse. I don't know why some

women choose to abuse. I think in my experience we both had fears about our relationship. I think my abuser felt that she needed to control situations in order to remove the fear and feel safe, thus she chose to control me. Homophobia is also a big issue, within as well as without lesbian relationships. Growing up in a lesbian-hating society, we are very aware that society does not legitimise our relationship. As an abused woman this silenced me further. For my abuser the fear of being labelled as a lesbian increased her need to control me, to stop me talking to anyone. The fact that this is abuse underpinned by fear rather than something which men take as their right, does not lessen the pain, but without explanations it can increase isolation.

The final point I'd like to discuss is our use of language. I feel in relationships between women there is a scale of abuse. In searching for new ways of having relationships we carry with us the 'protection' we needed in the past. This can lead to manipulative and destructive behaviour, where it is not easy to identify an abuser and abused. Nevertheless the behaviour is still hurtful and may lead to destructive and painful situations. I don't know when this becomes abusive but unless we begin to define the boundaries, there is the temptation to assume there is always two-way abuse in lesbian relationships. This once again may result in victim-blaming.

I have written this article because it has been important for me to be able to read about women who have survived abuse in lesbian relationships. I realise that there are many more issues which I find unexplained, and are difficult to confront in my mind. I think that by writing about the issues we can begin to bring them out into the open. It is also important to remember that writing is not accessible to all lesbians, and that practical support is also needed. □

This piece is a response to 'Unspeakable Acts: abuse by and between women' by Liz Kelly in T&S 21. We encourage our readers to enter into discussion and debate with articles either by letter or articles.



I would like to thank Rebecca Dale, Catherine Donovan and Judith Sim for their help and support in writing this article, and also Liz Kelly for her useful comments in reply to my original letter.

Still working against the grain

Southall Black Sisters has taken the lead on a number of critical campaigns around domestic violence and the threat to women's freedom from religious fundamentalism. Margot Farnham talks to Hannana Siddiqui and Pragna Patel about the group, its campaign and how its politics and aims have developed in recent years.

History

23 April 1979: mass protest against NF presence in Southall. Blair Peach killed by Special Patrol Group officer and hundreds arrested and injured

November 1979: Southall Black Sisters founded
1980: anti-virginity tests campaign. Asian woman Mrs. Dhillon and her children killed by husband in fire. SBS protests

1983: GLC funding to open Southall Black Women's Centre

May 1984: Krishna Sharma found hanged after repeated violence from husband. SBS demonstrates: 'They say it's suicide. We say it's murder'

October 1985: Balwant Kaur murdered by her husband in Brent Asian Women's Refuge. SBS campaigns for husband's conviction

1986: Gurdip Kaur murdered SBS joins campaign in Reading

July 1986: Network of Women national demonstration against violence against women

October 1986: Southall Black Women's Centre splits

March 1987: new centre opened

May/June 1987: Dominion Centre campaign on safety of women workers

9 March 1989: International Women's Day meeting on religious fundamentalism. Statement issued in support of Salman Rushdie.

6 May 1989: first meeting of Women Against Fundamentalism.

27 May 1989: WAF pickets orthodox Muslim demonstration calling for extension of blasphemy laws

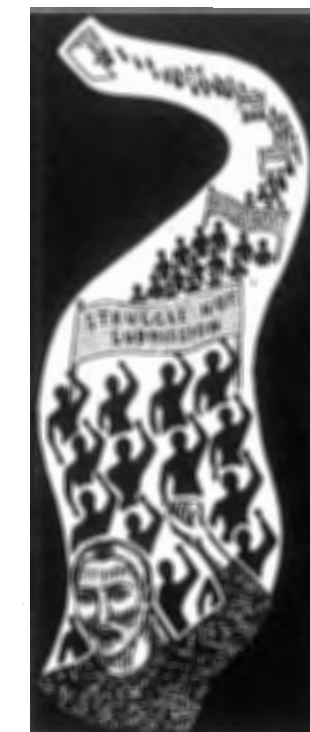
June 1990: Launch of Kiranjit Ahluwalia campaign

Southall Black Sisters was founded in 1979 by a group of young Asian and Afro-Caribbean women from the area. The group's initial emphasis was on looking at the way racism shaped Black women's lives. It was a time of great awakening of Black consciousness and resistance, inspired by Black movements in America. Pragna Patel joined the group in 1982, to help set up the off-shoot Southall Black Women's Centre; Hannana Siddiqui in 1986 after the centre split to form two separate groups.

Margot Farnham: Can you describe the political climate of the early 80s, when Southall Black Sisters began?

Pragna Patel: We are talking about a wide political context, particularly within Asian communities. There was debate generating around the notion of being Black and uniting with Afro-Caribbeans who are classified as Black in a way that Asians haven't been. There was already that politicisation taking place, so it wasn't so very difficult. I think things have become more difficult now, but then there were more attempts to bridge the divisions and come together on platforms expressing solidarity and support.

Hannana Siddiqui: There were other Black women's groups springing up at the same time as SBS, such as Birmingham Black Sisters. There was this growth of a movement among Black women themselves: Asian and Afro-Caribbean women coming together and trying very hard to create that unity at that time.



PP: Brixton Black Women's Group was another sister organisation and perhaps a trend setter. A lot of the actual theory was developed within that group although I think we have come a long way since. We have been continuously informed by the practical work we do and so question even some of the earlier SBS thinking. That's inevitable; it's a part of growth and development.

Now, the name SBS almost comes across as an anachronism but at the time it was not unusual. It's very significant too as a name: "Sisters" because there was an awakening among Black women, a beginning of questioning women's oppression within the community and developing the notion of sisterhood, and "Black" was significant because there was that politicisation on race taking place.

At that time the name was common and one which most women - most Black people too who were beginning to question the society and the way in which it shaped their lives, would not have raised eyebrows at. Now I think a lot of people would question us more and say that it is out-dated and needs to be changed.

We have kept it because of that early SBS legacy and history. The politics have changed with the changing membership of the group. I'd like to think we have added to and changed the debates, but in a positive way so, despite the changes and different make-up of the group, there is a continuity.

MF: *The campaign around virginity testing in 1980 was one of SBS's first major campaigns. What was your involvement?*

PP: A lot of the group's early efforts and energies were galvanised around looking at unionisation problems for Black women in and around Southall, in factories, in hospitals, at Heathrow airport; but also around the immigration and nationality laws and the ways in which racist laws were also sexist in definitions and implementation.

HS: SBS were part of the picket at Heathrow airport. It was a joint picket with men. What they were emphasising was the racist stereotyping of Asian women as passive submissive women, entirely dependent on their families.

I think these early campaigns were more shaped by women's experiences of racism than feminist thinking. Although there was some discussion around sexuality and women's role within the family.

PP: Everyone was just outraged by the racism shown by the state. But I don't think that anyone tried to articulate the ways in which women's bodies were being violated - to raise the issue as a feminist issue as well as showing up racism or articulate more clearly the ways in which the state can oppress by using racist and sexist practices at the same time. It wasn't articulated clearly because it wasn't the kind of issue established Black organisations, largely male dominated, would have worried about.

MF: *Tell me about when the first centre was opened.*

PP: That was in 1982. I was one of the two development workers who set up the centre. There had been major debate from the beginning: was it better to try to provide some kind of service for women, which would have put us in contact with the daily experiences of women, or would providing a service divert energy from the campaigning?

Then there was a major discussion with SBS as to whether to have a centre or not and what funding would do to the group as a whole. We were meeting in people's homes, mainly campaigning and attempting to bring out journals now and again.

Within the group there were some women strongly in favour of providing services, talking about the desperate need to have some kind of independent voluntary organisation dealing with women's problems and women's needs in a way that social services were failing to do. When I joined SBS, an application had already been made to the GLC to set up a centre.

Unfortunately, at that time a lot of the founding members went to do other things. Some went on to work in the statutory social services, some actually went on to be more involved in setting up the Asian women's centre in Brent. So myself and other new members formed the new SBS, and began to re-shape the politics according to our own experiences.



Southall Black Sisters picket Ealing Town Hall, 1989.

Mandana Hendessi describes the early days of SBS 1980-1982

The early organisers felt that yes, they were very angry about what was happening to Black people - increasing racial attacks, institutionalised racism and increasing fascist activity particularly in Ealing - yet there was no mention of women's oppression. Women felt they ought to come together and make their voice heard. The basis they came together on was Afro-Asian unity. This is why the term Black was taken to refer to the group. The environment was political and dynamic. Women who were politicised in that context were very much aware of their role and wanted to express that.

We didn't have a base. We had to use other people's offices. That was a problem. Eventually we met at my home in Southall. In the Chix factory campaign, SBS went on the picket line and talked about Black women's oppression with them. The other thing that brought us closer to women was our advice sessions in Southall Rights on all aspects of women's lives. We had a legal adviser and SBS members who would follow up on cases. That was a way of getting to introduce ourselves to women.

Our main emphasis was on campaigning. We were out a lot. We had debates as well. I remember a debate on sexuality. It was the first time that I was introduced to the whole notion of political lesbianism.

We talked about aspects of our life but not in terms of raising individual consciousness but a collective consciousness. Consciousness raising groups that existed at the time concentrated on individual consciousness. There was such a diversity in our backgrounds - a couple of women were going through arranged marriages whereas I was going through a divorce and was about to become a single mother living on a council estate and others were without any attachment. The point was not about correcting each other's lives in a moral sense which was prevalent in other women's groups. That was why the group was quite appealing to a number of women.

I was at a crisis point in terms of my personal life when I joined SBS. In terms of my political life, I was exploring different political views and activities. Of course, all on the left. SBS was the first political organisation I joined. It was important because of that and secondly, from the point of view of identity of someone who was an immigrant whose identity was constantly undermined in a hostile society. SBS provided the back-up for me to work it all out for myself.

This is an excerpt from a longer article in "Against the Grain": Southall Black Sisters 1979-1989," available from: SBS 52 Norwood Road Southall Middx. 081-571 9595
£7.50 institutions
£4.50 individuals
£1.50 Unwaged.

The Centre

MF: What were the aims of the centre?

PP: Politically the idea was to keep Southall Black Sisters as a campaigning group separate from the Southall Black Women's Centre. There was lots of funding. It really was the golden era because money just flowed in. The aim was to provide a base for women, to provide a service for women, to be autonomous - and, hopefully, to build up experience and knowledge and information about Black women from which to really start campaigning.

At that time we didn't really know what we would concentrate on. The aim was just to provide the first resource centre for Black women, serviced by black women.

Although we tried to separate the identity of SBS from the women's centre, of course the same women were involved and so inevitably the work we did was going to interact and that meant we had a particular identity within the community. In those days there was a lot of hostility from men within the community both from the Left and the Right. The conservative elements within the community were very hostile and even the Left, the Southall Youth Movement - a very male, established organisation - regarded SBS as a very threatening group. They attached labels to us using all the common stereotypes applicable to women organising in this way: a group of loose women, very available whores, lesbians.

The dilemma was, did we think women would use the centre if we projected a politicised and radical image of ourselves? Would women be allowed to come? Or should we present the centre as a very 'safe' place for women, doing all the kinds of things that would legitimise our existence in the eyes of the community like sewing classes, cultural activities? Should we not talk about providing real alternatives for women and engaging in discussions around contraception, abortion, those kinds of things?

That dilemma was not entirely theoretically resolved. However it was resolved practically because we got so

many referrals of women facing domestic violence, initially from statutory organisations like social services, that we found ourselves doing a lot more advice and case work than any other activity.

MF: The group split again in 1986. Why was that?

PP: It was really the continuing political debate about our campaigning role. Some of us who had been there longer felt that campaigning was absolutely crucial and that however much our energies were taken up with servicing, it was necessary to maintain campaigning, to keep it in the forefront of whatever we were doing. Other people felt it was more important to concentrate on activities.

Then there were questions about what kind of activities. Some of the women felt that if women were demanding sewing classes or hairdressing classes or cultural activities, then we should be providing them. By then - we're talking about '84, '85, '86 - there were other women's centres that weren't political in the way that we were, and they were setting up activities like sewing, hair-dressing etc. We felt that as a women's centre we should be offering an alternative and developing a theory about Black women's position in society and within our communities, and showing women alternatives and not reinforcing women's traditional roles.



Prioritising campaigning

MF: How did the split affect SBS's work?

PP: We didn't want to be seen as fighting over resources; we wanted just to get on with whatever priorities each group felt it had to rebuild. So we decided to leave all the resources and everything behind and just set up another centre. But by then resources were harder to come by. It meant that for the next few years we struggled even harder, really hard. But I think a lot of the recent successes have been due to that: having to establish our credibility and identity all over again and get on with what we wanted to do.

But we were also released; we weren't fighting each other internally and that released us to get on with what we thought were our priorities. That is also why some of our campaigns have been successful, because we have not had internal wranglings about campaigning.

HS: That was when I joined, just after the dispute. For me that was what was very good about SBS, being able to get involved in an organisation that wasn't going through internal disputes but also with whom I shared a similar political perspective. I was a socialist and also a feminist and that was the perspective of the group.

The group was trying to do two things at the same time. One was working with women and helping them on a practical level; and secondly, to work with them in order to increase political awareness and encourage them to take up their own struggles.

This meant making campaigning central to all SBS work in a way that other women's groups were failing to do. Nobody else was working with women so that they would get involved in campaigning and lead those campaigns themselves. It was also important that the aim of campaigning was not lost, particularly for a funded organisation such as ours. Funded organisations can and do get bogged down into providing a service rather than working at a political campaigning level for fear of losing funding. SBS wasn't afraid of that because they had a political perspective which was much wider and



much more long-term and wasn't pre-occupied with people's personal interests about their jobs.

MF: You were involved in the campaign around the safety of women workers at the Dominion Community Centre in Southall.

PP: That was soon after we formed the new group. A woman worker there had been attacked by some male users. We came together with other community groups to demand safety for women as workers and users of the centre. Initially the campaign took the form of sit-ins and occupations. It was a campaign involving men and women.

That was one of the first problems we began to have with Left groups in this area and with Southall Monitoring Group in particular, who we had worked very closely with on a number of campaigns in the early 80s around issues of racism and they were quite supportive of us - men as well as women.

But then we realised we were being undermined as women. The Dominion Centre was perhaps the first major clash. It was the SMG which took up the case of the woman who had been assaulted and raised the question of safety, but we felt the campaign should have been led by women. Our role within the campaign was undermined, even though most of the work was put in by us.

Domestic violence

MF: Can we talk now more specifically about SBS's involvement in domestic violence, starting with the campaign around the murder of Balwant Kaur in the Brent Asian Women's Refuge in 1985? In what way were you involved?

PP: It was agonising for all of us. We felt personally responsible in a way. But it also really made us angry because it raised the whole question of safety of refugees. We

were forced to challenge again whether women were really safe in these places that are so lacking in resources and suffer from poor staffing levels. There was only one worker at the refuge and she was off sick when the murder took place.

We had already begun campaigning around women and domestic violence. Our latest campaign, the Kiranjit Ahluwalia campaign, is an extension of that domestic violence issue and yet another aspect of that same debate. So when Balwant Kaur was murdered we had to look again at the whole question of the safety of refuges, of the policing of domestic violence - because the police had been warned she was in danger and had failed to provide any protection - and the whole question of what was going to happen to her husband. We were very concerned that the law would treat him leniently and that at the final trial he would get off with the lesser conviction of manslaughter. So we picketed the court hearings and were very concerned to keep up the pressure on the law and the criminal justice system.

But we felt we had to distinguish ourselves from the 'hang 'em and flog 'em lobby'. We didn't want to be associated with that element which believes in right wing notions of punishment. Our point was that we didn't want him free because of the consequences for his three daughters.

MF: How does SBS feel about the police and working with them?

HS: We have a lot of problems with the police, especially in Southall. In some areas the police have set up Domestic Violence Units (DVU) and in many cases they can be very good and very useful. The female police officers who run them can be quite committed in helping women deal with domestic violence. But unfortunately in Southall we don't have such a unit.

Sometimes you find a very useful and helpful police officer but most of the time you don't, and you know you have a huge battle on your hands. You know that women, without you being there, already have a big problem getting the police to take their complaints and threats of violence seriously. But when we get involved the police don't like it; they think we are interfering and they don't like the fact that

we question their attitudes, procedures and policies on domestic violence. We often have to threaten them with formal complaints to get any action. There have been many times when we have submitted complaints about their failure to take action on domestic violence.

Even DVU s have different policies and guidelines. For example there's the case of the Asian woman who was killed by her husband at the DVU at Stoke Newington police station. This was a meeting that had been facilitated partly by the police and partly by the refuge she was staying at. Her death led us to question the role of DVUs and of police officers as facilitators and mediators in domestic violence cases. We were saying they don't have a role in mediating meetings between husband and wife because that's reverting back to the old philosophy of reconciliation between partners. And that's worrying because if Stoke Newington police station has that policy, what are the policies of other DVUs?

MF: How do the police in general deal with domestic violence in Asian families?

HS: Either in their traditional fashion of not taking domestic violence seriously, or they adopt what they consider to be an 'anti-racist', multi-cultural approach. This means that they recognise that Asian women have other cultural ways of dealing with domestic violence and these differences must be 'respected'. Either way the result is inaction or incompetent action. Of course they can also be racist. Occasionally you get an Asian police officer but they're no better. Often they're worse because they put pressure on women to stay with their husbands. And also there are problems of interpretation. The police have consistently failed to provide interpretation for women who can't speak English. The police interpreters who are available tend to be Asian men who have very traditional ideas about women. They are not helpful to women who are trying to escape domestic violence. They try to advise Asian women to respect their traditions and family honour! We have had a few battles with police interpreters about this.

PP: We have just completed a survey of policing of domestic violence in this area. One of our aims was to look at whether all these Force Orders and Home Office circulars around domestic violence have any effect in practice. Another very important aim is to bridge the gap between a 'Black' analysis of policing and a 'feminist' analysis, neither of which has been adequate in actually understanding the policing of domestic violence and the experiences of Black women.

There is a tendency when women look at policing, first of all (understandably), to look at issues which have been neglected by mainstream analyses of policing, such as rape, sexual harassment and domestic violence. But then those debates are not placed in the wider context of what is happening with policing in this country. Left police analyses have rarely attempted to take up issues to do with women and policing.

Bringing feminist and anti-racist analyses together and reshaping critiques in the light of our experiences is important for us and I think that is true of all our work in SBS.

MF: What about community policing? Have you any thoughts on models that might work for this area?

PP: It depends on what you mean by community policing. If you mean can communities look after themselves, that could not work. How can the community look after itself unless there's equality within the family, between young people and old people and between women and men? And equality in deciding how the resources are to be distributed within our communities; how we are represented outside our communities, by whom, and in whose interest.

We question the notion that the Black community is homogeneous because it suggests that there are no internal divisions, that there are no gender divisions, class divisions, etc. But our community is rife with class, gender, caste, religious divisions and until all that disappears I don't know how we can talk about the community protecting itself.

HS: Parts of the community have taken it upon themselves to police the community:

men, either as networks or in more organised groups like the youth gangs, who try to police women's behaviour or get them back into the family if they leave. They say they are policing their own communities and don't need outside police intervention, which works against their interests. This presents a problem because we know we can't rely on the community to help with domestic violence and to help girls to escape pressures like arranged marriages. We have to turn to outside agencies like the police, social services, to help us to help women to make their own choices which includes escaping oppressive situations if they wish.

PP: A few years ago relying on the police in absence of other forms of protecting women from domestic violence was causing us all kinds of problems within the community. Critics from the Left said we were turning to those state institutions for protection, when they are only too ready to harass Black families; that we were betraying the Black community and the anti-racist cause by inviting state institutions involved in that harassment to protect women within the community.

But the tension has slightly eased in recent years because domestic violence has been accepted - even by the more conservative elements of the community - whereas before it was ignored. But having said that, it doesn't mean they are doing much about it.



Network of Women

MF: Tell me about the Network of Women campaign.

PP: That was in 1986. We felt it was time for women to be out there marching. We felt that since the Corrie Bill there wasn't that kind of presence of women on the streets on an issue like violence against women. There was a need to make a visible protest about Balwant Kaur's death.

We felt that we needed to do something on a wider scale to keep up the pressure to get violence against women recognised as a major public issue. We decided to have a major national demonstration. But we very quickly became aware that there were very few socialist feminists prepared to take this on. One of the strengths of radical feminism is its primary focus on the whole issue of violence against women and the analysis of power relations within the home. So when we began to organise we found we were very much in the midst of radical feminists and there were very, very few socialist feminist voices to be heard.

But we made mistakes in formulating an agenda on violence against women. Instead of trying to focus around perhaps domestic violence, as highlighted by Balwant Kaur's death, we tried to include every kind of violence - a whole mish-mash of issues from strip searches, state violence, to individual violence, to street violence, to the exploitation of the Third World by the First World and its impact on women in the Third world. All the ways in which women were dominated by men and the state. The politics were never thought through properly.

Nevertheless it was an important demonstration because it was an attempt to mobilise women. The strength of radical feminism was shown in the way we mobilised vast numbers of women. That radical current of feminism was the most visible, most vociferous: and the strongest.

But the vision was short-sighted. It was meant to be some kind of beginning for a national network of women working around violence against women. However, it took up so much of our energies and time that when it was all over we all heaved a sigh of relief and said "Thank god, that's over". The march was the beginning and the end of that initiative.

MF: The Black feminist network existed and was strong at that point. Why do you think the march didn't lead on to a wider campaign by Black women?

PP: I think the strength of Asian women organising in this country is mainly around refugees and domestic violence but that is not true for Afro-Caribbean women. I also

think that SBS's politics are not mainstream Black politics, which still very much focus on racism and race relations.

A lot of Black people within the communities think that taking up these issues on women, exposing the community warts and all, is harming the community and the cause of anti-racism.

Having said that, we have been around campaigning for so long that we no longer get intimidated by that kind of accusation. We have confidence; we have strong and very concrete links with women. It is their experiences which form our political thinking and agenda.

The Network of Women demonstration also posed another dilemma, which has always been prevalent in our work whenever a campaign has taken on a national dimension. We are so caught up organising nationally, that it is often at the expense of our local campaigns. On the other hand if we concentrate only locally, we are not able to make wider links and we remain parochial in our perspective.

HS: We face this dilemma with the Kiranjit Ahluwalia campaign. That has taken off as a national campaign and there is a lot of interest in it, but it is such a mass campaign and requires so much time that inevitably it is at the expense of our local campaign work at the moment. That dilemma is also there with our involvement with Women Against Fundamentalism, because at one point that had a huge momentum of its own.

Women Against Fundamentalism

MF: Tell me about Women Against Fundamentalism and SBS's involvement.

HS: Women Against Fundamentalism, was set up after a meeting that SBS and Southall Labour Party women's section had in Southall for International Women's Day in March 1989. The title of that meeting was "The resurgence of religion: what price are women paying?" and the aim was to draw women together from different religious backgrounds to discuss religious fundamentalism in all those religions and how that affects women's lives. We had speakers from Ireland, Pakistan, Iran, India. And obviously we discussed the situation in this country which was just in the

wake of the Rushdie affair. There was a lot of interest. About 200 women turned up from the locality and outside of London.

PP: We had decided to organise the meeting not because of the Rushdie affair, but because we were beginning to see the effects of fundamentalism on women in countries like Pakistan and Iran. Then the whole Rushdie thing blew up and it made the discussions around fundamentalism urgent and vital.

HS: Two things came out of the meeting. One was a statement issued by SBS and Southall Labour Party women's section in support of Rushdie. We were against banning the book or extending the blasphemy laws, which we felt the state would use to create greater religious censorship. We felt that we had something in common with Rushdie: his right to dissent, his right to express his views without being censored or intimidated. As SBS we had been engaged in that process within our communities for a long time and we wanted to be able to preserve that right to dissent in the same way.

That was at a time when not many people had issued statements in support of him except for members of the literary establishment. Certainly not Black communities and certainly not women's organisations.

The other thing that came out of the meeting was to set up Women Against Fundamentalism, to link up with women from other religious backgrounds, other organisations and with individuals who were very isolated and trying to struggle against religious fundamentalism in their own communities and needed support to do so. The idea was to build networks in this country but also to provide support for women in other countries who were engaged in similar struggles.

WAF took off. It had women from all kinds of religious backgrounds: Irish women, Jewish women, Iranian women in exile, SBS. One of the first things we did was picket the mass anti-Rushdie demonstration which took place in London on 27th May 1989. We decided we wanted to do that after a long and difficult debate. Besides the question of security, there was



the question of how it would be seen because at that point there had been two sides to the debate: The racists who had reacted to the Muslims who were offended by the book, and the fundamentalists.

We felt the way they had reacted and the kinds of demands they were making were very reactionary and we didn't want to be associated with either side. We felt it was possible to have a third view and a third way, which wasn't being expressed at that time: that you didn't have to be a racist; you didn't have to be a fundamentalist; that the fundamentalist demands were very reactionary; that these demands were being made by fundamentalist leaders without our communities and that they weren't necessarily the demands of the community.

There is always this tendency to homogenise the Muslim community and to say that women want the same thing. We were saying that community leaders weren't necessarily speaking for us; that we wanted other things and we wanted to give a public voice to that. Because the fundamentalists were not only asking for things like banning the book and extending the blasphemy laws. The hidden agenda was very much about the control of women's lives.

One of the things they are demanding is the setting up of separate religious

schools, particularly for girls. Muslim fundamentalists have been making this demand for some time, but not with the same confidence until the Rushdie Affair exploded.

The issue of separate religious schools has divided the Left. Many have taken on board the argument that to deny Muslims separate schools is tantamount to racism. Whilst Muslim fundamentalists and their followers have used the 'race card' to demand separate schools. We believe that these schools are not really about addressing racism. We recognise that racism exists in state schools and the urgent need to address this, but organising around religion is, for us, not the way forward.

We are also very much against the idea of separate religious schools for girls. Fundamentalists play on the fear of some Muslim parents, though not all, that they are losing control over their girls, that girls are becoming 'westernised'. The idea is to segregate girls in separate religious schools, away from the boys and away from other influences. The aim is to indoctrinate them at a very young age, to control them, and to direct them towards becoming good wives and mothers. We feel that this is a very dangerous development, which threatens the gains which we as a women's group have been fighting for a very long time.

The Left has been very weak in taking a stance on this issue. In Southall we had a big battle with the Left when we were trying to prevent two local secondary schools from opting out under the government's Education Reform Act provisions. Some of the Sikh parent governors of these schools attempted to turn them into Sikh-only schools. Everybody acknowledged privately that one of the main objectives of the Sikh parent governors was actually to turn them into Sikh-only schools and that the hidden agenda was to 'control' the girls. The Left acknowledged that privately but they didn't want to do it publicly. They were frightened of alienating support from the parents, who they thought would refuse to opt out on education grounds but not on religious or gender issues.

In many ways we were ahead compared to some of these other organisations

involved in the campaign to prevent opting out because we had been thinking about and analysing the issue for much longer, because of WAF. They had been failing to look at the trends that were taking place and failing to see that Southall was actually quite a secular community and that you could address these issues and you would find a lot of support by doing so.

I think they underestimated the parents very much. When we talked to parents on the doorstep and raised these issues, it was very clear that they were very much against the idea of setting up Sikh-only schools; they didn't want that kind of segregation. And that happened with parents we talked to from various religions: Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus. There is first of all a reluctance to have denominational schools and also people didn't want their daughters to lose out on educational opportunities; they didn't want to go backwards and a lot of them were worried that it was returning to medieval ideas about women in education.

PP: The fundamentalists know that the gender issue is the point where they can connect with parents, because there is a real fear amongst a lot of parents that girls are going astray and becoming 'westernised'. And that kind of thinking has reverberations well outside of even fundamentalist circles because it reinforces very conservative values and traditions without you necessarily having to be fundamentalist.

We were saying we couldn't pretend gender issues didn't exist. The threat isn't just in the era of indoctrinating girls from a very young age. There is also a growing movement by religious leaders to control the kind of institutions that we have set up, like the Muslim women's refuge in Hackney, and make them into institutions which are more about containing women rather than helping them to escape violence.

We are still battling, but it is easier for us: we are operating in a community in Southall which has had a long history of radicalisation. In other communities, particularly in the north of England and east London where women don't have our history of organising in alternative and

autonomous ways, it's a very different scenario for women.

You hear lots of horror stories about organised networks of men who make it their job to look for Asian women who have run away. They find out the addresses and go from refuge to refuge looking for these women. It is almost underground. But we never heard of the existence of such groups in the past. There has been the resurgence of fundamentalist belief within certain communities, but definitely alongside that a consolidation of conservative and traditional values.

This whole unleashing of very reactionary thinking has set Black progressive movements, not just for us as women who have been trying to organise within Black communities but even for the anti-racist struggle. Identities are beginning to break down, from Black identity to religious identity. This is not about uniting and recognising common oppression but about returning to exclusive identities which don't provide channels to bridge between different peoples and different thinkings.

MF: How has your involvement with WAF affected your work locally in Southall?

PP: Ironically it has actually united us with some of the people who have been against us for so long like the Indian Workers' Association. This is one of the most important indigenous community organisations in this area, claiming to negotiate on behalf of the Southall community. It is a patriarchal organisation, entirely dominated by men and it has never paid any kind of attention to women's needs except recently some lip service.

But the leader of that organisation is very much in favour of the stance we took, because he has himself had battles and threats from fundamentalist Sikhs because he is secular in his outlook as the IWA has been generally.

Kiranjit Aluwahlia Campaign

MF: Can we go on to talk about your more recent activities around the Kiranjit Aluwahlia and the Justice for Women campaigns?

HS: We initially got involved when Crawley Women's Aid and Crawley Women's Centre approached us about Kiranjit Ahluwalia, who at that time was on remand awaiting trial for having killed her husband. Although they did work around domestic violence they felt that because we have a history of campaigning and of working very closely with Asian women, we would be useful in helping them organise the campaign and helping Kiranjit.

We did attempt to talk to her solicitors before her trial in December 1989 but they were reluctant to do any work with us or to discuss any part of the case or even to get any information from us on domestic violence. I think there was a failure on the part of the defence to build up a case around domestic violence, to show how difficult it is, what the pressures were on Kiranjit, what prevented her from leaving that violent situation, and in particular how it affects Asian women.

After her conviction we obviously felt we needed to do something. We then launched the campaign, which had two aims: one was to work with new solicitors on the legal side and try to put together an appeal against her conviction; and second, to raise the issue of domestic violence and women who kill; why they kill and how the law fails to reflect their experiences and what we must do to change the law and change attitudes around that.

MF: You had been working for over a year on the campaign. Why do you think it took off so strongly over the Sara Thornton case?

PP: I think there's a lot of reasons for that. Part of it is that a lot of the ground work had been done over the year on Kiranjit's case, so we were prepared for the press in terms of the arguments we used by the time the Thornton case came up. Also maybe it had something to do with the fact that the public has become now sufficiently informed about domestic violence, after years and years of campaigning by women. The public were wanting to express an opinion and maybe the two just coincided: the campaigning and increased public awareness of the issue. And then Sara Thornton's case came along which raised those same issues.

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MF: You are in contact with Kiranjit. How is she coping?

PP: She has been very, very depressed. It's been very difficult to try to get her to think of a future for herself. I think her biggest worry, her only real worry, is for her children and that is what depresses her: being separated from them, seeing them only twice a month for one hour on each occasion is really agonising for her; seeing the effects of her predicament, the death of her husband, and not being able to deal with that. All these are playing on her mind.

HS: It's very difficult because she feels she is totally helpless as she is locked away and can't develop a proper relationship with them and try to begin a healing process. Her children are being torn apart by the acrimony that the in-laws still feel, the way they try to breed a hatred in the children

against their own mother, although they very much love her and are very, very close. It's the source of her depression and her anguish, but also of her motivation to fight.

PP: She and her children are going to need so much long-term support. The campaigning has also put us in touch with other women in similar situations who have been treated slightly better in court and are out on suspended sentences. They have told us that they will never forget. They say "However much you try to live a normal life, you can't. You live on a day-to-day basis, you do the best you can but you are never the same person."

The whole thing about Kiranjit has raised a lot of questions for us, because up until now our campaigns around domestic violence have been about women at the receiving end. This is the first campaign about women who take matters in their own hands. That has made us question again what women are about, what makes us angry, what made Kiranjit angry, why she chose to manifest it in that way; whether it is justified, how the law fails to take account of women's anger and how difficult it is to write into the law even now the notion that women have a right to be angry.

If she is released it may be a victory in that she will be re-united with her children; it may be a victory for the campaign whether it sets a precedent or not, but it's certainly not going to be the end of the story. What happens afterwards to women like Kiranjit is just as important as what happens now.

In terms of the wider campaign, there are disagreements as well about what we want to see changed. Ideally there is so very much, but we are also constrained by the political climate, the present government, from making demands for everything that we would like to see on the statutes for women.

There are lots of questions, about strategy, about women and violence, about what prisons do to women. Although we have done all this work about violence, Kiranjit's case has made us, as feminists, confront these issues afresh, with a new perspective on everything.

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