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Trouble & Strife is produced by Lisa Adkins, Marian Foley, Mandana Henessi, Cath Jackson, Liz Kelly, Sophie Laws, Diana Leonard, Joan Scanlon and Sara Scott; with help from Paddy Tanton, Kate Cook, Emma Kelly, and Caroline Forbes.

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Trouble & Strife

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Letters

Not everybody

Dear T&S,

EVERYBODY WANTS TO SHAG KD LANG

No, we are not pleased with the result. Wasn't it teeniest bit unsisterly to have changed the title without any consultation with us? If our title didn't fit your 'house style' (didn't this used to be called The Line?) you could have shared this with us earlier, which you didn't.

Why such a shit title anyway... and one that contradicts and makes meaningless what followed.

What's more, we could've given you loads of better alternatives if you'd asked which you didn't, but even if you had we'd have probably said no.

What was wrong with the title anyway, isn't it true? (didn't any of you go and see her last week?) But of course you don't have those thoughts do you and if you did you'd replace them with something more wholesome and naff like the title you gave our article.

Yours etc.

Rosa Ainley & Sarah Cooper
London E8

nb we're assuming this letter will be published - it was written for the letters page. And no editing.

Eds: Trouble and Strife's editorial policy is that while we ensure that authors agree the final text of their article, we decide on title, illustrations and the introduction.

After Bea

* Dear T&S,
Bea Campbell ("After Margaret", T&S 22) seems to have spent the last ten years in a different country to me. Somehow, Britain after ten years of Thatcherism (and still more of Tory rule) represents to Bea Campbell a new post-feminist, post-socialist fairyland; a free market, pluralist democracy in which individuals make free choices, 'reconstruct' their social context

constantly and exchange power at will. To argue that the free-market system is not conservative and patriarchal is ridiculous.

Firstly, the free-market embodies the very principles on which patriarchy is based: competition, aggression and inequality. It is about making profit; it gives rise to an economic class system, leads to mass unemployment and distributes wealth unequally. The free-market forms the basis of two patriarchal economic systems: capitalism and imperialism, and one cannot exist without the other.

And obviously, relative prosperity in our own society does not benefit us all equally. In the Britain I've been in for the last ten years, liberalising the market has led to increased poverty and unemployment for ordinary people - particularly in the black community and amongst single mothers for example. This in turn has led to increased anti-immigration feeling and a rise in racism and facism. Additionally, the selfish and retrogressive ideology of Thatcherism helped launch an attack on all the gains made by the women's movement in the '70s, and the '80s and '90s have seen an immensely powerful backlash against feminism.

Campbell seems to believe that the aim of feminism is to scrape out a niche for ourselves (ie for feminists, not women) and to have some input in this supposedly 'pluralist' society as a kind of 'special interest' group.

Feminists, however, are not in themselves an oppressed group and our aim has never been simply to create nice lives for ourselves, and a bit of influence in the academic market. Our aim has been to achieve equality for women as a whole, 52% of the population, who surely constitute more than a shade of opinion needing to be expressed.

Many women literally do not survive patriarchy: those women who are murdered by their boyfriends/husbands; the 1500 women who die from anorexia every year; the women who commit suicide after



experiencing rape and sexual abuse are just some of the women who cannot decide to settle for a 'space' within the present system. We need change, not assimilation.

Radical feminism has long understood that women's equality cannot be achieved by gaining 'spaces' or 'rights'. The key issue for radical feminists is power. Throughout Bea Campbell's speech there is no mention of power, except in relation to Thatcher whom she portrays as merely exercising individual power. The politics underlying this article are those which have become very familiar to radical feminists in recent years: those of the new liberals on the left.

A growing demoralisation on the left has led to a wholesale retreat from some of its basic principles: ie. that the class structure is still a problem; that the working class still exists; that the capitalist market leads to inequality etc. This so-called 'New Times/New Realist' politics has become very powerful and has been particularly noticeable amongst certain women on the left.

We have become very familiar with the arguments of the new liberals on the left in the porn and SM debates in particular. One of radical feminism's chief problems with this politics is its analysis of power: that it is held by individuals and can be exchanged at will, and that power relations are being constantly reconstructed. Radical feminism has argued that power is held within structures/and collective bodies, and as such can only be challenged collectively.

One of the conceptual tools used to boost the argument of this liberal position is post-structuralism. T&S has published excellent critiques of this in the past, and as a journal which usually seeks to avoid elitist jargon I was also disappointed at the number of post-structuralist 'buzzwords' which were allowed to creep into this article.

Why then, was the decision made to print this article? I feel extremely dismayed and angered by the decision. I agree with

T&S's policy of also printing material concerned with socialist feminism, particularly because as Liz Kelly has noted (T&S 11), at a grass roots level radical and socialist feminists often have a lot more in common than the academics would have us believe. However, Bea Campbell's politics are the very ones which have consistently been used to attack radical feminist insights in recent years.

I think T&S has comprised its position as one of the very few journals in feminism or on the left which has consistently held out against the new liberal 'Post' politics. And I feel it has also compromised its principles in giving space to someone who already has a lot of coverage elsewhere, and who is a well known journalist and broadcaster, instead of taking the time to find one of the many grassroots socialist feminists who have campaigned long and hard against the cruelties and injustices of Thatcherism both here and abroad. This article is an insult to all those women who have suffered under it.

In sisterhood.

Rachel Wingfield
London

* indicates letter has been cut

Baby Talk

Dear T&S,

I am writing in response to Dena Attar's article on motherhood, childcare and women's liberation (T&S 23).

Since I was active around childcare, trying to get a nursery at the university where I was a research student and creches at conferences when I had kids, I guess I've become one of the feminists she mentions. I fail to campaign for childcare anymore because I personally don't need it and don't have the motivation; and I may even appear hostile since nowadays I won't organise a creche at conferences I'm involved with.

But this isn't just indifference. My gut response is that I veer away from work

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on childcare because it feels like a bottomless pit - witness Dena's account of how little was achieved with the seemingly large sum of money given to the National Childcare Campaign in the mid-'80s, and the half of the GLC women's budget which went on childcare projects. And the reason I will no longer organise creches for conferences is because I know from bitter experience it (a) triples the work and the cost; (b) women say they need one - and then don't come/don't bring the child, so one is left with a pissed off nursery worker who has given up a Saturday for nothing, and (c) kids don't like them.

But this is obviously not the whole story, and musing on this, and on Dena's account of being ignored when she visited a women's centre with her children, together with her remarks on early '80s feminist arguments that having children was a betrayal (of a feminist ideal or other women), leads me to some questions. These all relate to aspects of motherhood which I think mothers have to change if feminism is to progress:

1. In the women's centre, why did none of the other women help look after her kids?

Dena suggests the reason she could not participate in a meeting was because she had her children with her because the creche was shut. Certainly the prevailing concrete situation is either there is a creche or the mother is responsible for keeping the children amused/quiet: ie that certain people care for children (mothers, creche workers, fathers) and the rest of the world doesn't and shouldn't have to. If all those present at the meeting had kept an eye on and entertained the children and tolerated their activities and chatter, there'd have been no need for a creche.

But as Ruth Wallsgrove's article "Thicker than water: mothering and childcare" (T&S 7), which Dena mentions, makes clear, although many mothers want other women to help with childcare and say they welcome support from others, they

never want to lose control of 'their' children. We can actually be very 'handsoffish' if other people try to help, let alone to establish a close relationship with a child. Mothers own - and intend to continue to own - their children (and this is very apparent at times in Dena's own article). In so far as there is 'a' trend in feminism, it seems to be towards an intensification of this 'mother right' (see Christine Delphy's article in this issue).

2. Why don't children like conference creches? Or to put it another way, why is the childcare which kids routinely get (and expect) so difficult to reproduce elsewhere?

Dena's article takes as given the very high quality of childcare provided (in most cases) in the UK today. Children (and husbands) expect to be comfortable in their own homes with their own toys and food, looked after by (ie with stimulating, caring, solicitous, constant personal attention of) an adult on a one to two or three basis. It is incredibly expensive to substitute for this - and anyway, the location and the personalised nature of the servicing is absolutely integral to the job.

This is why socialist feminists' suggestions that 'socialised' (state or commercial) services (restaurants, laundries - and nurseries) could substitute for women's domestic work have always been so way off beam. They have never recognised what husbands/fathers get personally from women. It is also why the early WLM demand for twenty-four hour nurseries was embarrassing, always a dead duck. Childcare and other domestic work is not as 'good' when done elsewhere. It has to be done for children and men in their own homes, at exactly the times and in the form they want. To get something approaching the same quality universally provided by the state, or to buy it, would be prohibitively expensive - so it is exploited, taken free, from women.

We shall not get out of this impasse unless and until feminists/mothers are pre-



pared to problematise the content of childcare: to stop taking what is in fact middle class, western, late twentieth century standards of childcare as a given/desirable.

3. Why are some women/feminists hostile to mothers?

Dena and I disagree in what we remember from our earlier reading. What I remember from Sheila Shulman's "Lesbian Feminists and the Great Baby Con" (*Spinster No 4*) is Sheila saying there is so little support for women who don't want to have children, that when a friend (actually her concern is specifically with lesbians) who felt that way changes her mind and has a baby, she feels betrayed; that the woman has bought the belief that having a baby will make her socially acceptable and that experiencing pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding and the raising of children is woman's mega experience.

Now, while I sympathise with a lot of what is in Dena's article, and don't (as she would say) minimise the pleasures of motherhood, I think we do have to go on "querying biological motherhood as a reasonable choice". I have never tolerated a women's movement which required women not to be mothers (or indeed not to be heterosexuals); but I have more sympathy with non-mothers than Dena.

Women without children are heavily policed, and where else except in the women's movement do they get any support for their choice? To me, the oppression of mothers and non-mothers is the opposite side of the same coin.

There is, for me no doubt that there is not only heterosexual privilege, but also maternal privilege. Women do get praised for being so clever and normal as to have managed to get pregnant; and some of us, even feminists, put down childless women something shocking. Mothers do say to me "You'll understand because you're a mother too", or "You have to be a mother to understand what it (equalling virtually the whole of life) is all about". Having small children is demanding to say the least; not having children is an even harder row to plough, especially perhaps if you also fail the femininity stakes as far as the world is concerned by being a lesbian.

Motherhood divides women, and hard as a mother's lot may be (at times), mothers are the socially acceptable group - and often very unreflexive on our own situation and motivation. I therefore think we need to think hard before appearing to attack other women.

Best wishes,
Diana Leonard
London

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Hors d'oeuvres

Is sexual harassment the worst thing about working in service industries? Lisa Adkins reveals the full extent and consequences of women's sexual objectification in tourism.

Most if not all work on employment, including that produced by feminists, has until recently either completely ignored sexuality or denied that sexual relations operate in the labour market at all. This has been despite radical feminists' concern with sexual harassment and all the feminist research showing how important male defined sexual relations are for creating gender inequalities elsewhere in society.

In the last couple of years a few studies have pointed out this anomaly and claimed themselves to recognize the significance of sexuality for gender relations in employment. However they still tend to assume heterosexuality is normal and therefore have a limited view of the socially constructed nature of sexual and hence gender relations.

In *Sex at Work* Jeff Hearn and Wendy Parkin, taking male-dominated heterosexual relations for granted, explain for instance men's sexual harassment of women at work as due to alienating employment. They argue men's lack of control over what they do and how they

work makes them aggressive and bored and they escape these negative feelings by using women to amuse themselves - as is evidenced by sexual harassment being particularly enduring in industries such as car manufacturing, construction, printing and mining. Why then don't women - equally subject to alienation at work - sexually harass men?

Some other new studies, for example Rosemary Pringle's *Secretaries Talk* and Cynthia Cockburn's *In the Way of Women*, are equally, if less obviously, problematic. These studies by highly influential and widely respected feminist researchers treat heterosexuality as if it only contributes to the production of gender, and is only structured by gender inequality, when explicit male coercion is evident, again using the case of sexual harassment. Outside of particular coercive practices, they consider heterosexuality to be a spontaneous and mutually satisfying relation between two naturally given groups, men and women. They thus see heterosexuality as a social phenomenon only when it is 'forced'.

They both say that "men control women not only through rape or through forcing them to do what they want, but also through definitions of pleasure and self-hood". But in fact Pringle, in her study of secretaries, assumes heterosexuality is only male controlled when men's sexual attentions are imposed on women by force. Outside of this she views heterosexuality as largely voluntary, stressing how it is negotiable and flexible. Indeed, outside of coercive sexual relations, she thinks heterosexuality is a source of "power and pleasure" for women:

Rather than assuming... that secretaries are always the pathetic victims of sexual harassment, it might be possible to consider the power and pleasure they currently get out of their interactions with people [sic] and how they get what they want on their own terms. (p101-2)

She does not see heterosexuality as a continuum, with men exerting varying degrees of control; but rather two fundamentally different sorts of heterosexuality: coercive and non coercive. Coercive interactions make women powerless victims, but non-coercive heterosexuality affords women power and excitement.

Cynthia Cockburn shows how male sexual banter and sexual innuendo act as a means to control women, but then goes on to say that "sexual harassment shows only the negative side of organization sexuality". On the 'positive' side she points to the opportunities that employment affords both women and men for sociability, since "work can be a path to pleasure too" claiming as evidence of this that a large proportion of marriages "are made at work". But since when did feminists see the opportunity to get married as unambiguously positive for women? Do we no longer see being a wife as one of the key institutions of patriarchy?

Although Cockburn is at pains to point out that sexual pleasure, sociability and openness are all more risky for women than men because of the power relations of heterosexuality, she nonetheless still sees these power relations as being 'flexible': women are able to negotiate them substantially enough to overturn inequalities.

Opposition to sexual harassment is only one component of a sexual politics in the

workplace. It needs to be supplemented with analyses of the ways in which sexual pleasure might be used to disrupt male rationality and to empower women. (p159)

Cockburn and Pringle thus see heterosexual relations which are not 'harassment' as not imposed; but rather as chosen, 'liked'; or even as a potential threat to male power. They ignore the compulsory nature of heterosexuality for women; that compulsion lies behind both explicitly coercive and 'chosen' sexual practices; and that all heterosexual interactions are structured by male dominance.

Compulsory heterosexuality at work

The strength of the last, radical feminist, insight became very clear to me in some recent research I undertook on the employment of men and women in tourism. I looked at the work of men and



Judy Stevens

women in a hotel and a leisure park in Lancashire. In both workplaces jobs are highly gender segregated although there are equal numbers of male and female staff. I looked at the gender dynamics of recruitment, the forms of control to which workers were subject and the different kinds of work which men and women did.

What I found was that the kinds of work men did was occupationally specific, whereas part of the work women did was not. For women it was a condition of their employment that they engage in and respond to male initiated sexual interactions with both customers and employees: in 'sexual servicing', for short.

In order to be employed at all at either workplace, regardless of the jobs they applied for, women had to be physically attractive. No parallel requirement operated in relation to men. Men simply had to have skills and abilities which varied with specific occupations, but being attractive was required of *women as a group* regardless of the occupation.

For instance by far the majority of bar staff were men and by far the majority of waiting staff women. These two occupations were however very similar: the task content was the same for both. They were high-customer contact jobs, involving taking orders from customers and serving them with drinks and/or food. Given this, one might assume the personnel specifications for the two occupations would require similar worker qualities, and indeed, both jobs did require employees to be 'helpful and enthusiastic'. But bar staff, unlike waiting staff, were also required to be 'strong', 'smart' and to have 'good communication skills', (requirements specific to this occupation). Waiting staff, on the other hand, were required to be 'attractive' and 'caring' (requirements for *all the other women's* occupations too).

These differences cannot be adequately explained by the requirements of the jobs themselves. Why, for example, was 'strength' needed by bar staff and not waiting staff, when delivering food to tables all day requires just as much physical stamina/strength and is just as physically demanding and exhausting as lifting crates and changing barrels in bar work? Why

were waiting staff required to have a 'caring' attitude (towards customers), when bar staff needed to be 'good communicators' with customers? Why were bar staff required to be (only) smart when waiting staff were required to be attractive given that workers in both these occupations (and in fact in all the hotels' occupations) were required to wear clean, pressed, smart uniforms and polished shoes?

Similarly, at the leisure park women had to look attractive to get hired. The work was seasonal and each summer women were recruited in all occupations not simply on the basis of their having particular skills or resources for particular jobs (that is, not just because they knew how to pull a pint or add up a bill or make sandwiches), but rather on the basis of what they as women needed to be given a job at all; because they looked 'right'. As one manager said, women had to look "attractive and fresh" to get employed. Recruitment of women at the leisure park was based *primarily* on this, and I knew a number of women who were not offered employment there because their appearance was not up to standard: for example, one because she looked 'weird' (she wore a scarf tied around her head) and a number who were said to be 'too ugly' and/or 'too manly'.

Women at the leisure park not only had to fulfil appearance criteria to get the job, they had to maintain their looks to stay there. They were instantly warned if their appearance deviated from the prescribed standard: if they failed to correct such 'appearance problems', they were dismissed. During the time I was there women were warned about looking tired, having chipped nail varnish, wearing 'weird' make up, and looking 'sloppy'. In all these cases management told me they had 'no option' but to try to get the women to 'correct their appearance problems'. But no such controls operated on men's appearance. Both men and women had to wear clean uniforms, but this was *all* men had to do. Men could look tired, sloppy or weird without their jobs being under threat.

Women at the hotel were also obliged to conform to a plethora of standards relating to personal appearance.

Unlike male employees, they were given strict guidelines on the way they should wear their hair (to ensure facial display) and how to wear make-up and their uniforms. Failure to adhere to these standards again led to warnings and the possibility of dismissal.

Since women not only had to look good to be employed but also had to stay looking good to remain there - it seems clear that *part of the job* for women consisted in looking good.

Sexualizing uniforms

One particular aspect of the control on women's appearance at both the hotel and the leisure park was the way in which women were required to wear their uniforms. The uniforms were gender differentiated, but women - and only women - had to wear theirs in certain specified ways. At the hotel, they had to wear skirts, of a particular length, and sheer stockings, and polished high heeled shoes; while in the bar at the leisure park, women had to wear full-skirted gingham dresses, pulled down 'off the shoulder'.

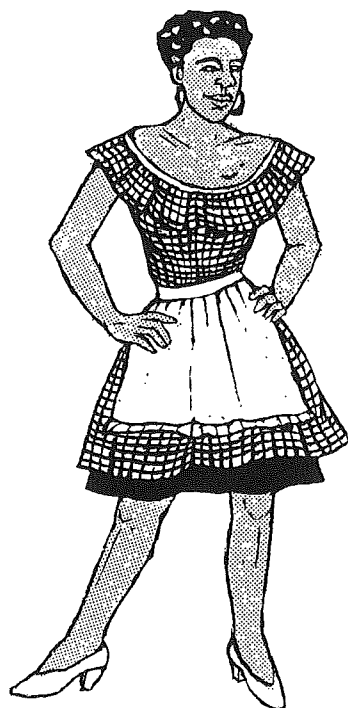
These controls turned the women into sexualized actors - into 'objects' for men's use. Women in the bar risked dismissal if they refused to wear their uniform 'off the shoulder'. But both they and everyone else knew it sexually degraded them. The women concerned said that the uniform worn in this way, was a way of the manager trying "to turn us into sex toys or something". Their costumes meant they were often subject to sexual attention from male customers, co-workers and management - including the bar manager himself. It was he who decided this was the 'correct' way to wear the dress, and he aggressively enforced the requirement, often pulling the women's dresses down into the 'correct' position, thereby 'legitimately' paying them sexual attention (touching their clothing and their bare shoulders), and simultaneously degrading them as workers.

This connection between clothing requirements and the sexualization and degradation of women workers was also evident in the innuendoes and directly sexual and degrading comments with which women at both workplaces had to deal

routinely. In the words of one woman employee, male customers were "always eyeing us up... and commenting on the way we looked and on how they liked us in our uniforms". They would judge whether or not women would be good in bed on the basis of what they looked like, and they sexually objectified women by staring and leering. The degree of sexual attention paid to the women's appearance was so marked and so routine, that one woman employee compared working there to "being in a tits and bums show"; another said the male customers "seem to think we are on display for them". It can therefore be argued that sexual looks were part of what women sold to employers in exchange for employment - and part of the service employers sold to customers.

Male customers

Women working in such workplaces *had* to develop strategies to cope with the various and frequent forms of sexual attention they received from men. They usually dealt with such situations either by 'laughing it off' or by 'playing along with it'. They said the worst thing they could do if a man made comments to them or touched them was to



Judy Stevens



Judy Stevens

get annoyed, look angry or not respond. This would make the man *more* likely to carry on bothering them, often more intensely. Such compulsory interactions were so regular for the women that they regarded it as a part of their job.

This is why I say part of these women's work was therefore sexual work. When male customers paid women sexual attention, the women had to respond to some extent. They could laugh/looked flattered/smile or 'enter into it'. They therefore sexually serviced men whether they wanted to or not, and men appropriated their work and were able to do so with or without the women's consent because of the conditions of the employment. Contrary to Cockburn and Pringle's suggestions about sex at work being a source of power and pleasure for women which women can get on their own terms, in the time I spent in the hotel and leisure park it was *always and only* male customers who initiated and defined the nature of such interactions, and it was men who were made to feel good about themselves, never the women. It was men who got their egos boosted and their sexual thrills. The way women workers were made into sex objects therefore produced a sexual power relationship (as well as the more usually recognized customer service relationship) between men customers and women workers in which men dominated women.

The women at the two workplaces were therefore not only what is usually referred to as 'economically productive' workers for the owners and managers; they were also sexual workers. They not only stacked shelves, served food and drinks, cleared tables and carried out all the other tasks necessary for the production of goods and services in the leisure industry; they also provided amusement, titillation, gratification - for men. Moreover, this work was compulsory if they wanted to get, and keep their job.

Male co-workers

This sexual power relationship between men and women was not limited simply to male customers. It also operated between women workers and male employees. Because women's employment status was

defined primarily through their position as sexualised workers, women were no better placed to resist sexual interactions with male workers than they were with male customers. There was again nothing women could do except 'cope' with such behaviour; one woman manager was dismayed that she could not prevent male employees sexualising and harassing the women who worked in her department, not least because they did it to her as well.

Thus male workers, like male customers, directly appropriated forms of sexual work from women. But the sexual power relationship between men and women workers had other implications too. Most importantly, it systematically undermined the status and the overall structural position of women as workers vis-à-vis male workers in the workplaces. It was part of the process whereby the structurally more powerful position of male workers in both workplaces was produced. Men were more powerful in both workplaces because men and women were different *kinds* of workers. Men did not have to carry out sexual work in the way that women did, *and* their work was not exploited in the same way as women's. In other words, men did not have their status as workers undermined by their status as sexual subordinates. Women did.

Men were able to claim (and be seen) to possess various labour market resources, such as strength and specific occupational 'skills'. Occupations were then defined as the *preserve* of men because they were linked to specific skills and capacities, which, in the given circumstances, only men could claim to possess. But because they were sexualized, women workers could never challenge this situation; they were not able to possess particular occupational skills because the *primary* labour market resource they were recognized to possess, was their value as sexual servicers/their being attractive women. Male employees were themselves key agents in this process. Men managers participated in the creation of regulations on appearance which reduced women's status, and men (in all occupations and throughout the occupational hierarchy) colluded in producing the conditions in which women could

be and were routinely sexualized.

Heterosexual workers

Men as workers, men as customers, and the hotel and leisure park as employers all therefore derived considerable benefits from the construction of women as sexually differentiated and subordinate. Male workers always occupied a more powerful position than women and were able to exploit the position of women within their workplaces. Employers had women serving (in fact working) as sexual attractions, satisfying male customers. And both male workers and male customers had access to, and could appropriate sexual servicing from women workers.

The women interviewed enjoyed *some* of these sexualised interactions, but they found most of them annoying and embarrassing, even though not explicitly coercive. They were in now way 'pathetic victims', but equally they could do little to resist. What little they could do, some did. They were sarcastic and flippant, even if the men rarely noticed this, or cared, so long as they got a response. But this did not change the fact that women could only be employees if they were sexual subordinates and if they carried out sexual work. These conditions attached to their employment meant both that heterosexuality was *compulsory* for them and that men had *power* within such heterosexual interactions. Fully fledged resistance by women - eg refusing to 'exchange' sexual labour, or refusing to be sexually attractive - led to dismissal.

The fact that women's work in the labour market can be sexual (without being prostitution) has important implications for our understanding of the way sexuality figures in the labour market. In previous feminist analysis of the labour market theory employment/waged work has characteristically been defined as 'economic', and sexuality as non-economic entity. But far from being separate, or differentiated from economic relations sexuality can constitute part of gendered economic relations. The way in which the women I talked to had to cope with sexualization by male customers and male workers on a day-to-day basis, as part of the job,

was an outcome of the manner in which sexuality structured service-sector production.

This gendering of production also created sexual relations at the two workplaces, since being a sexual worker placed women in a position where they were consistently sexually objectified and used by men. The relations of production thus contributed to the production of a form of male dominated sexuality. Moreover, women had no choice but to participate in male constructed sexuality if they wanted to retain their job and to earn a living. They had no choice but to be what Monique Wittig has described as "heterosexualized". Thus both coercive and 'non-coercive' heterosexual interactions in the workplace were structured by male power and dominance, and both were exploitative for women.

This obligation to do non-occupationally specific labour probably applies to the majority of women's occupations, for example in nursing, secretarial work and teaching. In the tourist industry the additional requirement is clearly sexual servicing. □

C. Cockburn (1991) *In the Way of Women: men's resistance to sex equality in organizations* Macmillan, London

J. Hearn and W. Parkin (1987) *'Sex' at 'Work: the power and paradox of organisation sexuality*, Wheatsheaf, Brighton.

R. Pringle (1988) *Secretaries Talk: sexuality, power and work*, Verso, London

M. Wittig (1992) 'On the Social Contract', in her collection *The Straight Mind and other essays*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, London.



Judy Stevens

Mothers' Union?

What are the implications of basing our politics on notions of women's difference from men? Christine Delphy exposes the assumptions of one strand - women's privileged connection with children - in contemporary feminist theory and practice.

Since its re-emergence in 1968-70, the women's movement has of course changed – but not in one single direction, which is why it is so hard to write the movement's history or to draw up any sort of balance sheet. There are contradictory sets of ideas on almost every subject and, depending on the weight you give to this or that position, you can define the general direction in which feminism is supposedly moving in quite different ways.

This article is concerned with just one aspect of feminism today, and what I want to discuss is not an organised tendency, comparable to the 'tendencies' of leftist movements, but an intellectual tendency to be found to a varying degree in various parts of the women's movement, and to varying degrees in many individuals. It is an inclination to think in a particular way which exists more or less strongly, more or less manifestly, and more or less consciously in all of us.

Mother right

This inclination is not something which is explicitly formulated as such in specific books and articles. Rather it is what I think various texts probably have in common: elements in writing on different subjects and in diverse campaigns and actions which together form a whole I call the 'maternal demand'. This is defined by three aspects:

- it tends to *base women's rights* – women's claims for liberation – *on women's specificity* (and not on their universality, ie not on women being members of the human species);
- it tends to *base this specificity on women's particular function in reproduction*;
- and it tends to *demand special rights over another category of human beings: children*.

At this stage in the evolution of the ideology of women's specificity, what is new is that motherhood and its idealisation has become a shield, hidden behind which is a refusal by women to share the ownership of children with men. The maternal demand is thus an appeal based on maternity; but, reciprocally, suggests motherhood is what specifies women.

This reciprocity clearly shows the central problem posed by all ideologies of difference, whether they apply to women or to other groups. Specificity allows a group to demand exorbitant rights – rights which are not accorded to other groups. But the other side of the coin is that this same specificity requires the group to renounce other rights, ie to common treatment. This certainly seems to be happening at the moment. The motherhood – the motherliness – which

marks out women is the basis on which some feminists currently claim exclusive ownership of children; and the individuals and groups concerned unquestionably set great store on acquiring this right. But whether they are aware of it or not, their approach is certainly not *objectively* compatible with other feminist demands based on universalism; and in making this demand they are implicitly renouncing full membership of the human species. In addition, there is the equally important problem that they are demanding ownership, not of goods, nor of their own bodies, but of other human beings.

In preparing this article I have used only what feminists have written: I have not formally studied the concrete actions of groups. Also I have projected into the future a line I have glimpsed. This is "pushing things to their logical conclusion", and obviously in reality nothing is "pushed to its logical conclusion" because reality is contradictory. But the reason why I looked through the various texts for indications of this position, was because in the last few years my attention had been drawn to it by non theorised attitudes amongst most of my feminist friends: by their 'spontaneous' reactions which all went in one direction. To them it seemed to be 'obvious' that when a couple separated it was a victory for feminism if the woman got custody of the children, and a defeat if her husband got them. After a while I started to ask myself why; and then I asked other people. But all I got was a look of astonishment. How could I even ask the question! In addition, various "feminist" political actions seemed also to be inspired by the same implicit sentiment: that it is both "good" (for women) and "the right" of women to own children. Here I will take just three examples of the very diverse concerns within feminism which show evidence of elements of the maternal demand.

New reproductive technologies

Many feminists are currently studying the new reproductive technologies, and with few exceptions their attitudes towards them range from fairly negative to apocalyptic. Now, some disquiet about reproductive technology is certainly legitimate. Research suggests those who seek to have their eggs removed by laparoscopy and then re-implanted in their uteruses may not be making a fully informed

choice. They may not know the risks involved in the operation nor realise the very low success rate.

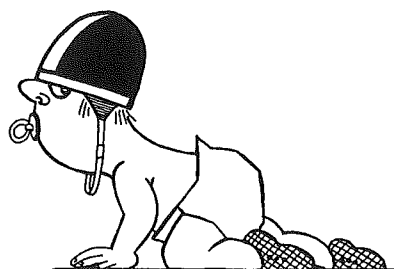
But is this something specific to surgical interventions to "remedy" infertility or doesn't it also apply to many other (if not to the majority of) medical interventions? If so, what is at issue is just another instance of a more general problem – the retention of information and abuse of power by the medical profession, practised to the detriment of people who should be clients but are only patients – which is always serious.

Another line of criticism argues that surrogate motherhood will lead to poor women being exploited for the benefit of rich women, and suggests we should not accept surrogate motherhood in principle, since it involves selling one's biological processes.



Cath Jackson

However, if the issue is the exploitation of poor women's bodies, then surrogacy is not the most striking instance. Every day hundreds of thousands of prostitutes, three-quarters of whom are not voluntary but were captured or sold by a relative and held in conditions of slavery and torture, sell their bodies – often with no profit to themselves. There are a few hundred surrogate mothers and their "exploitation" lasts nine months; it is voluntary; and they themselves receive money. If feminist critics were really concerned about the exploitation of women's bodies, how can we explain their being more scandalised by surrogate motherhood than by prostitution? Which leads me to think it is not "the exploitation of the body" which is their real cause for concern.



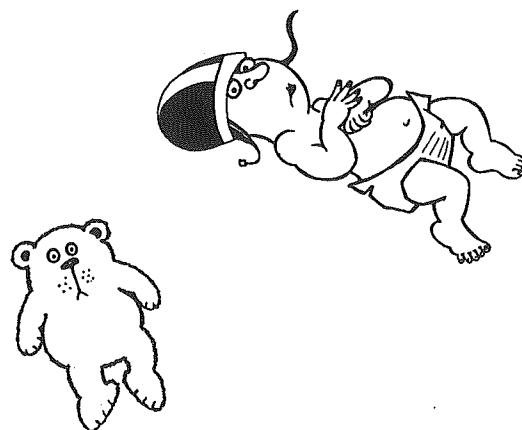
In addition, those opposed to reproductive technology often paint apocalyptic pictures of a conspiracy by men to replace women by artificial uteruses. The few feminists who have criticised such scenarios have pointed out that there is really no substance to such prophecies. Macho intellectuals might want to replace women with technology, but there is no evidence to suggest they are actually researching *doing* so. Above all, there is no evidence they have the *means* to do so. The goal attributed to such men when the spectre of "gynocide" is evoked, is the elimination of women thanks to artificial wombs. But the snag is that, as yet, not a single artificial womb exists. Such a machine is far from being created, even if men wanted it to exist. The longest anyone has been able to keep an embryo in vitro is a few days – which is a far cry from the requisite nine months. And even if men could produce such a machine, imagine what it would cost – and even more how much it would cost to produce millions of them! Can we really imagine the construction of enough such machines to replace three billion women?

But leaving aside the feasibility of the operation, to imagine this is the goal of the masculine half of humanity, is to think (a) that men only consider women in so far as we serve them; and (b) that women only serve men through reproduction.

Now although the first proposition is unfortunately true, the second is not. To say that men, who do hold power and do only consider women in an instrumental way, only "use" us for reproduction, is to fall in the trap of accepting men's own ideology. Men do indeed often say "women are only good for having babies", but this is their way of minimising how useful we are to them (hence from their point of view, how useful we are to humanity, since they see humanity as composed only of themselves). It minimises the extent to which they (are seen to) exploit us – for women are not only "good" for reproduction. We also do more than half of all human work, and three-quarters of the work we do is unpaid and benefits men. So why should they want to eliminate us? Not only our eggs but also our work is free. If they were to eliminate us, they would be killing the geese that lay the golden eggs.

The fear that women will be physically eliminated is therefore both unfounded and in the present circumstances (ie given the wide-ranging exploitation to which women are subjected), absurd. It is therefore hard to believe this is really what preoccupies those who oppose the new reproductive technologies. So what is at stake for them? I think one indication is given by their constantly repeated assertion that women's role in biological reproduction is more important than men's.

In studying the theme of "nature" in discussion of reproductive technology, Marie-Jo Dhavernas found that in order to pass new laws on assisted reproduction, a single, unique form of descent and kinship, the western married couple and their legitimate children, had been erected as the unchangeable and supposedly natural model. But not only has this form always been a model, an ideal, which has never corresponded to reality (ie it has never been the statistical norm), but it is itself in the process of losing even its normative status.



Things are therefore being asked of people who want to use assisted reproduction – that they be heterosexual and married, etc. – which other people not only do not fulfil, but which are not even asked of them any longer. For instance, much more is required of those who want assisted reproduction than is asked of would-be adopters; and more is required of would-be adopters than is asked of ordinary parents. The majority of naturally procreated children live in (what

for the model are) non 'natural' families. In sum, parents deemed non natural are the only ones obliged to follow a supposedly natural model of parenthood; a model which has nothing to do with what natural parents actually do.

Some feminists' views on what should be allowed and what forbidden when reproduction is assisted, *also* involve a model based on reference to nature – though theirs is not the same nature as the nature invoked by legislators. In "feminist" nature:

- the only biological tie in reproduction is the one between a woman and a child. The role of the biological father is minimised (read ignored);
- this biological bond between woman and child is considered to be the basis of kinship, ie of affiliation or descent.

But this supposedly natural matrilineal descent also does not prevail in either norms or fact. So here it is feminists who in turn are demanding of potential 'non natural' parents (of those seeking assisted reproduction) that they conform to so called natural requirements – things they do not require of natural parents, ie of people who do not need to use reproductive technologies.

Such feminists seem to find the debate on reproductive technology an occasion on which to express their views on what descent *should* be, just as lawyers and politicians find it the occasion to express theirs. But in the case of feminists, their views are expressed indirectly. For whatever form descent may take, it is *always* a social convention. However, instead of attacking the social convention and demanding that, as a social convention, it could and should be changed, most feminist critiques of reproductive technology simply assert that descent exists already – in nature.

Feminist reconstructions of human evolution

The same assertion is also found in a completely different area of research: in feminist writing on the origins of women's oppression. Most of this draws on ancient history, anthropology and prehistory, but not all. Some is philosophical, for example, Mary O'Brien's book *The Politics of Reproduction*.

But as far as I can see, the distinction between the two is purely formal, because work which is supposedly based on recognised scholarship in fact goes far beyond what the state of such scholarship would allow.

Both books written in the '70s and '80s interpret knowledge, from frequently disparate scientific universes, in the light of certain assumptions. These are not usually explicit. Sometimes they are totally implicit and sometimes they are produced simply as assertions which require no proof. They speculate about the possible conditions of human existence in non specified conditions – either in an ahistoric absolute condition or in a primitive humanity whose technological level and cultural forms are not specified. So what they are really doing is questioning under what conditions human existence would be possible prior to the emergence of any social formation or organisation.

So far the disciplines of anthropology and sociology (which these authors claim to adhere to) are concerned, however, such a question is a contradiction in terms – and should never be asked. So despite their use of anthropological material about real human life – life in society – these writers in the end attach themselves to a tradition of philosophical thinking which:

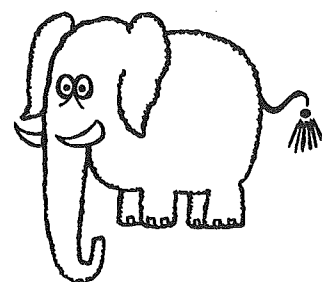
- places the individual chronologically prior to society; and
- tries to imagine the emergence, the creation, of life in society on the basis of the (biological, psychological, etc) 'needs' of these pre-social humans.

They therefore postulate a non-social human nature.

These speculations themselves rest in turn on premises which assume:

- that humans pre-exist society; and
- that human beings have a content: they have needs and tendencies – in a word, a precise and intrinsic nature.

For these reasons, or rather because of these errors in understanding the nature of knowledge at the very base of such approaches, I call such accounts "feminist reconstructions", because the way they operate relies on the same *mythological* character as patriarchal reconstructions.



Both share not only the same speculative character but also:

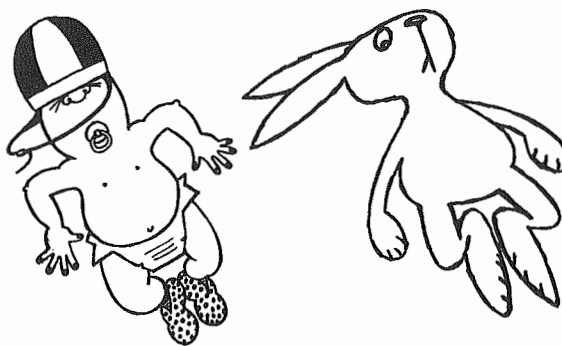
- the same surreptitious abandoning of the anthropological premise that human beings and culture cannot be dissociated from one another: that they are given together and created one by the other;
- some presuppositions or basic beliefs about the conditions of existence of the first human beings; and
- a hazy definition of this first humanity, which is sometimes seen as a mythical group, and sometimes conceived of on the model of existing hunter gatherers (ie modelled on the population with the lowest known level of technology).

Feminist reconstructions differ from their patriarchal counterparts, however, in their interpretation of these same premises. Both feminist reconstructions and patriarchal constructions see the reproductive role of women as largely dictating their social role. Both take for granted particularly that:

- the woman who gives birth to a baby will necessarily suckle it;
- the woman who nurses a child will necessarily care for all its other day-to-day needs: that the nurse will be the child-rearer;
- each of these functions will be performed by just one person; and
- all these functions will be performed by the same person, who will be called the mother.

Patriarchal reconstructions distinguish descent – the affiliation of the newborn into society via a given individual or individuals (the ‘father’, ‘mother’ or ‘family’) – from the responsibility for upbringing. Feminists, however, not only see all the roles as intermingled and as deriving from the act of giving birth, but also affiliation or descent (the attaching of a new member of society, a new baby, to one of the groups in the society) as automatic. A baby is deemed to be automatically affiliated to the woman who brought it into the world. Descent is seen to flow naturally from giving birth, with no social mediation and no decisions being made. From this perspective, descent is not a social fact. It derives from the physical act of giving birth.

The second point of difference from patriarchal reconstructions is that in feminist reconstructions, women, or rather females, are the ones mainly responsible for the survival of primitive society. This is firmly linked to the first point, since the fact of giving birth is seen as itself carrying social responsibility for the young, just as it carries the social attachment of the child to its biological mother. Thus, for instance, according to Maria Mies (1986), women were concerned with gathering and later invented agriculture, so as “to feed themselves and their children”. Note that they were the women’s children – with no question asked or explanations sought. In these feminist reconstructions, women’s specific role in reproduction entails responsibility for – or ownership of (it is not clear which from the possessive) – “their” children, without further formalities.



In patriarchal reconstructions, motherhood rather than childbirth constitutes a major handicap. Only men could hunt, they claim, and hunting was a vitally important activity for the survival of the group when collecting food, and also for the development of civilisation. In what became a classic of feminist anthropology, the myth of ‘Man the Hunter’ was taken apart as long ago as 1975. But nonetheless, according to the latest ‘scientific’ (read patriarchal) versions of modern anthropology, it was their hunting together that led men (read “men”) to develop co-operation, the basis of life in society, and to their need to communicate by signals, hence to their invention of language. Not only are women here not the motor of culture, they have it all given to them on a plate by men: the meat and the language.

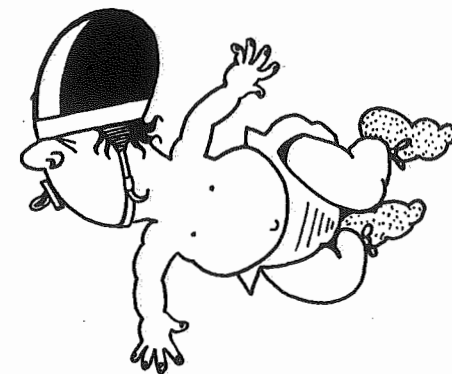
In feminist reconstructions it's the same but different. Male anthropologists having decreed arbitrarily that pregnancy, childbirth and what follows (or rather what is presumed to follow) prevent women from doing anything else, and that only the “something else” is decisive for society and culture, feminists have decreed equally arbitrarily that, on the contrary, because women were responsible for children (and thus far the two schools are in full accord), women and only women (and here the schools part company) were motivated to seek food. Similarly, while for the patriarchs women have no sense of co-operation or collective responsibility whatever, since they believe only hunting nurtures such virtues, feminists decree the opposite. Only the fact of giving birth gives a sense of responsibility vis à vis the group. Men are thus thought to be totally deprived of this virtue, to the point that if they were allowed to, they would stay at home and eat the group’s children instead of going out and killing animals.

In patriarchal reconstructions, the domination of women is not a problem. It is inscribed in the unchangeable nature of the human species: in women’s reproductive role and everything (giving birth, breast feeding, and caring for children) which is thought to be part of this reproductive role and to disempower women. These are held to be physical or ethnographical “facts”. Women’s subordination does not have to be explained or to have an origin. It was always there. It has simply continued.

In feminist reconstructions, however, women are the motor of progress, or simply of humanisation, and they are this not despite but because of motherhood. Therefore the overthrow of mother right is for these feminists the overturning of a whole social and cultural structure, which included as a fundamental trait descent through the female line. This original social organisation was motherly, responsible, and particularly careful of the immediate and future survival of the group. Maternal care induced a culture where the values of peace and co-operation predominated, and where aggression, violence, individualism and egoism were prohibited.

This whole edifice rests on one assumption: that women feel a responsibility towards future generations, and hence to the

entire group, because of the way their experience is shaped by being responsible for ‘their’ children. And this assumption itself rests on another, for this feeling of responsibility is attributed to all women, and denied to all men, for just one reason: women give birth and men do not.

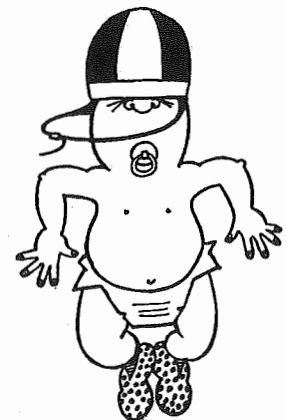


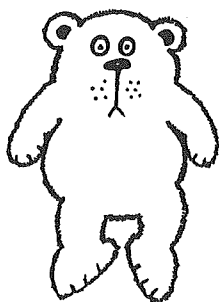
The message of these reconstructions is given in some revealing titles: *Usurping Paternity* (Azad) and *The Origins of Abduction, or the Murder of the Mother* (Blaise). This message does not concern the real historical origins of “the defeat of the female sex”, because there is no history or any possibility of such a history at stake. The real message is that *human society is based in nature on the bond between mother and child*. This bond is the most important social tie. It produces culture.

The message of these reconstructions is that mother-child descent is not strictly speaking affiliation/a line of descent. It is not the affiliation of a new member of society into the society via one of its existing members. It is rather a biological phenomenon with social implications. All other sorts of descent are seen as social – in the sense of artificial and non natural, hence ‘bad’ and ‘anti-natural’ – by comparison. It is therefore not difficult to conclude, as all these feminist reconstructions do, that patriarchal civilisation is a catastrophe because it is based on non natural descent; on a denial of nature.

The sacred bond

Such theories are also evident in essays which fall into the category of ‘general feminism’ and which stress feminine qualities and values, for their authors see such qualities as





A. Azad (1985) *La paternité usurpatrice* Les éditions du remue-ménage, Montreal

S. Blaise (1989) *Le rapt des origines ou le meurtre de la mère* published by the author

P. Chesler (1988) *The Sacred Bond* Times Books, NY

M.-J. Dhavernas (1991) 'Essentialisme et biologie dans les discours sur les nouveaux modes de procréation, conférence paper, forthcoming in *Sexe et genre*, Presses du CNRS, Paris

C. Gilligan (1982) *In a Different Voice*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.

M. O'Brien (1983) *The Politics of Reproduction*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London

A. Rich (1976) *Of Woman Born* W W Norton and Co.

S. Ruddick (1980) 'Maternal thinking', *Feminist Studies*, No. 6, summer

L. Segal (1987) *Is the Future Female?*, Virago, London

J. Stacey (1986) 'Are feminists afraid to leave home?', in J. Mitchell and A. Oakley (eds) *What is feminism?*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford.

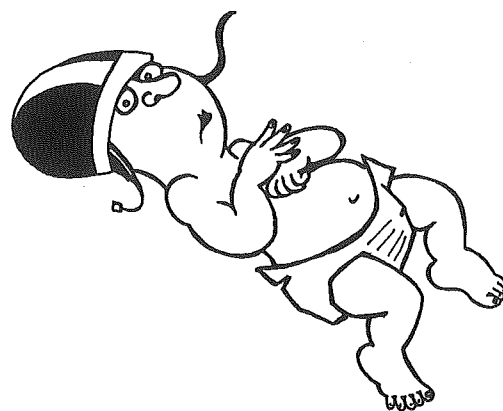
deriving from an experience specific to women: motherhood. It would be tedious to cite all the books and articles in this vein, since although some are very well known and explicitly defend this point of view, the theme itself can now be found in practically the whole of American feminist literature, whatever the specific topic may be. I shall therefore assume readers know what I am talking about and simply make a few remarks about this position.

1. In a remarkable analysis of the emergence of conservative and pro-family "feminism", Judith Stacey notes that its principal advocates – Germaine Greer, mark two version Betty Friedan, Jean Elshtain and Carol McMillan – draw the same inspiration from accentuating "the life giving values associated with motherhood" as was already to be found in Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*. The last is generally considered a radical feminist classic, which shows that there is an incontestable ideological continuity between staunch feminists and those who, after or before turning their coats, preach a return to the home, a strict division of tasks, and a separation of spheres between men and women, ie who maintain a classical patriarchal discourse.

2. In *Is the Future Female?* Lynn Segal notes that authors from this new current pay only lip service to the problematic of gender, in works with evocative titles such as Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking* and Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*. They may affirm at the start of their work that the values and attitudes they are going to talk about are historically constructed, and they deny that they support any form of biological determinism. But having said that, they proceed as if the values and attitudes in question were shared by all women: by all women irrespective of the society in which they are geographically located, by all women who have ever lived within the same geographical area whatever the epoch, and by all women who live in the same country at the same time whatever their social background.

We know full well, however, to take just the most minor factors of variation: generational changes within the same class, the same century and the same country, that our mothers' experience was very different

from our own. And if experience is the source of attitudes and values, then ours cannot be the same as theirs – which we knew anyway from experience. There is therefore no need to go far to find, in the most banal, most generally shared facts of life, a shining contradiction of the thesis.



These authors are therefore calling "feminine values" a collection of very specific values, which correspond more or less to those of western housewives of the last half century; and they are then projecting these values on to all the women of the world across the centuries. In addition, these values correspond only "more or less" to those of western housewives, since the authors speak more of the norms than of reality. But whether or not the values and attitudes they call feminine are really those of even a particular generation of women, is less important than the fact that they generalise in such a way that their thesis is actually ahistorical. It is therefore contrary to the methodology which derives from the problematic they claim to adhere to – which is at least social if not sociological. So, whatever their protestations, they do in fact have a naturalist problematic.

3. As Lynn Segal also remarks, these writers also make modern motherhood into not only a supposedly universal experience, but also an entirely positive one for both women and children. This is pretty astounding. How can anyone idealise motherhood in a movement where half the activists are in therapy because they are mothers, while the other half are in therapy because they have been children (not

to mention those who suffer from both experiences, because that would lead to a total of 150%)?

Women's liberation or a mothers' union?

This new current tends to see only positive behaviour and values in motherhood, which involves a stupefying misinterpretation of the facts. But what this does, and this is perhaps its purpose, is to idealise motherhood as a set of values, behaviour and attitudes, and to make us totally identify the interests of women with those of mothers; and the interests of children with those of mothers. But who needs feminists to do/say that?

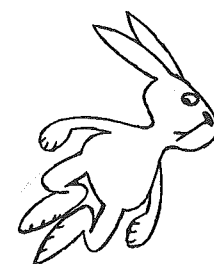
The identity of women is thus once again completely cut back to, and circumscribed by, motherhood; and children's dependence continues to be taken for granted. It is assumed children have at best, or at worst, two parents; and that only a parent can defend a child against its other parent if he is bad. People don't ask why children are dependent on adults, and on just two adults; nor why they are so fragile and exposed to violence. Abuses of parental powers are caused by/attributed to the character of the parents, and given it has been shown that women are good and men are wicked, to men's bad nature. People forget, or pretend to forget, that there can only be an abuse of power when power already exists... and that changing the protector does not change the situation of non-power which underlies the need for protection.

A feminist project which does not question all forms of subjection, including those which seem natural (because after all we are well placed to know that our subjection was also, and is still, considered to be natural) becomes a corporatist project, and it no longer deserves to be called a liberation project. And I do not want to witness the transformation of our liberation project into an attempt to defend the immediate interests of *some* women. I fear even more women's interests being identified with acquiring the entire set of rights of parents: with wrestling from men what remains of their parental authority.

I view with deep disquiet the feminist movement transforming itself into a fight for the ownership of children. There are many (too many) signs which indicate we are taking

this path. Whether it is a question of action around the new reproductive technologies, or the new feminist myths of origin, or the idealisation of motherhood, the same leitmotif is everywhere: "Children belong to women". (The latest book by Phyllis Chessler, on the 'Baby M' case where a surrogate mother opposed adoptive parents with whom she had made a contract, was indeed entitled *Sacred Bond*.)

Maybe we will end up with full ownership of children; but I don't think this will help children. It won't be much of an improvement for them, even if the new owner proves better than the old one. Nor do I think it will help to liberate women. It may constitute a short term increase in power for some women *within the gender system as it exists*; but it will be at the price of renouncing the perspective of one day obliterating this dividing line: of renouncing the objective of having the gender system disappear. □



A longer version of this article is forthcoming in *Women's Studies International Forum*



Cath Jackson

Coming out in the Cold

Russian lesbians and gays are fighting new laws on sexuality which, for the first time ever, cover sex between women. Cath Jackson talks to Olga Zhuk, president of the Tchaikovsky Foundation, a lesbian and gay group based in St Petersburg, about the proposed new criminal code and about growing up lesbian in Russia. Liz Trott interprets.

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ФОНД КУЛЬТУРНОЙ ИНИЦИАТИВЫ И ЗАЩИТЫ СЕКСУАЛЬНЫХ МЕНЬШИНСТВ ИМЕНИ П.И. ЧАЙКОВСКОГО

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Cath Jackson: When was the Tchaikovsky Foundation formed and why?

Olga Zhuk: On 30th July 1990 gay and lesbian people in Leningrad (now St Petersburg) got together and decided to form this organisation - although there had been work before that.

In May of 1990 there was a new democratic Leningrad soviet (city authority) and therefore there appeared a real possibility of registering the organisation.

To make an organisation legal it's absolutely essential to go through a series of bureaucratic procedures. That is called registration and you can be blocked at every stage.

Before that time only the communist party and organisations attached to it existed. People of many kinds and many organisations then began to register. As soon as the possibility arose we all took advantage of it.

This was the founding group which consisted of various people, of various sexual orientations - not only homosexuals, lesbians and bi-sexuals, but straight people too, which is naturally very strange to the West but nevertheless it is like that in Russia.

At the moment the Foundation consists of a core group of people who are not afraid to take open action, and a kind of 'shadow cabinet'. Among the people who are not afraid to speak out openly are very many artists, painters and well-known

people, which is very important for the Foundation. In the 'shadow cabinet' are various people, including members of the Russian Parliament (soviet deputies) who are homosexual.

CJ: Presumably they do not feel able to come out as gay?

OZ: The only people to talk openly about our problems are the heterosexual deputies and doctors caring for people with AIDS.

CJ: What are the aims, the objectives of the Foundation?

OZ: The full title is the Tchaikovsky Foundation for Cultural Initiatives and the Defence of Sexual Minorities. Its aims are the defence of gay rights, the study of our cultural heritage, the development of homosexual art and charitable activity in relation to people who have been convicted of homosexual crimes and people with AIDS. Mostly gay people but not all.

CJ: Were there any organisations for gays and lesbians before the Foundation was formed?

OZ: In Moscow, around the newspaper "Tema", which means "The Theme". Then in Russia there is the Libertarian Party, which registered on the 14th June 1990. This is a party very much like the Italian Radical Party, which defends the interests of all minorities. I am a member of this Libertarian Party too. Most of the people involved are in Moscow. We talk about them as two separate groups, the news-

paper "Tema" and the Libertarian Party, but they are all the same people.

CJ: You were arrested last year. Was that connected to your work with the Foundation?

OZ: In Russia there are two concepts: one is being 'held' and the other is 'arrest'. I was 'held'.

It was one of a whole series of events which followed our first attempt to register. People attacked me on my staircase, stole the key to my flat, stole my documents and threatened me.

The reason was "confirmation of identity". They arrested me near my home, held my arms behind my back, asked me to show my documents - which I always carry with me - and even so they held me for three hours and threatened me. My mother rang a friend of hers; her friend rang the prosecutor of the organisation which keeps a check on police and militia activities; he telephoned them - and they released me.

Legislation threat

CJ: What is the legal situation on homosexuality in Russia?

OZ: Under the old Article 121 of the Russian penal code, consensual anal sex between men was punishable with a sentence up to five years in a camp - prison in Russia is only a kind of holding place; you always get sent to a camp after that. Sex between women was not mentioned.

Article 121 is the criminal code covering all laws on sexuality and sexual activity. It includes statutes on infection with venereal disease and AIDS, on rape, on under-age sex and on homosexuality. They have been reviewing Article 121 for many years and now they are proposing a new article in which consenting sex between men is no longer illegal. But there will be a new statute, statute 132, which would punish non-consensual sex between men and non-consensual lesbian sex with sentences of up to three years (the same as for heterosexual rape under statute 131).

It is the first time ever in the Russian criminal code that the word "lesbian" is included. Our people have been acknowledged!

CJ: Why do you think it was not included before?

OZ: Russia is a very patriarchal society which presumes that women don't have a sexuality of their own and are in general not capable of a free choice in that regard. Besides which it is a totalitarian society in which only men are important: husband, father and warrior.

CJ: So why do you think lesbians are now included?

OZ: It's completely inscrutable because a few months ago, when one of our friends



Olga Zhuk at the House of Lords while visiting Europe earlier this year.

Photo: Gordon Rainsford

Statute 131

Rape (1) Rape, that is sexual relations with the use of physical violence, threats or the utilization of the helpless state of the female victim - is punishable by the restriction of personal freedom for a period of up to three years or the deprivation of personal freedom for a period of up to three years.

(2) Rape, committed as a repeat offence, or by a person having before committed the acts stipulated in Statute 127 of this Code, and also committed by a group - is punishable by the deprivation of personal freedom for a period of up to eight years.

(3) Rape, committed by an especially dangerous repeat offender or having through carelessness caused the death of the female victim or any other serious consequences, and equally the rape of a minor female known by the guilty party to be under fourteen years of age - is punishable by the deprivation of personal freedom for a period from eight to fifteen years.

who is a lawyer saw the projected code, that whole statute 132 was not included. The statutes about sexual difference were all differently phrased. So I don't know.

They have been reviewing the Russian criminal code act over about 15 years and each section is worked on by a different person. The section about sexuality was done by a professor of legal affairs, a very good person, very intelligent. About six months ago someone told me certain other people were looking at the section and making changes in it, but who they are I don't know.

Having taken away the ban on consensual sex between men, they hope that everyone will think they are great democrats. It is a very cunning code. Not only is there a split between homosexual and heterosexual acts; in the way it is written it would be very easy to add at the next stage when it goes to the Supreme Soviet (for final ratification) another bit about consensual sex.

CJ: Haven't things improved since Yeltsin came to power?

OZ: That is a big mistake people in the west make. No democratisation has taken place. There's only a play of democracy. One totalitarian regime has been replaced by another, 'democratic' totalitarian regime. The Russian mentality doesn't know another path; it only knows black and white. And more so since the people who made it happen were all communists. Nothing has been turned upside down; everything is just the same.

CJ: Is the Foundation now legal?

OZ: Since 5 November (1991). That is an improvement from one point of view, but from another not. It's very useful for the KGB to have a legal organisation because they can keep a check on it more easily. Second, we have now come across extreme difficulty because before, when we weren't registered, if we wanted to hold a conference or something similar, we would make an agreement with the city authorities under a false name. Now we do it under our own name and we are refused everywhere. The reasons are "It's not the kind of thing we do"... "We haven't the space"... "We're booked up"...

CJ: What are attitudes towards gays and lesbians like generally, among the general public?

OZ: The official data of sociologists - they've done a survey of the population - say that 30 per cent of Soviet citizens are for isolation of homosexuals and 33 per cent are for liquidation of homosexuals.

Ordinary people, many of them laugh at homosexuality; they think that homosexual people are ill. A lot of the Leningrad deputies laugh at me. They think I'm such a cute person, why don't I sleep with men? They think that lesbians have to be ugly. They are patronising. I have worked with these people for a year, I thought they understood really well. But the majority of people think a woman who becomes a lesbian just needs a really good fuck.

Lesbian life

CJ: So what's it like to grow up lesbian in Russia?

OZ: It's a fucker! The basic problem of homosexuals is loneliness, particularly for young people. Most of them don't know

any other homosexuals, apart from their friend.

The Foundation does not go in for dating, but "Tema" does. But every single letter we get, particularly from the provinces, is about "I don't know how I can live", "I'm so lonely", "I don't know where I can find anybody who is like me". There are very many attempts at suicide.

CJ: So how do lesbians and gays meet each other?

OZ: For men there is cruising - if you can call that 'meeting' - in public toilets, that kind of thing. For women such places don't exist. Usually when a woman gets to about 25, 27 she has made a circle of friends, a little community, which consists of old lovers, present lovers and future lovers. Everybody makes their own little community. And the circle is quite small; only about six or eight people.

CJ: How do you build that circle?

OZ: Well it happens! There's the women you knew, the women you know and the women you get to know.

Most women are married, because you are expected to and because women don't identify as lesbians. It's not just the communist ideology, it's the Russian mentality. There was a very short period of development of lesbian and gay culture among the bourgeoisie in Russia from roughly 1905 to the first world war and then a few splashes in the '20s and '30s, particularly in the '20s, but very little. For a Russian person, it's a taboo subject.

CJ: So how do women know to define themselves as lesbian, where there is no context, no examples of out lesbians to look to?

OZ: That's why it takes so long for this 'circle' to appear, for women to make the decision that that is who they are.

For many the path is made more easy by experiences in prison. There is a kind of system of sexual relations between women in women's prisons. It's the only place where a sub-culture of lesbianism has been preserved. The intellectual climate of the 1920s is already long gone and any tradition of lesbian 'high culture' is completely broken. But in prison a kind of sub-culture has continued, which is very patriarchal with very solid distinctions between role

Statute 132

Sex between men or the gratification of sexual lust in any other perverted forms

(1) Sex between men, lesbianism or gratification of sexual lust in any other perverted forms, committed with the use of physical violence, threats or the utilization of the helpless state of the victim, male or female - is punishable by the restriction of personal freedom up to three years or the deprivation of personal freedom from two to three years.

(2) The same acts, committed twice or by a person who earlier has committed rape, and also committed by a group - is punishable by the deprivation of personal freedom for a period from five to seven years.

(3) Acts, stipulated in the first or second parts of this statute, committed by an especially dangerous repeat offender, or causing through carelessness the death of the victim, or any other serious consequences, and equally the commission of the same acts in relation to a minor, known to the guilty party to be under fourteen years of age - is punishable by the deprivation of personal freedom for a period from seven to twelve years.

behaviour. There are a lot of stone butches in prison, women who dress as men and think of themselves as men and who don't touch. They identify as men to such an extent that they don't touch themselves, their own bodies, at all. They think that whatever they are doing is just for the other woman.

There were forms of lesbian culture - established lesbian circles - outside prison in the past, but now any traditions are in what is known as the 'low' culture: a kind of sub-culture that exists in criminal circles in the big towns; a culture of the 'lumpen proletariat'. It has its own language, its own slang.

So there's this kind of network of criminal groups across the country - a criminal 'archipelago' - and it contains a lesbian culture but one with a very patriarchal attitude and of course no politics.

Political action

CJ: Is it difficult to bring lesbians together in a political group when so few define themselves as lesbians?

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OZ: In general lesbians don't want to work politically. They say that nobody's bothering them, everything's okay: it's much better that no-one should know they are lesbians and they don't want to draw attention to it.

CJ: How many lesbians are involved in the Foundation?

OZ: About six months ago we held a big meeting and there were about ten lesbians, most of whom defined themselves as bisexual, and 40 men.

When we had a big conference in July 1990 in Leningrad, about human rights and AIDS, I rang every single one of my lesbian contacts and on the first day not one of them turned up. Then on the third day every single one of them came. But they turned away from the cameras and didn't want to be seen to be there. They came on the third day because everything seemed to be okay; they weren't going to be beaten up. We set them an example and then they followed it.

CJ: Do you think they felt strengthened by being there in numbers?

OZ: Yes, there were lots of people and lots of foreigners who behaved freely.

CJ: So there are no autonomous lesbian organisations in Russia?

OZ: In Estonia. All very nice women! I put an advert in an Estonian newspaper once saying I wanted to meet Estonian women and letters came from all over Estonia. It's an absolutely tiny country. It consists mostly of small villages - and lesbians! I went to a meeting in Estonia where there were 150 lesbians.

This is because Estonia is a very European country. It only came under Soviet rule in 1940 - a relatively short time - and Finland is just next door. Estonia had the first homosexual conference in May 1990. But even there the lesbians aren't very political. It's more of a social network, a club. They phone each other up, they meet.

CJ: As a woman, how do you feel about working mainly with men?

OZ: We have a very good working relationship. They elected me president, when in all the other gay organisations the

presidents are all men. It greatly lightens their work, that I am a woman. If a woman goes to the official organisations to ask for something, they behave differently than they would to a homosexual man. That's because I am a woman and most of the people I am asking things of are men. It's instinctive - a question of sex! They like me because they think I'm sexy! It's still a strictly official relationship, but they behave differently because I'm a woman.

CJ: Do you have links with a feminist movement in Russia?

OZ: There are only about 15 feminists in Russia! - in Moscow and St Petersburg. One is very, very helpful - her name is Olga Lipovskaya. The others don't want to know. They are worried about being associated with lesbians. It's really hard for them, though. One woman I know, she wrote an article that was purely feminist and she headed it, "I'm not a feminist, but ..." That's very typical in Russia. Feminism is a dirty word and lesbianism is unspeakable. It musn't be said aloud.

CJ: So there's no feminist analysis about lesbian sexuality?

OZ: Feminists do talk about the problem of sexuality. They are just beginning. But from the lesbian side, lesbians tend to identify themselves with the homosexual rather than feminist movement. Both sides are at fault. For instance, abortion doesn't interest me at all. Why should it interest me? And that is common among lesbians.

CJ: What's it like for lesbians and homosexuals in other states?

OZ: In the east, in Asia, the countries are very patriarchal. The lesbians from those countries come to Moscow or Leningrad if they can. But lesbians from these countries all have this notion that if they love women they must be like men.

CJ: The relaxation of the strict communist doctrine has allowed fundamentalist doctrines to revive. Is that a problem for lesbians?

OZ: In the Russian orthodox church there is an element of threat there. They haven't rejected homosexuality officially but they are showing prejudice, even to people with AIDS. In Islamic countries, they kill people who are homosexuals. □

Dicing With Madonna

Madonna claims to offer women a positive model of active female sexuality. Elaine Hawkins challenges our increasing acceptance of the joys of playing with power.

South Bank, London: - July 1991 - I'm at a teacher's conference for 'A' level Media Studies, being addressed by a woman academic who's introduced as "taking her feminism very seriously but who likes to go out dancing". The lecture moves to a criticism of the "politics of despair" which she feels has dominated the women's movement in recent years. She challenges this with the claim that she (along with many other women) doesn't feel oppressed; that she feels strong and 'powerful'. She wants to explore popular culture not for representations of masochistic powerlessness but for the representations it offers of women experiencing active sexual desire.

The lecture focuses on Madonna. Here she feels she has found that positive representation. The lecture and workshop she leads become a celebration of Madonna as strong, powerful, a totally positive image for women in the '90s. I note in passing that she speaks from a very 'privileged' position: white, middle class, heterosexual; a position of lesser oppression.

She inspires her audience to take this 'radical' work back to their classrooms. The general response to her words is gleeful; she offers an opportunity to reach across the generation divide which separates teachers from their students.

Back in the classroom? The attraction of Madonna for teachers has to be related to current interest in post modernism - the fashion in art, literature and the media for quite a while now. 'Re-appropriation' is key to it all - a catch phrase at the heart of all analysis of the post-modern product. Madonna, we are told, takes recognisable cultural signs from one context and reworks them into new meanings in a different context. The pornographic dress of her video *Open Your Heart* is, the argument goes, de-eroticised by its new context use when taken as a whole the video becomes a satire on men's voyeuristic gaze. But, equally plausibly, the final moments of the video in which Madonna dances off along the yellow brick road in the company of a little boy can be read as the wish fulfillment of every not-so-little boy's fantasy; the threatening woman is really a softy. As *Guardian* journalist Derek Malcolm comments with evident relief after an interview with Madonna:

She does appear - and it's the only word that springs readily to mind however feeble - nicer than one would expect from so immensely ambitious and sharp a generator of instant publicity.

Madonna is frequently quoted complaining about the moral majority's inability





ity to appreciate parody in her work. But the video images throughout the *Immaculate Collection* sequence in no way cut out the possibility of straightforward voyeuristic and exploitative gazing. And most of the men I've talked to are doing just that. No amount of talk about her postmodern re-appropriation can change this.

As for the students themselves who are the recipients of the intellectualised Madonna - a positive reception seems like a good bet. I teach at a college in the far south west of Britain where the students I meet in the 17-20 age range are frequently aspiring to leave the intensely tight communities in which they have spent a large proportion - if not all - of their lives. They're from a variety of social backgrounds and often studying at the college because they have rejected the school sixth forms through which they could have been channelled. These students may be far from the metropolitan centres where contemporary styles and images are generated but they're not out of touch. For a number of years now I've been working with young women who challenge the relevance of my feminism to their lives: women with strong up-front personalities who decry what they see as the whingeing analysis of feminism; who believe that women can and should be strong and that women have only personal weakness to blame if they aren't. Often, these women are middle class, committedly heterosexual and celebrate their belief that they won't be oppressed; they won't be victims and if only other young women followed their example - all would be well.

The mass media industries of the past five years have fuelled this post-feminist ideology. It must be acknowledged that Madonna herself has been active in the creation of her own image, but that creation has been allowed precisely because she projects a version of femininity which, despite its apparent radicalism, is not ultimately a challenge to the system. With immense perception, Madonna has keyed into the discontent of many young women and offered a way out. But it is no way out: the image reeks of conservative individualism.

Post-feminist style?

The tabloid press has delighted in sensationalising and exploiting the version of femininity for which Madonna has become an icon; the broadsheets have taken a slightly more muted delight in the new 'post-feminist' style. In July last year, *The Guardian* 'Style' page told us:

The seventies were a grey period in underwear, frillies were undeniably politically unsound and it was only in the sport and fitness boom in the early eighties that underwear came back into fashion. (By the latter part of the decade) breasts were politically sound, proud symbols of the post-feminist, post careerist, post me-ist woman... Like high heels or curve-hugging corsetry, in its nineties reincarnation eyeliner belongs to the new school of glamour wear. The message it sends out is more about parody and power than sexual availability.

On the same page another "unlikely new icon for nineties woman" is being discussed. Paula McGinley takes "as close a look as she dares at 'Tank Girl'":

'She sweats, belches, breaks wind and picks her nose... Lifted from the adult comic DEADLINE, Tank Girl sports biker boots, prefers a spiked club to a handbag and shaves where others would blowdry... Running in the style press until the end of the year, she is a robust component of a three million pound marketing spend. Tank Girl as anti-heroine is not so much selling a product as daring the customer to buy it.'

Madonna and Tank Girl "are both sexual women who are definitely pulling the strings to get what they want".

Okay but does making a mint 'fit' with truly radical politics?

What are women finding so attractive in icons like Madonna and Tank Girl. To begin with, they are representatives of a version of femininity which stresses female heterosexual 'power over' men. Hence one of the appeals to heterosexual feminists. But the issue of 'power over', of dominance and submission, has also infiltrated lesbian sexuality. Cherry Smyth's review (*City Limits* - June 13 - 20 1991) of *Love Bites* by Della Grace described it as "the first book of pro-sex photography for lesbians to be published in Britain." Cherry Smyth celebrates the sado-masochistic images in this book as a "raw, difficult, fantastical

exposure of raunchiness". She continues; approvingly: "Paradoxically, much of it is not explicit but resonates with sexual power". Grace herself is quoted as saying: "I'm not a sicko, a pervert. I'm a strong woman and it's creative and powerful to dress up and be sexual". As far as she's concerned, "Now more women dress for themselves and aren't allowing lesbian sex police dictate how they are".

This language of sexual power, of liberation to dress and be as one wishes, is a direct attack on those who have - on carefully argued political grounds - contended that some forms of behaviour and dress conspire with rather than challenge our oppression.

Power is the key theme. It is a cause for celebration if women can be said to have it - whether it's over men or other women. The central issue, however, is what we mean by power. What Madonna, Della Grace and the post-feminists mean by power is a quite explicitly hierarchical concept; a power which involves a conscious adoption of a position of claiming of lesser power or powerlessness; the mirror image of power under patriarchy. These truths may be obscured by talk about 'control', role play and conscious parody but in the end what we have is the continued representation of eroticised inequality.

What urgently faces those of us not seduced by the allure of these inherently conservative and reactionary expressions of power, is the need to restate a truly radical definition of the power we are seeking in our lives. To do this means to acknowledge the attractions for many women of Madonna's power 'games'; to take seriously the allure of the rapidly shifting roles which Madonna offers up for identification and the power they seem to offer; to recognise the origins of the masochistic and sadistic fantasies which may thread our lives. This acknowledgement and recognition is urgently needed if only because many women are excited by Madonna's persona; are excited by the 'sexual liberation' which S and M seems to offer. But, recognition and acknowledgement are very different to celebration; indeed they must be part of the process whereby we begin to understand just how damaged our desires



have been under patriarchy. In doing this we begin to construct new and truly radical definitions of power.

Teresa De Lauretis has argued in her article 'Guerilla in the Midst - Women's Cinema in the '80s' that many of the movies of the end of the decade - including a film like *Fatal Attraction* - show the violent subjugation of the 'strong' woman character: a narrative patterning which links them with the movies of the '40s when the 'femme fatale' first made her screen debut. In these image constructions, the sexually active female character is shown to be ultimately evil. The moral of the story is always clear - this woman is constructed to be overpowered and we, the audience, are invited to enjoy her suppression both on and off screen. She's a slut.

Madonna plays with the same image construction. She never excludes men from her dramatic fantasy world; her dramas are worked out specifically in relation to them - and she invites their challenge "Hey boys you want to fuck us?" she taunts on stage. The invitation carries with it the potential heightened enjoyment of the overpowering of this woman who has been celebrated on and off stage for her 'control'. The closing frames of the video *Express Yourself*, where Madonna role-played alternatively as power-dressing executive and seductive dumb blonde show the female character being aggressively snatched up by the man who enters her bedroom - a scene which is intercut with shots of macho aggressive wrestling. Madonna's image frequently constructs a fake challenge to men to reassert their control; an old-fashioned cocktease in a new corset. In a celebratory article indicating that feminists should find plenty to applaud in Madonna's sexual challenge, American academic Camille Paglia argues:

Like the potent Barbara Streisand, whose maverick female style had a great impact on girls in the sixties, Madonna is confronting the romantic dilemma of the strong woman looking for a man but uncertain of whether she wants a tyrant or a slave.

This would seem a valid summary of the messages about sexual politics which thread Madonna's performance. Dominance and submission weave their way

through all her work, presented as inevitable and to be played with rather than challenged. Lyrics and images which appear challenging for one moment will contradict or undercut each other at the next. The 'play' becomes tedious but that is precisely what makes Madonna palatable for those who would run a mile if her challenge appeared truly serious.

Many young women have clearly found a delight in Madonna's shifting personas - her ability to switch roles and - so the argument goes - 'control' her reality. Role play and 'control' appear to be two much celebrated phenomena in contemporary sexual politics. For S and M dykes role play is okay because they're in control. For heterosexual young women the opportunity to try on different roles - to experiment in projecting what is experienced as an incredible complexity of self - could be understood as an attempt to project control over lives which are in reality constrained by a multitude of different oppressions. What has to be questioned is the extent to which the 'power' experienced in doing this challenges or escapes the real conditions of their lives. For young working class women without the money and hype of the industry in which Madonna has participated, the power of shifting identities is ultimately illusory; the control extremely shallow. Unprotected by Madonna's privilege, the dangers they may face in playing Madonna's heterosexual 'games' are worrying, to say the least.

For white, middle class, privileged women heterosexual power over men may be a compelling fantasy, but for the majority of women in our society the engagements we have to make with power are more complex and contradictory. 'Pussy' doesn't rule the world, even though Madonna would have it so. In a racist, patriarchal, classist, heterosexist society where women continue to be discriminated against, at worst violently constrained and abused, it would be consoling to think that it can all be changed in the bedroom. Madonna's jubilant, "Hey girls, use your sexual power, it's about the only power you've got in this world" in fact hits the nail on the head. Sexual power is likely to yield very little for very few in a world where

women are oppressed in every dimension of the public and private spheres.

Madonna ignores this fact; tempts us with the offer of uncritical indulgence of our 'pleasures'. And those of us who refuse this seduction are taunted - not this time by men but by other feminists - for our lack of sense of play.

Women in their power-dressing costumes operating as 'equals' in the world of men have succumbed to men's vision of a world based on 'power over'. It's fools gold and it's still men who are setting the agenda. There are plenty of temptations to seduce us from our different visions - perhaps the most compelling of which is the view that it is possible to climb the hierarchies and, having achieved power over others, change the structures of thinking which we secretly abhor. But it doesn't work; in any profession radicalism is concentrated at the lowest layers; you don't 'rise' if you express a politics which challenges the very foundation of the hierarchical system of which you are a part. Self destruction of the racist, patriarchal, capitalist society isn't the name of today's, or tomorrow's, game. Sinead O'Connor, not always the most radical in her thinking, expresses a simple logic when she says:

Imagine if you got the most popular people in the music industry together... that as artists we've given our power away to this industry and let's take it back... If we withdrew like that we could take our power back instantly.

The reality for many women in the early '90s is a position of engaged withdrawal. Many of us are engaged in the system as we struggle for economic survival in the patriarchal, racist, capitalist, 'power over' world. We construct our challenges against that system and its subtle and overt forms of abuse from within. However - as ever - we need to forge strong networks which explicitly challenge the seduction of 'power over'; networks which acknowledge but also analyse the desires which we find in ourselves for a short-term sense of 'power over', whether in our private or our public lives. We have to acknowledge that desires and sexuality which are shaped out of eroticised inequality hold no radical potential.

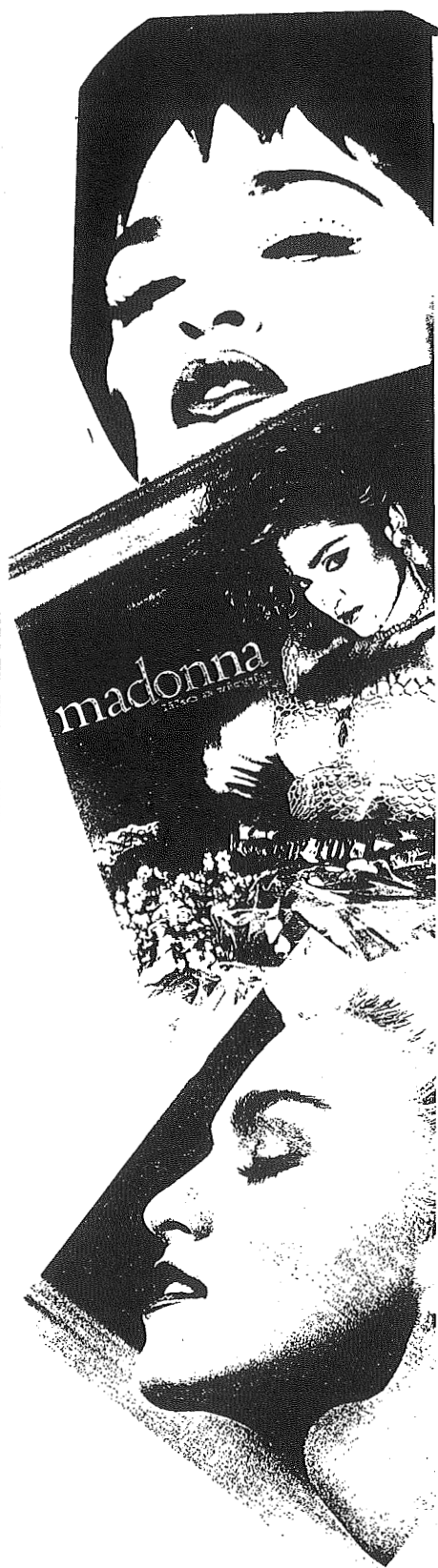
Madonna and Tank Girl will con-

tinue to mount their 'challenge' to titillate men. Some will be threatened; some academics will love Madonna for her 'rich' resource of cultural symbols and their post-modern 're-appropriation'. Some lesbians and feminists will see in her a validation of those dominance/submission desires which they would rather legitimate than confront and re-assess. Many young women will be impressed by the image of sexual activity that Madonna offers and be drawn to the apparent 'power' of role playing and the illusory control it offers. It's an image which will last them a while but, when brought out of the bedroom into the world of exploitation, it's an image which will prove sadly lacking.

In 20 years' time we will look back on the '80s and '90s as a period similar to the '60s, when superficial progress in the conditions of women's lives obscured continued inferiority and subjugation. Madonna, Tank Girl and post-feminism declare women have the freedom to do and wear what they like; to have a good time as sexually active women, but the focus is still on their men. Their message is only valid as celebration of power over men; a 'game' which interpretes submission as also 'powerful'.

It's a 'game' which some lesbians have also chosen to 're-appropriate' but the meanings don't change that easily. The only radical and real progress lies along a much more perplexing and challenging path. The more we know about the circumstances of women's lives - women from all different social and cultural backgrounds - the more there is to understand and the more there is to challenge. And we won't understand it or challenge it by fighting for 'power over' others. It can't be done by 'dressing to kill' on the dance floor, because in the end the sexual movements we thought we controlled emerge as nightmarishly out of our grasp. □

Teresa de Lauretis, 'Guerilla in the Midst - Women's Cinema in the 80s' *Screen* Vol. 31 No. 1, Spring 1990.



Gang Rape in the Townships

Mary Masechaba Mabaso is a community activist in Soweto. She is director of the Sechaba Training Centre - a project of the Interdenominational Prayer Women's League. In 1990 she organised the first protest march against sexual assault to take place in a South African township. Here Diana Russell talks to her about sexual violence in Soweto.

Diana Russell: Can you describe the general problem of sexual assault and sexual murder in Soweto today?

Mary Masechaba Mabaso: In the olden days if the man or the boy loved a girl he had to talk to her. And if the girl didn't love him, he could not risk raping her. But nowadays, if a boy proposes to the girl and she doesn't agree to the proposal, he often rapes her. Then she will end up being his lover because she will say, "What can I do? You have already raped me".

The victims today range in age from four to seventy-five years, but most of them are young students. In the past, rape was mainly done by individuals. For example, a girl who didn't want to fall in love with a particular boy was eventually grabbed and raped by him. But recently, gangs have started terrorizing girls, taking them to some other place from the streets, from the schools, and from their homes. These girls can be raped for a whole week without their parents knowing where they are.

Some girls are tempted by the boys who say, "Let's go and enjoy ourselves for the day - as a friend". But they don't know the boys' real intentions. At the end of the day the boys rape them. If the boys know the girls, they often kill them afterwards because they know that otherwise the girls will tell their parents and everybody else they know who it was who raped them. Many of the girls who are sexually abused are killed - not only by boys - but also by adults who rape children of fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen years old.

If they know you and they rape you, you are fortunate if they don't kill you.

DR: How does the community respond when this happens?

MMM: We get a lot of calls every day at the training centre. Just now I was busy with a call from a woman who wants us to go to the East Rand to tell the women there how to organize a protest. Because it seems that raping is a fashion in our townships nowadays. It is a new style where men do not need to propose to a girl, they just go for her. So girls are afraid all the time. Instead of going out to the theatre with their boyfriends, they need their brothers next to them. But another really disappointing thing is that even brothers now attempt to rape their own sisters. And when we've had meetings with women and children we've found out that a large number of children have also been abused by their fathers.

DR: Are you referring to sexual abuse?

MMM: Yes. When you leave your child alone in the home, she is not safe. And in the street, she is not safe. And in the school, she is not safe. There is nowhere that she can walk and be safe. Girls are afraid somebody in a car will stop them and say, "Get in". When they walk in the street they are raped by men with guns. Sexual abuse happens so much that some students stop going to school.

The police say that rape is decreasing. But we say it is not. The majority of victims stay in their houses too afraid to go to the police because the police often harass them if they do report to them.



The Jackrollers

MMM: "Jackrolling" means to kidnap and rape girls. To molest. Jackrollers are a group that formed to rape children. Usually more than five of them rape a girl at one time. It is part of the game they are playing. Their aim is to molest all the girls by the age of twenty six.

DR: How many Jackrollers are there?

MMM: There are many in all the townships, though some rapists aren't called Jackrollers. But in all parts of the townships we have school kids who are Jackrollers. They are there for raping, nothing else.

Sometimes they go to school with guns and say, "Teacher, please, we want so-and-so". And because the teacher is afraid of the guns, he or she will release the girl. The girl is innocent, she does not even know them. They also rape children who are not even in primary school.

DR: When did the Jackrollers start?

MMM: In late 1976 the schools in Soweto were closed down because of the unrest. When the schools were opened again, many students were too old to go back because the government has set twenty-one years old as the age limit for attending school. So these students could only go to adult school. But some of them didn't like adult school; others were no longer interested in any kind of school. These boys were really frustrated. There was no work for them because they were not qualified for any job, so they had nothing to do. Also there was a tsotsi (hoodlum) element among them. So they started a gang called the Jackrollers.

The Jackrollers are jealous of others who can attend school while they cannot. They rape the girl students to get them pregnant so they will not be able to go back to school.

... as long as women live in fear of men, solidarity against state violence will not be achieved.

Rape Crisis — Capetown

Although the school students used to be against the Jackrollers, some of them - including boys as young as thirteen joined them and started raping children in the classrooms and in the homes.

DR: You said that raping girls has become a fashion in Soweto. How did this happen? What caused this?

MMM: We can't just criticize the men because there are also women who do not bother about their bodies. They go out late in the evening - at midnight - and what do they expect after that? On the other hand, men nowadays think that women who walk in the evening are after men, but this is not the case.

DR: Are you saying that women sometimes put themselves at risk of being raped?

MMM: Yes.

DR: But no woman wants to be raped.

MMM: No, they don't want to be raped. They believe that in their township they must be able to walk free as long as they know where they are going. But it is always dangerous to walk late in the evening because these guys



are on every corner. And they are so arrogant that they feel they must terrorize women to scare them. Sometimes they use a toy gun. Women are afraid to die so they have to accept the boys' abuse so that maybe at the end of the day the boys will let them go, and they can go home and report the matter.

I remember one girl in Orlando West who was raped a year ago by five boys. On the day of the court case, a group of boys took that girl into a field and raped her again. The trial is still going on because whenever there is a hearing, the (first) boy who raped her doesn't turn up in court. So there is no end to it. Is there any future for that girl?

DR: Were the second group of boys punishing the girl for reporting the rape?

MMM: Yes, yes. And they told her she must not report what they did. She must lie or cancel the case.

Drugs are another problem. Some drugs aren't healthy for our boys. They are being sold to young and old alike. These drugs are influencing them to commit sexual abuse. Some of our boys now start smoking dagga (marijuana) at the ages of ten, thirteen, or fifteen. After smoking dagga, they need something to eat. If they don't have enough food, it makes them very aggressive and they go after women. And then there's alcohol. In the olden days, people who drank were old enough, but nowadays a boy of thirteen years old can drink in the shebeens (illegal bars). Students are now going there to drink, and if when they leave they find some girls on the street, they grab them and take them for the whole night. Sometimes a girl of fifteen has been grabbed by five youths who keep her the whole night. After that, that girl may never meet a boy for the rest of her life.

Some girls come to a shebeen ignorant that at the end of the night the very boys that are with them are going to be their husbands that evening.

DR: The boys will rape the girls?

MMM: Yes. Another thing is that long ago we did not have television. I understand that in other countries people are used to seeing sex on television. Sex to them is not private. But in our tradition, sex is a private thing and you have to respect it. Nowadays our children are seeing whatever appears on television, like boys and men and women in bed. They

are not used to this sort of thing, but they go for it.

DR: Are you talking about ordinary television or about videos?

MMM: The videos that you can get nowadays. You can just rent them from shops in Soweto and in town. Another thing is the films from other countries that are being shown here now. Most South Africans are interested to see what other countries are doing, but we have never before seen things like some of them are showing. Now we realize that these other countries are not worried about sexual abuse. They do it in public whereas with us, it is a curse.

The boys here are now taking advantage of what they are seeing. They want to sit with a girl and kiss her. But that is not our nature. It is not our culture. Boys nowadays want to practise what has never before been practised in our country.

DR: So these movies are causing a breakdown in traditional values?

MMM: Yes. Nowadays you do not go out with a man expecting that at the end of the day he will marry you. But at the end of the day you are pregnant. You bear the child and then you start a new life with somebody else. We have the pill now but unfortunately some girls don't consider how to use it.

DR: Is the breakdown in traditional values also caused by apartheid? Because of the fight to get rid of it, many political activists who are parents have been detained, which also causes broken homes, lack of supervision of children, and so on.

MMM: But everybody in prison is not there because of apartheid. Apartheid is not the problem when it comes to sexual abuse because what is happening now within the townships is black-on-black violence.

The March

DR: Why did you decide to organise a march?

MMM: When the abuse was not coming to an end, and after we heard the cry from the students at the schools, and from the streets, Maggie Nkwe and I got together with concerned mothers, and we said, "We parents cannot stand this any more!". We were worried about the lives and the futures of our children. So we decided we would march in the street to protest about rape and sexual abuse.

We wanted to show the rapists that we are not happy because we are afraid we will never have the mothers of tomorrow. We are afraid that when these children get married they might not even bear children. The whole life of the poor child is damaged and there is no future for her. If people know a girl was raped, no-one will marry her. And others can now come and rape her because she has been raped before. She will never be safe. It is not a healthy thing to be sexually abused because at the end of the day you might become permanently injured because some of your organs have been worn out before their time. And some women who have been raped are afraid to tell doctors or policemen because they are so afraid that their rapists will get back at them for telling.

DR: Why did you set out to have a women's march?

MMM: Because we bear the children, we are most concerned not only for our children but also for the female children who are still busy with their studies. We are concerned about what all this sexual abuse will do to the futures of our girls. Men must not treat it as a game or think that at the end of the day there will be no damage. There is great damage in sexual abuse.

DR: You keep referring to the women participants as "concerned mothers". Didn't non-mothers participate?

MMM: Yes they did, but according to our language here in South Africa, we call women mothers once they are over the age of twenty-five. It is a word of respect. All women are mothers.

DR: Are men over the age of twenty-five all called fathers?

MMM: No. But here in Johannesburg, when a man gets married, he is called a man. Before that he is a boy, a teenager.

The Interdenominational Prayer Women's League believes in using peaceful methods instead of violence to protest against sexual abuse. At first we just wanted to make an open space to pray for the situation in our township, including sexual abuse. But when we saw that the amount of rape was getting higher and higher, especially at the schools, Leah Tutu said, "Mary, we have prayed enough! Let us now go marching". So we mothers organised this protest. We decided last year (in 1989), to

march in February of this year. From the beginning there were threats, but Maggie and I stood up and said, "We are going to do it!". We didn't care whether people would kill us or not.

I wrote to the chief magistrate of Johannesburg explaining why we were going to protest and to ask for permission to do this, because whenever you do anything like a march in South Africa, you have to get permission. It was the first time in South Africa that women demonstrated in the streets against sexual assault. Before, women had only demonstrated against apartheid.

After getting permission, I notified the press and sent letters to different organisations to tell them that we will meet on such and such a day, where we will start the procession, and that we will have prayers at the end. We then invited women from all the other organisations and concerned mothers to join us. Women came from groups like the South African Council of Churches and POWA (People Opposed to Women Abuse) and supported the project for the whole day.

There were a lot of women who came as early as eight o'clock on the morning of Saturday, February 3rd. We carried placards saying why we are against the rapists, and why we are against sexual abuse, and the damage that it does. We asked everybody to make their own placards, and there were lots of different ones, like: "Stop Rape Because You Are Damaging the Future of the Young Girls", "Sexual Abuse is a Curse", "Don't Think this is the Right Approach to the Young Ones", and "Hands Off Our Children". The last one referred particularly to the fathers because of the crisis we have of fathers abusing their own children.

And as we walked from one township to another, more and more people joined us - male and female, girls and boys. We marched six kilometers through the streets of Soweto that day. From Diepkloof we marched past Orlando and Orlando West, then proceeded up past the Mandelas' house to the mountain. We were aware that by marching in the street we were going to meet the rapists because they knew about our protest. The women were scared about what the rapists might do, but we marched bravely anyhow. We reminded ourselves that they are also our children.

We thought that men would maybe be against us and force us to leave the street, but

I must tell you that the men in the taxis hooted at us and said, "Well done!". We were shocked and excited that men joined us, even some of the youth.

Our march ended at the mountain where we held a prayer service. The main speakers for the day were myself, Maggie Nkwe, and Leah Tutu. We said, "God. Listen to what we are asking. Here is the situation. Be with us. Let the children change from whatever they are and be normal and respect themselves so that the girls can go back to school".

The impact of the march

MMM: You know how when you organize something you don't know whether people will accept it or not? Well, immediately afterwards everybody was saying, "When are you doing the next one?"; "This is the right approach", and, "You were brave".

Even the reputation of the Jackrollers started going down in the very place in Orlando where they used to stay. There isn't such a lot of noise about them any more. Even they were saying, "Did you see the ladies who were protesting?". They are now seeing that what they were doing is definitely not supported by the community. Although I cannot say there is no more sexual abuse; it still goes on, but the protests have played a big role not only in Soweto but in the whole of South Africa.

Some people said, "Thank you!" because the number of rapes is now reduced. Even the policemen were excited about that. Now whenever there is a crisis of rape, they phone us. I told the policemen that it is their duty to normalize the township with regard to sexual abuse. So they are now really trying to do better. When I talk to the top brigadier about a case, he finds out what is happening with it, then gets back to me about it.

I asked him about a case in Orlando where a child was waiting since the morning for a policeman to take her to the doctor. I said to him, "I want to know about this". At the end of the day, a policeman asked me if

I had heard anything from the family. I said, "Yes, the policeman came and took the child to the doctor". So there is now a good relationship between us and the police. They are now aware of our objectives and we are aware that there are certain obstacles for them since most of the victims do not report their abuse.

DR: What sort of coverage did your march get in the newspapers?

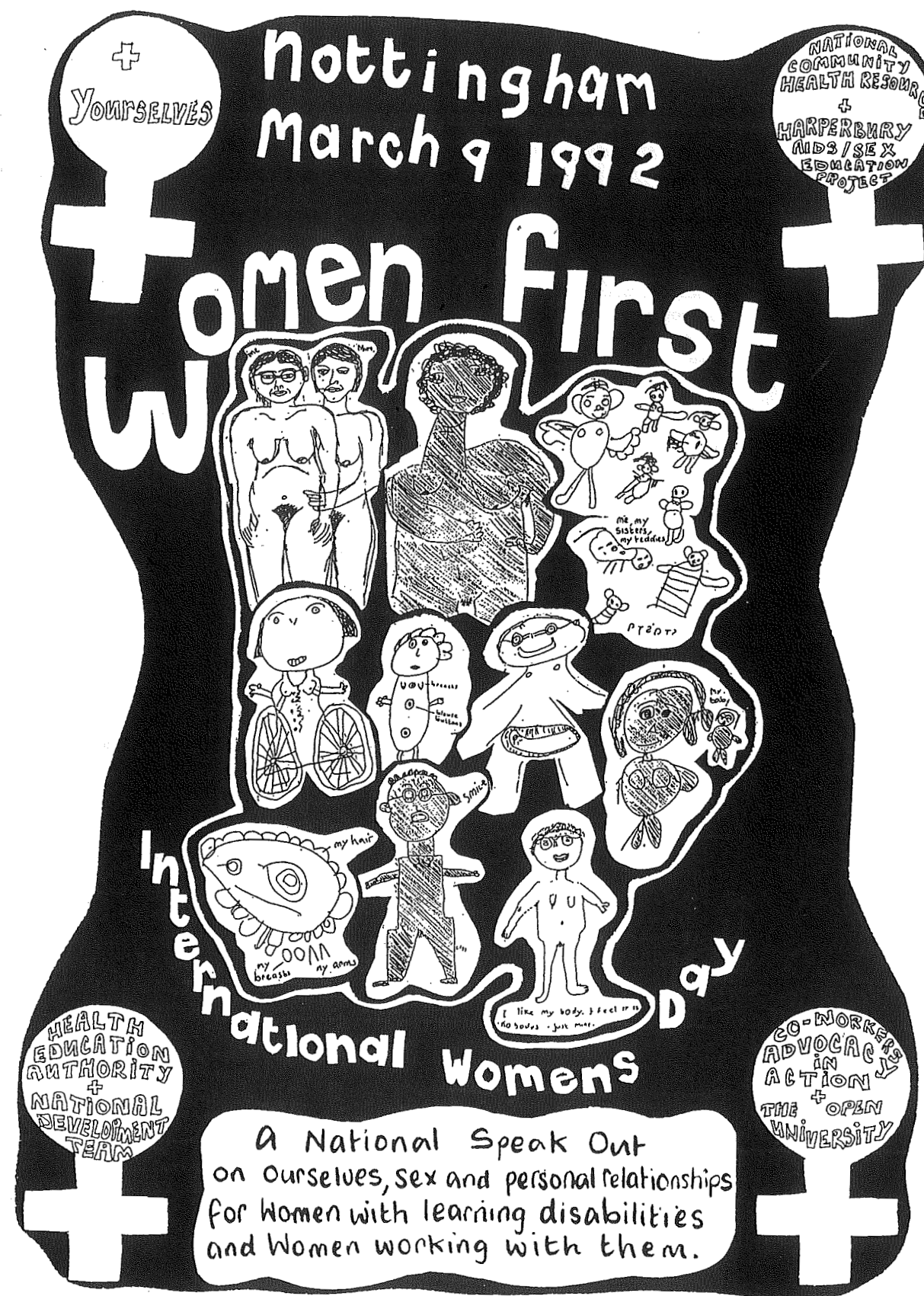
MMM: We invited the South African Broadcasting Company (SABC), *The Star*, and *The Sowetan*. The SABC stayed with us from beginning to end and interviewed me at the end of the march. It was on the evening news. It made history.

After the march, we went to Pretoria to meet Erica van Zyl, the top lady in the prisons. I got permission from the Pretoria Police Station to see her because I felt I could not share these concerns with a man. I wanted to share them with a woman who is a mother and who is open, and who can be made to understand. There is a rape unit in Pretoria which is being run professionally. We wanted to see this rape unit so that we can also have a rape unit in Soweto staffed by women police and members of the community.

I have been invited to talk to the women in the East Rand about how they can protest because they also have a big problem of rape and sexual abuse. I think after that we will be going from township to township or maybe from city to city.

We are just thinking about whether we can have a Rape Crisis Centre in Soweto and I would definitely like to get into contact with the POWA people.

We also want to get together with the police and members of the community to talk about sexual abuse. We want the media to cover this so that rapists will see that everybody is aware of what they are doing. And we want the police to have more power so that they won't release rapists so quickly before anything can be done to change



REPORT
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This March the first national conference for women with learning difficulties and women who work with them was held in Nottingham. Yola Jacobsen reports on the conference and explores its significance.

I am a self advocacy tutor working in adult education, facilitating discussion groups for people with learning difficulties. Learning difficulty is a label given to people with a wide range of skills and abilities, it includes people who when younger would have gone to special schools and people who need support in their daily lives because of a difficulty in learning.

The aims of self advocacy groups are to bring students together as a cohesive group, to encourage them to talk and listen to each other, to increase confidence in their verbal and decision-making skills and self awareness. Self advocacy is a two way process: as people are speaking up for themselves it is important to listen to and respect what they are saying, this may not be what you expected them to say and can challenge one's ideas about and expectations of people with learning difficulties. Self advocacy is about empowerment, one person may become more confident about every day decisions in their lives, another person may become involved in the political act of speaking up at a meeting about rights for people with learning difficulties.

The Self Advocacy Movement

The Self Advocacy movement is people with learning difficulties speaking for themselves and organising together to be heard. Originating in Sweden in the late 1960s, the Self Advocacy Movement developed in Canada and the United States in the 1970s, where it was referred to as the "last of the Civil Rights movements". The movement was established in Britain in 1984 with the setting up of the People First of London and Thames District group. People First is,

... an organisation for people who are self advocates and who want to speak up for their rights and put new ideas forward and have a better position. It's for people who've been labelled mentally

handicapped, though we don't like that word. We call them 'friend' or 'people with learning disabilities' or we call them by their name which is the proper way of introducing somebody.¹

Developing independence

Recently, many people with learning difficulties are being encouraged to live more independently, for instance, by moving out of long-stay institutions into staffed housing in the community or from a hostel into their own flat. Self advocacy has an important role to play as people are having more opportunities to take on more responsibilities and choices in their lives. One group of women I know who moved out of long-stay hospital into the community four years ago, often talk about how their lives used to be run by the daily routine of an institution. For example everyone went to bed at 'lights out'. They talked about how it felt making their own decision on when to go to bed. One woman initially found it difficult to make this choice and stayed up very late. Eventually she got used to taking responsibility for herself and found it easier to make a decision which suited her and which meant she wasn't tired the next day.

Specific issues for women

Travelling independently and being able to go out on your own is an issue for many people with learning difficulties. However, women who have the skills to travel independently are less likely to want or be allowed to travel on their own, than are men.

It is hard for ordinary women to go out, but they have husbands or boyfriends. Women with a handicap can't really go out.

My mum would let me go more places if I had a boyfriend. My sister has a boyfriend and she goes out every night in his car.²

Women students have told me, on numerous occasions, of incidents when they have

been harassed when travelling on their own. After a discussion on this, one group were keen to arrange some self defence sessions for themselves. Women only groups are used in self advocacy, as elsewhere, because they offer non-threatening supportive forums where women can talk about their experiences as women.

I have worked in groups where women have expressed great frustration and sometimes grief over the lack of control and choice they have over their sexual relationships and motherhood. They may experience considerable conflict when the encouragement to live independently excludes taking control over these areas of life.

People like us don't have babies. No one in the centre does apart from staff. Some people have their stomachs taken out.²

Sexuality for women (as also for men) with learning difficulties has been largely ignored or suppressed and controlled. Issues of sexuality are beginning to be addressed but it remains a controversial area. Work with older women who have lived in institutions, to help them recognise their right to have and express a sexuality is in the early stages of development. Women frequently talk about their experiences of sexual harassment and abuse. They discuss the lack of control they have been allowed to have over their bodies and of forced abortions, sterilisation and other operations.

It would be wrong to give the impression that when talking about women with learning difficulties and sexuality it is all about being a victim. Sexuality for women is about choice and a positive expression of feelings. The development of self advocacy skills can enable women to have control over and to speak for themselves about their sexuality.

Black women

Black women have stated that although sexism in education played an insidious role in their lives, it was racism which most heavily influenced their experience. In the 1960s many Afro-Caribbean children were labelled educationally sub-normal (ESN), because the education system failed to recognise its class/cultural bias which led to many Afro Caribbean children 'failing'. In



the 1970s, "disruptive units and special schools (took) over where ESN schools left off."³ In the words of one woman who found herself in a disruptive unit, "They treated us as if we were mentally handicapped".

These children are adults now in the 1990s. I have worked with some Afro Caribbean women students who have been labelled as having a learning difficulty simply because the education system failed to cater for their needs when they were children. Consequently, they responded with behaviour which was deemed disruptive or indicative of educational subnormality. For all Black people with learning difficulties the racist education system will have had an impact on their identity, self esteem and learning.

Self concept and self esteem

Women students I work with have very often had their self esteem lowered because of attitudes towards their learning difficulty. This is what one particular woman with a learning difficulty was told at school.

They said I was unteachable, that I couldn't be taught anything. That's why I had to leave.²

It wasn't until 1971 that the government officially recognised that people with learning difficulties were not 'ineducable'. However, just over twenty years later in 1992 women with learning difficulties have been involved in organising their first national conference.



A National Speak Out

International Women's Day 1992: the first national conference for women with learning difficulties, - "Women First: Speak Out" was held in Nottingham. The conference was organised by Advocacy in Action, a Nottingham based group which describes itself as a "Disability Equality Collective":

We are an unpaid worker collective working nationally on issues of disability equality, community development and 'user-involvement' in planning, provision and evaluation of services... we are mostly people with learning difficulties and some supporters. We have left the hospitals and institutions behind us. Now we run our own business. No one is in charge. We call ourselves co-workers.

They provide a range of services including information, public speaking, training and consultancy and advocacy. Every Friday there is a women's group for women co-workers who work at the Advocacy in Action office. I went along to visit the group to talk about their involvement in the conference and how the actual day went.

The conference came about when the women co-workers at Advocacy In Action were approached by women from the Open University, the National Community Health Resource, the Harperbury AIDS Awareness/Sex Education project, and the National Development Team who had wanted for some time to plan a conference with and for women with disabilities. Women co-workers from Advocacy In Action were employed as consultants to help with the organisation and running of the conference. The conference was held, in the words of one of the co-workers, "So we could speak out about women and talk to other people who had the same experience."

On the day 240 women came to the conference, which was initially planned for 100 women. At the conference there were "black women, white, caribbean, old women, young women, women in wheelchairs..." Many more women applied to come but couldn't be offered places because of the lack of space. The majority of the women were women with learning difficulties. The conference publicity stipulated that there should be "groups of two women with learning difficulties and one

woman working with them," and "no men, no staff, no experts, no top people..." Women came from all over the country and one group of women who live in a hospital had to fight a section order so they could attend the conference.

As well as a chance to "say fantastic things about" themselves and other women, one of the things women were asked to do in the morning session of the conference was to think about themselves and their bodies. They were asked to draw themselves imagining that they had no clothes on. This had been something the women co-workers from Advocacy In Action had done in their own group and had initially found difficult. The poster to publicise the conference reproduced women's drawings of themselves. Many women at the conference had found the drawings very difficult to do. Speaking personally I would have found this exercise hard to do especially if I was in a group with women I didn't know. This is how some of the women at the conference reacted, as noted on a feedback sheet at the end of the session:

"I like to draw myself."
"It was embarrassing."
"I didn't like it."
"Nice to be able to say good things."
"I liked my picture."

The afternoon session of the conference consisted of workshops which included: Making choices about sex, My right to be a mother, Caring for myself and caring for others (personal relationships), Sexual and physical abuse, Lesbian women workshop, Black women's workshop, HIV and AIDs workshop and Contraceptive advice.

The HIV workshop run by women from Harperbury hospital included women who had spent time living in long-stay hospital. Women were particularly worried about needles and how frequently they had had injections for their medication. It was reported to me that two women needed support and reassurance after this particular workshop because they received daily "needles".

About 40 women turned up to the sexual and physical abuse workshop. Difficult issues were discussed in small groups

Going to the conference

Going to Nottingham with eight other women for the Women First Conference was an extraordinary experience. Apart from the drive up and back in one day and the problem of trying to balance being just one of the group and sometimes needing to enable some of the women I was with, it brought up a lot of issues for me. I realised that the women's movement has never really been open to women with learning difficulties. I am not sure that I have any idea what the answer to this is but I did feel that the Women First Conference was a beginning and that some of us will now begin to address this in a more active way. I talked to some of the women with learning difficulties who I went to Nottingham with, about what they thought of the day. Diane said:

I got upset in the morning because I was a bit nervous. There were too many people; I didn't like it. It was better in the afternoon in the smaller group, I went to the Making Friends workshop. It was strange, it just being with just women; I'm not used to it.

Doris said:

I liked the whole day but it was a bit too crowded; I like smaller groups. I liked

meeting new people and I met someone I knew. I went to the Health workshop. I helped to speak for the group. We talked about feelings in the group and how to deal with them, especially if someone's horrible to you. It was easier to talk about women's problems with just women.

Before we went, I made the decision that I would come out at the conference and that I would go to the lesbian workshop. I am out at work to staff but not to the service users, because there are worries about parents' reactions. However having discovered that Anna was talking about being a lesbian, I suddenly felt very feeble and decided that it was about time I began to be more open about my sexuality. It is after all far easier for me working in an equal opportunities borough than it is for someone with learning difficulties who has problems getting their sexuality acknowledged at all, let alone supported or validated. So Anna and I went to the lesbian workshop together. We talked about what we liked about being lesbians and what was difficult. Anna said:

It was nice for me because I haven't been with a group of lesbians before. I was very pleased when I found out that Kate was a lesbian too. We went to the meeting to support each other.

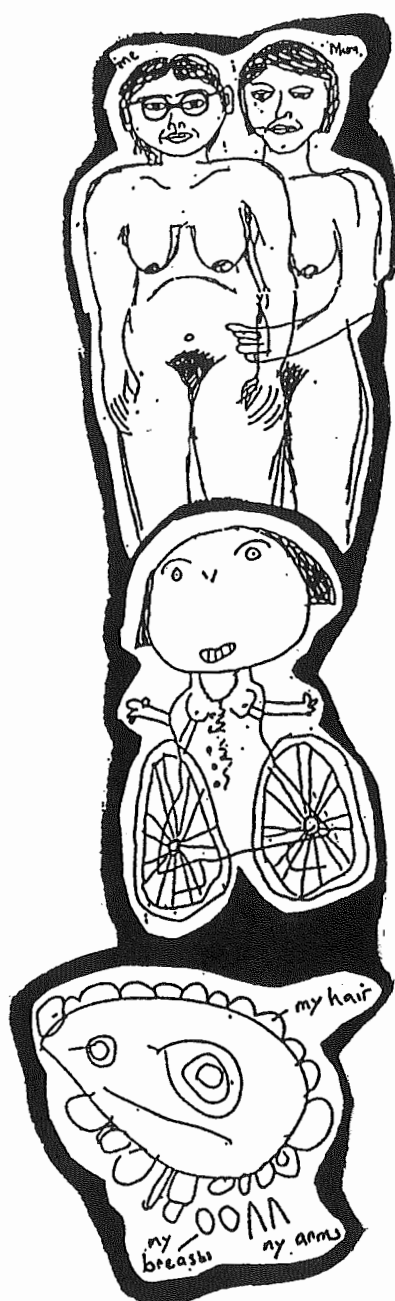
Kate Hall

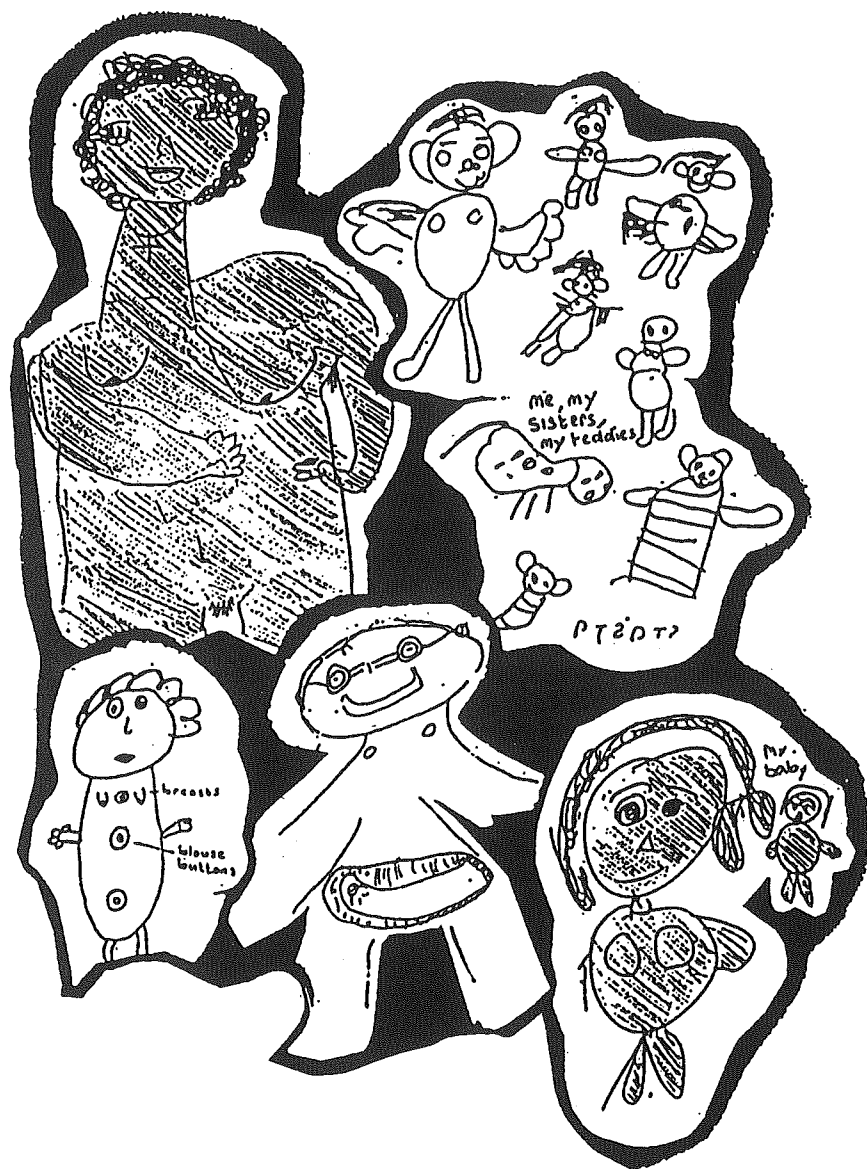
with the workshop leaders starting by sharing their experiences. Women talked about being touched in bad ways and were encouraged to think about saying no and being in control of who touches you. They were asked to fantasise about being big and tall and to draw tiny pictures of their abusers, rip them up and stamp on the pieces of paper. The session ended on a positive note, women acknowledged how brave they had been, "... but also building on real positives with compliments to ourselves and to one another ..." Support was arranged for women who showed signs of distress after the workshops.

One of the leaders of this workshop commented that "It has been our experi-

ence... that women need to talk through these issues urgently and that the best support comes from other disabled women with shared experience. What blocks this from happening is the degree of control done to disabled women by professionals. Once disabled women know it's OK to feel anger and pain, then they inevitably draw on one another's strength and support to validate their feelings..."

The 'control' that professionals exert over women with learning difficulties in such situations, I feel from my own experience, is mostly down to the professionals' own fear. Issues of physical and sexual abuse have regularly come up in women's groups I have worked with. Whilst I feel,





although this help can be found sometimes and this area of work is developing slowly. On one hand I can give an individual space to look at difficult personal issues and not be sure that if they want further support that the support will be available. On the other hand self advocacy is precisely about an individual communicating and having a say: just because what is said is difficult to take on it can't mean that we stop listening or supporting. Clearly there are a lot of issues that urgently need to be addressed here.

Whilst the issues in both of the workshops mentioned above are important and women with learning difficulties need to talk about them, I felt on the one hand admiration that these issues had been tackled in such a direct way at the conference, but on the other hand an unease about the way in which women were being encouraged to confront issues without any assured consistent support once they left the conference. It was encouraging to hear, therefore, that a network - BODY STRONG was set up as a result of the abuse workshop, a self help link network for women who wish to deal with their abuse further. On the day of the conference, for the women who had attended the sexual and physical abuse workshop it was "checked out that all participants had someone to talk to after the event."

On asking the women co-workers from Nottingham what they had thought of the conference and being involved in organising it and running it their responses were all positive.

"I felt excited".

"It was good running a group, now I've done it once I feel alright".

"It was a good conference."

The most important things about the conference for the women co-workers were: Making friends. Speaking out and meeting and talking to different women. Talking to people.

My last question to the women co-workers was "Are you feminists?" One woman responded, "We don't use that word it sounds like jargon." However, after some discussion the group decided that they believed in women first. □

in the words of my colleague Kate Hall that "What people bring to a group is a need to say it, have it acknowledged, talk about their feelings and that is often enough." What happens if it is not enough? What is the professional's role if I feel a woman needs more support and the group is not enough?

On this I feel fairly clear, I am not a counsellor/therapist. Support from other women with learning difficulties who have had similar experiences would be valuable if it were available. I can try and refer women on to other kinds of support, however, there is a dearth of opportunities for people to work with qualified therapists or counsellors with experience of working with people with learning difficulties

1. Gary Bourlet quoted in *Disability Equality In The Classroom: A Human Rights Issue*, by Richard Rieser and Micheline Mason, (revised edition Disability Equality in Education, February 1992).
2. Atkinson, D and Williams F - *Know Me As I Am* - An anthology of prose, poetry and art by people with learning difficulties. (Hodder and Stoughton 1990)
3. Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie & Suzanne Scafe, *The Heart of the Race, Black Women's Lives in Britain* (Virago 1985)

OLD HET?

What's become of "Compulsory Heterosexuality"? Has it been left on the shelf? In this classic review Deborah Cameron reminds us of the relevance of Adrienne Rich's analysis to sexual politics today.

A couple of years ago I was asked to write a 're-assessment' of Adrienne Rich's essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" for the inaugural 'feminisms now' issue of a new journal. The request initially puzzled me. Why did the editors feel a need to 'reassess' something that was published as recently as 1980? When had "Compulsory Heterosexuality" entered the limbo category of feminist 'classics', like "The myth of the vaginal orgasm" and *The Dialectic of Sex*, early texts considered groundbreaking in their day but now read only by historically-minded academics?

"Compulsory Heterosexuality" appeared at a turning point: just before a period of painful divisions among feminists about sex, and just before the AIDS epidemic. These developments profoundly changed the way sexuality was talked about, inside and outside feminism. Because of them, the ideas Adrienne Rich put into circulation began to be questioned almost as soon as her essay was published. In consequence her piece has suffered the traditional fate of the 'classic' - to be quoted out of context and referred to more than read. Thus although the phrase 'compulsory heterosexuality' remains current, for many feminists it is now detached from Rich's particular, radical feminist analysis. Here I want to ask what has happened to

that analysis - and whether we can really afford to consign it to history.

The Argument

"Compulsory Heterosexuality" begins as a review of several influential books about women's psychology. Rich takes the authors to task, however, for ignoring lesbianism or dismissing it as a minority preference irrelevant to most women. As she says, a developmental study of women should explain their sexuality rather than taking it as given. And to explain the heterosexuality of most women (which is somewhat surprising given current patterns of childbearing - according to the psychoanalysts we all start by loving our mothers) you have to acknowledge that in patriarchal societies heterosexuality is an institution, and women are coerced into it.

Conversely, it must also be acknowledged that some women have always resisted coercion and maintained their primary allegiance to other women. Rich proposes a 'lesbian continuum' encompassing many different relationships between women, from explicit sexual partnerships through passionate friendships to the lifelong affectionate bonds of mothers, daughters and sisters. If the extent of women's commitment to one another has been hidden and silenced (not to mention



Tamsin Wilson

severely punished) that only goes to show what a threat it poses to the fabric of male-dominated society.

I have summarised Rich's argument in a way that brings out what I have always found most appealing in it: namely, that it makes the connection between the oppression of women in general and the specific oppression of lesbians. This contrasts with a tradition - both inside and outside feminism - of seeing the two as separate problems requiring separate political solutions. Rich is arguing for a systematic relationship between sexism and heterosexism, with the latter as a vital component of the former. If marriage and the family are cornerstones in the edifice of male control over women, heterosexism (along with economic inequality) is part of the cement: by suppressing alternatives to heterosexuality it puts pressure on women to seek emotional satisfaction in structurally unequal relationships with men. It follows that all women, not just self-identified lesbians, have a political interest in opposing heterosexism. A further implication is that lesbians have more to gain from alliances with heterosexual feminists than from alliances with gay men.

There was a time when this point of view dominated feminist thinking and discussion. But times have changed. In my view, the most important reasons for the shift are, as I mentioned before, the conflicts around sexuality that went on among feminists during the 1980s and the emergence of AIDS as a major concern for sexual politics. I want to take up each of these points now.

The first problem: conflicts within feminism

Conflicts between lesbian and heterosexual feminists have (unfortunately) been a longstanding feature of this wave of western feminism; they certainly did not begin in the 1980s. But the 1980s brought a renewed awareness of the fragility of sisterhood, and sexual practice became a particular flashpoint. This was not only a question of lesbian versus heterosexual identity. Both lesbians and heterosexuals were themselves divided on issues like pornography and sadomasochism, and the debate that followed from these divisions had

implications for the analysis of sexuality in general.

Among the main protagonists in the sex debate were women who belonged to a current that came to be called 'pro-sex' (I am using the name this group gave themselves, but putting it in scare-quotes because I disagree with the implication that feminists who opposed their views were 'anti-sex'). 'Pro-sex' feminists initially defined themselves in opposition to anti-pornography feminists, especially Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon; but unlike some of the feminists who spoke against the Dworkin-MacKinnon ordinances, they were not simply against censorship. Beyond that, they wanted to reclaim sexual pleasure for women, celebrating the diversity of desire and refusing to condemn practices like S/M.

These feminists made their own reassessment of Adrienne Rich. They asked, for example, whether Rich had 'taken the sex out of lesbianism'. If every woman who hugged her woman friends or preferred their company to her husband's was a lesbian, where did that leave 'real' lesbians? And where did the idea of compulsory heterosexuality leave heterosexual women? Were they nothing but patriarchal dupes, completely deluded about their own desires and interests?

These criticisms of Rich reflected an emphasis on sexual choice which made its proponents hostile to the idea of sexual compulsion. Getting the right balance between these two has always been a serious problem for feminism. But some 'pro-sex' feminists went to an extreme of idealising the 'real' lesbian and condemning her supposed opposite, the joyless 'political lesbian'. And as a corollary, they were eager to grant the parallel existence of a 'real' heterosexual whose desire for men was genuine rather than coerced in any way. This led to a kind of utopian sexual voluntarism (the individual's own desires are all), glossing over the coercion many women do experience and ignoring the fact that our 'real' desires are shaped by social forces.

Whether intentionally or not, this approach once again separated lesbian and heterosexual women, sexism and

heterosexism, in discussions of sexuality. This was the heyday of identity politics, when sexual identities were a basis for political organising and groups defined on the basis of their sexual practices protested against oppression by others with different preferences. This was most marked in relation to things like S/M. But many lesbians spoke out more generally about heterosexual privilege and the way it was often abused. Adrienne Rich's insistence on a shared women's oppression seemed remote from the positions many feminists were developing.

I find this complicated because in some ways I think Rich's critics were right. There has been heterosexism among feminists, just as there has been racism, and it is no good submerging this in vague or sentimental rhetoric about 'woman-identified women'. (Though in fairness to Rich, the idea of a 'continuum' allows for some women to be more lesbian than others.) Nevertheless, it alarms me when lesbians start defining heterosexual women as powerful and privileged oppressors. To do this is to miss the important, functional relation between anti-lesbianism and anti-feminism.

The US feminist critic Tania Modleski has recently written, in her book attacking so-called 'post-feminism':

There seems to me to be a crucial difference between telling, say, a white woman she should be aware of her racial privilege and telling her she should be aware of her privilege as a heterosexual female. For feminism has emphasised from the beginning the oppressiveness of the ideology of compulsory heterosexuality and the institution it supports - that of the nuclear family... The special difficulties faced by lesbians under such a system (i.e. compulsory heterosexuality) are analogous to those of a prisoner who has escaped incarceration and, being 'at large', faces more extreme punitive measures than many of the more docile inmates. The hazards faced by lesbians cannot be overestimated, but we might remember the time when feminism deemed it no privilege to be a wife in patriarchy. (Modleski 1991)

Institutionalised heterosexuality is in general bad for women, but if the cost of lesbianism is high enough most will not be tempted to 'break out'. This is one of



Adrienne Rich's insights which we are in danger of losing. If in identity politics lesbians' interests are seen as *totally* opposed to heterosexual women's interests, and if lesbians' interests are defined simply in sexual liberationist terms - securing the right to have our minority preferences accepted as 'equally valid' - this deeper analysis of heterosexism and its integral role in maintaining men's power goes by the board. Of course lesbians have every right to demand that heterosexual women support our specific struggles (e.g. around custody and job discrimination); but to paraphrase an old saying, 'lesbians who want to be equally valid lack ambition'.

Although 'pro-sex' feminists insisted that sexuality is socially constructed, often accusing other feminists of essentialism, their approach had the rather contradictory effect of moving many women towards the idea of sexual choice as something given and immutable: you proclaimed yourself an 'x' (lesbian, straight, butch, vanilla, whatever) and then you defended your right to that preference, with the question of how you came by it and what its implications were relegated more or less to the background. 'Pro-sex' feminists thought it wrong to criticise any (consensual) sexual practice, and in some quarters that led to people essentialising their desires ('it's just



the way I am"). Again this probably was not the intention. But like the separation of lesbians' interests from the interests of heterosexual women, the idea of a fixed sexuality has been reinforced in recent years. One of the factors reinforcing it has been the AIDS epidemic.

The second problem: compulsory homophobia and the politics of AIDS

Feminists are only now starting to talk critically about the way AIDS has changed the politics of sexuality, and it remains very difficult to talk about this honestly, since many of us have contradictory responses. Speaking for myself, I feel horror at the catastrophe of the epidemic and the callousness of many people's responses to it; rage at the homophobia it has unleashed against lesbians as well as gay men; ambivalence about the way AIDS now dominates the radical political agenda (and the way so many lesbians have made it their priority); and occasionally even guilt (irrational though it is) that I and my community have mostly escaped the worst effects of fear, sickness, death and loss.

AIDS has made many things thinkable, sayable and do-able that would once have caused great difficulty to lesbian feminists. Some of us are prepared to make alliances with gay men for the purpose of resisting the renewed, more intense homophobia that has followed the epidemic. Some of us are prepared to concede that parts of the libertarian agenda we used to oppose - e.g. defending sexual expression and opposing censorship measures - now seem, if not more attractive, then at least more justifiable than they did ten years ago.

For instance, some of us have muted our opposition to pornography and to things like phone sex, which - in HIV terms anyway - are at least *safe* sex. That feminists should entertain this argument shows how AIDS has marginalised many of our traditional concerns about sexual practice. The whole question of what constitutes 'safe sex' has come to be defined in terms of whether a particular sexual practice is more or less likely to transmit HIV: the sense in which pornography and phone sex might

actually threaten the physical or psychological safety of women, or be open to criticism on other grounds, is glossed over in this discourse where safer sex is better and 'safer' means 'carrying lower HIV risk'. In the crisis of the epidemic it becomes genuinely difficult to speak of any 'risk' other than AIDS, or to ask the question 'safe for who?'.

As well as these accommodations on specific issues of sexual practice, we have also begun to see a more general shift towards the idea of sexuality as fixed and even inborn, a matter of nature rather than nurture. The notion of homosexuality as something a minority of people 'can't help' and should therefore be allowed to get on with in private not surprisingly surfaced as the liberal viewpoint in the mainstream debate about Clause 28. It is rather more surprising that so many politically radical gay and lesbian activists have become willing to endorse similar arguments, or at least to refrain from dissenting in public.

For example, Simon Le Vay, the US scientist who recently claimed to have discovered a spot on the (male) brain whose size correlated with sexual orientation, is not, as one might have expected, a ranting homophobe, he is an out and politically committed gay man. He has been widely criticised for his methodology, but there has been much less criticism of his underlying assumption - that it is worth looking for neuro-anatomical correlates of sexual preference in the first place. I have been told by gay men and lesbians on both sides of the Atlantic that although they privately doubt sexual preference has any biological basis, in the present climate of homophobic hysteria they see strategic advantages in keeping quiet about their doubts.

Personally, I find this extraordinary. In an age of gene therapy and bio-engineering, a belief that homosexuality is inborn will not necessarily protect us (just as it didn't protect us from Nazi eugenics). And morally, the argument is as repugnant as suggesting that religious toleration should be extended only to people born into their faith, and not to converts. But in addition, there is a specifically feminist reason to distrust this 'strategic' shift of perspective. If homosexuals are born and not made, so are

heterosexuals. If choice is not a factor, nor is coercion. Once again, the crucial connections Adrienne Rich makes between homophobia, heterosexism and sexism are being obscured.

A feminist analysis of compulsory heterosexuality is increasingly at issue in AIDS politics themselves. Just before I left America in 1990, a dispute surfaced among AIDS activists on the question of mandatory contact tracing (i.e. finding the sexual partners of seropositive people and telling them they are at risk). Gay men have always opposed contact tracing on the grounds that it stops many men coming forward for testing; this has been the orthodox position. But by 1990 AIDS had become a major cause of death among heterosexual women under 45 in US cities like New York and Washington DC. Organisations representing the affected population (which for various reasons is concentrated among poor minority ethnic women) began to challenge the orthodoxy by saying that women's sexual reality was different.

A coalition of mainly Latina activists spoke, for example, of women living with men who regularly visit prostitutes, who refuse to use condoms and who use violence to force their partners to have unprotected sex. These men's partners would gain from contact tracing. Unable to control the behaviour of the men they live with, they would at least know if they were at risk and would be able to seek testing and early treatment which delays the onset of illness.

It's instructive to compare the lack of discussion about the contact tracing issue with the ongoing furore about dental dams. The question of safer sex practices among lesbians is, of course, a valid one to ask; but it's also valid to point out that part of the reason why some women are asking it so urgently lies less in the reality of the epidemic for lesbians than in the internal politics of mixed organisations like ACT UP.

Women in these groups - many of whom are lesbians - rightly refuse to be marginalised; but in choosing their issues they have been very much influenced by the 1980s politics of sexual choice. This is a politics which enables alliances with gay men, but the contact tracing row shows

how it can make alliances with heterosexual women more difficult in some circumstances, because it marginalises issues of sexual compulsion.

This is a painful dilemma for feminists involved in AIDS politics, and it recalls Adrienne Rich's point that the interests of men and women will differ even if the men in question are gay. A feminist politics of sexuality must surely give weight to both choice and compulsion as dimensions of women's experience around sex. The right to say yes and the power to say no are both important. AIDS politics, dominated initially by gay men, have tended to be about affirming sexual choice, but as more and more heterosexual women enter the picture there is a need for serious discussion of the other dimension.

Back to the future?

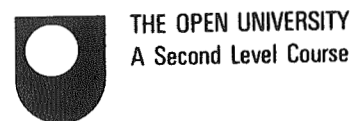
I've been trying to argue that in the years since "Compulsory Heterosexuality" was first published, discussions of sexuality (both among feminists and in the wider society that influences what feminists can do) have undergone dramatic shifts. In the process, it seems to me, some important insights of radical feminism have been watered down or even lost altogether.

Obviously, we can't go back to where we were when "Compulsory Heterosexuality" was a groundbreaking document. A great deal has changed since Adrienne Rich wrote it, and any effective politics of sexuality must address the changes that have taken place. But some things haven't changed. In grappling with new problems, we can't afford to lose sight of old ones - and the negative effect on women of the institution of heterosexuality is arguably the oldest problem in the book. Radical feminists were right to make it a central concern, and feminists today should be wary of turning heterosexuality back into a non-problem, something women can take or leave, one sexual identity among many.

Adrienne Rich could not have foreseen the events of the 1980s, and her essay does not have all the answers we need to do sexual politics in the 1990s. What it does have, though, is an important set of questions whose relevance is still striking and an analytical framework that might help us to clarify our responses. □



Tania Modleski (1991), *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a 'Post-Feminist' Age* (London: Routledge).
Adrienne Rich (1980), "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", *Signs* 5.4, p.631-57



THE OPEN UNIVERSITY
A Second Level Course

school for scandal



Launched in the early '80s, the Open University women's studies course made it possible for thousands of women to explore feminism. Cath Jackson talks to Diana Leonard, chair of the team which wrote the first course, and Liz Kelly and Joan Scanlon, who both tutored on the annual summer schools.

Cath Jackson: Di, you were given the job of heading the team which produced the first Open University women's studies course. When was that?

Diana Leonard: The course first ran from January 1983. The OU had agreed – rather late in the day in terms of women's studies – that they were going to have a women's studies course. I was appointed to chair the course team three years before it started, in 1980.

CJ: The course was seen as politically sensitive. What was that about?

DL: Everything that the OU does is publicly visible in a way that most other university courses aren't. That's partly because the TV part of the course goes out on BBC2 and is made by the BBC, which makes everything you do very visible.

But the OU was jumpy anyway about

politics. It's directly funded by the government, and there have been media exposés about what's taught on the course and what goes on at the summer school – which we'll come to later. At that time – the early '80s – Keith Joseph, who was then Minister for Education, had been making enquiries about Marxist bias in the social science courses and there was jumpiness too about feminism, to the extent that somebody from the Ministry of Education wrote to the OU to ask what the WRRC was when we referenced it in a course unit.

But also getting the women's studies course agreed had been quite politically contentious within the OU: in-fighting about who was involved in the course, who would chair the course team and control the content, and also who would get to write the course units.

It took more than a year of the course

team meeting to decide how to divide the limited amount of space we had between topics. There was a lot of pressure from socialist feminists, who very much wanted a say in the course and who the chair was going to be and who were very cross when they got me. That was partly because I was from outside and I wasn't going to give in to all the internal pressures but also because I was a radical feminist. So, for example, I was going to insist on having a course unit about

Lea Myers is 42, divorced and lives in London.

I left school when I was 15. In 1987 I was working as an administrator in a voluntary organisation and doing part-time youth work. I decided to do an Open University course to see if I was capable of studying. I looked at the prospectus and the only course I felt I could do was women's studies because I thought, "I must know about that, because I'm a woman". I didn't know what it was or what it meant. In fact I was frightened of feminists; I thought of them all as large aggressive women in dungarees.

The women's studies course suddenly made sense of my life. It was exciting and liberating. It put into words things I'd been feeling for years and hadn't known how to express: all that stuff about femininity and image and the way women are supposed to be. It helped me see how I had been constructed and manipulated and that all my hopes and everything I had ever done was because I'd been pressurised in one direction.

At summer school I asked to go in a mixed group at first, but I very quickly realised it wasn't a good idea. I never did it again! But I was used to being with men rather than women and I suppose I couldn't see the difference. But the women in the group began to talk to each other and we realised what pains the men were; they had all the right-on language but it was clear they were just trying to "get a feminist into bed".

The Monday evening optional session

violence and pornography, even though some of them said we shouldn't because it would 'put women off'.

But we only had 16 course units, so if you wanted something on violence, for example, you were making a highly political statement: that you think violence is important enough to make up one sixteenth of the whole course. Even the order of the units is highly politically contentious.

Liz Kelly: They marginalised the violence unit by making it the last but one topic, towards the end of the course, when the students are looking towards their exams or trying to finish off their very last essays.

Crisis of consciousness

CJ: What about the teaching approach? Was that similar to the other OU courses?

DL: There you hit other difficulties. The OU divides the country into regions for tutoring purposes and the tutors are appointed by the regional staff tutor of the particular faculty. Oddly, the women's studies course was located in the science faculty, so all the tutors were appointed by the regional science staff

was the turning point. I didn't know what a discussion on "compulsory heterosexuality" would be about and I'd certainly never read Adrienne Rich. I thought it was going to be about "compulsory sexuality", about being expected to be sexual, and I wanted to talk about that. By the end of the week I had made a decision in myself to be celibate and that I didn't have to feel it was a failure position. I felt really good about that.

The next first was the Thursday night when I went to the women-only disco in town. That was amazing. I'd never been to one before. I was really frightened; what would I say if someone asked me to dance?

We formed a really good group of women out of the week. Some of us are still in touch and we meet regularly, all over the country, and in Ireland.

After doing the women's studies course I went to university and then to do teacher training in FE. I'm just coming to the end of my first year's teaching.

In my first term at university I came out as a lesbian, because I fell in love with a woman there. It was an enormous shock; it hadn't occurred to me!

Education opens you up to all sorts of things; you stop being frightened. It's about breaking down barriers and that's what happened for me.

The women's studies course changed my life and I say it all the time. It totally changed my life!

tutors, unless they chose to pass that over to somebody who knew something about women's studies. So you could, for example, end up with a tutor who was a socio-biologist. LK: Or in some regions the tutor would be – and still is – a man.

Joan Scanlon: I remember one student who had a male tutor who marked her essays as 'too personal', too much about her own experience. Which was what they were supposed to be, of course: about relating the theory to personal experience. He clearly wanted academic essays. Worse, to put a man in a position to comment on a woman's



THE OPEN UNIVERSITY
A Second Level Course

The changing experience of women



personal experience in that way is pretty appalling.

DL: Another problem with the OU is that the course content is very homogenised. All OU course units go through three drafts; then they're very carefully edited – we had a very senior editor to work on the women's studies package because the dean of science was very worried we might produce something that was inflammatory or problematic in some way – and only then are they sent out to the students. So you end up with this very worked-over, masticated thing.

In an ordinary women's studies class room there's ebb and flow between the tutor and students; people can engage in a dialogue and get a sense of theory which is developing and to which they can contribute.

What's particular to distance learning women's studies courses is that if you've not been involved in women's studies before you can have a kind of crisis of consciousness when you start. The more you study, the more aware of sexism, heterosexism, oppression, violence, you become; but you're also not quite sure if you are interpreting your experiences right.

Women become aware that things they thought were individual quirks of their male partner or boss are possibly something more significant and generalised. So it's really important for students on a women's studies course to have a supportive group around them, to discuss things with and to support them through all the changes they may be wanting to make in their lives.

CJ: Did you not feel quite anxious about some of the material you were sending out, which women were studying on their own and might find distressing or disturbing?

LK: The material isn't disturbing in that way, partly because of the rigorous editing process but also because there's an awareness of the problem and the course units are written very carefully to be distanced. Then it's up to the woman to choose whether to keep the material at arm's length or to bring it much closer in.

DL: We discussed that issue a lot. Women's studies courses often use the personal experience of students as part of the teaching material and we were worried about the ethics of doing that on an OU course. It's very dodgy to require people to reveal

aspects of their personal lives and be assessed on it for an academic course. It's very different from students choosing to share something with other students they know.

So instead we presented autobiographical materials for students to comment on, rather than requiring them to write their own autobiographies or to work on the autobiography of their mother or somebody they knew personally.

Summer school

CJ: So how did you compensate for the lack of a support group?

DL: You can't. Some tutor groups functioned very well and were supportive, but many didn't.

These were all reasons why a number of us were so keen to have a summer school, even though it doubled the fee that students would have to pay. But if ever there was an OU course which needed a summer school, it was the women's studies course. And without it we would have had even less space to give a sense of the areas that feminism had been covering. Also there were things that we really wanted the students to talk about with tutors we had chosen and summer school tutors are appointed by the course team.

LK: What's unique about the OU women's studies summer school is that you have 120, 130 women – and a smattering of men – together in one place for a week. There's a huge range of women in terms of age, life experience: some from the Orkney islands, travelling 48 hours to get there; some from down the road; many who have never been away from their family on their own before.

DL: And some came despite enormous family pressures to stop them. One woman said her parents-in-law had offered her and her husband a trip round the world if she gave up the course and the summer school in particular.

LK: Then there'd often be up to ten women each week of the school with fairly major disabilities and it took enormous courage for them to be there.

One very glaring absence, though not absolute by any means, were Black women. That's partly because the OU doesn't have a visible outreach programme. But Black students may also be less confident about doing an unsupported, distance learning type

of degree. That's also a problem for some white women. Some were very unconfident when you came to meet them at summer school.

There were more women who already identified themselves as feminist in the early years of the course. They used the course as a way of rethinking things and also as a way to find women locally to work with.

DL: The summer school was an opportunity to meet other women, to share experiences and to meet tutors who had been working in women's studies for a long time and who

Jackie Malton is a senior police officer.

When I joined the police 22 years ago women still worked in different departments from men. We dealt with the women's issues, but that didn't mean we dealt with them properly and it marginalised women in the criminal justice system and women police officers. That's all you are seen as fit for, dealing with women.

At the time I wasn't mature enough or grown enough as a person to understand what I could have done for women. I had great empathy with most of the women I dealt with, but on reflection I don't think I did them any favours at all. I was probably just as guilty of that as the men. Domestic violence, for example: it was a case of "Have a cup of tea and let's talk about it". I fell into the trap of trying to prove I was this good all-round police officer and I probably colluded with the men.

Then as I got older I started to feel I needed to deal with women's issues properly. I decided to do an open university course and I picked the women's studies course. I was getting angry and I wanted to understand issues affecting women and affecting me as a woman and wanted to change attitudes to women in the police.

challenged them in a way that their regional tutor often didn't.

Women only

CJ: What about the men doing the course and coming to summer school?

DL: There was no question that men couldn't register for the women's studies course and some men registered for absolutely appropriate reasons: local councillors whose council had a women's unit and they wanted to read what was coming out of feminism. Other men did it because they thought it was an easy option – and some did it because they thought they would meet a lot of women on the summer school.

LK: And some of them did it because they

wanted to have a go at feminists and at lesbians in particular.

DL: We had a terrible fight to be allowed to have women-only sessions at the summer school. The OU hierarchy didn't want us to have them at all and we had to get a barrister's opinion on the legal situation. I was even told there wasn't a precedent in this country for single-sex education!

At the beginning about 10% were men; that went down gradually to around 5%. Maybe word went around that it wasn't such a good way to meet women after all.

In the early '80s I went through a real personal and professional crisis and it made me understand things more. After that there was no going back.

I did the course in 1984. Most of it made sense, though some of it for me was highly academic. But it brought me into contact with people of like mind. The people on the course didn't make value judgements about other people. The police service is always making value judgements. I was surrounded by women who made you feel comfortable.

It made sense to me. It got the ball rolling because I hadn't been able to articulate things before: the power men have over women. I went through this anger stage – and I'm still angry now.

I'd always felt a misfit in the police; that women got a raw deal over things like rape and domestic violence and women got a raw deal in terms of equal opportunities in the force. Doing the course made me feel better about that: that I wasn't wrong; that it was the system that was wrong. Since doing the course I feel that I've been able to put things on the agenda. I set up a very successful domestic violence project in west London. I might have done that when I was younger, but I wouldn't have felt so passionate about it.

But when I was course director I would think 60-70% of my time was taken up with men, even though they were just a tenth of the course students. There were always some extraordinarily awkward men. They complained about anti-male tutors; about not being listened to; that it was a lot more difficult than they expected. Then they complained about women-only sessions, women-only discos.

But it has to be said they had a hard time from men on the other summer school courses. They were treated as absolute creeps, especially the ones with openly 'new man' politics.

LK: Women are so unused to men not being given all the space to speak that some women



The changing experience of women



thought it was deeply unfair to men and felt they had to defend them.

CJ: Why was the OU so opposed to women-only sessions?

DL: The OU doesn't want bother from its summer schools, because it's had so much of it. The *Sun* and the *Mirror* and the *News of the World*, whenever they can't think of anything else to do, run a thing about married women getting off with men at the OU summer school. And it has to be said that the pages of *Sesame* – the OU newsletter – were and maybe still are full of lonely hearts and passionate goings-on.

On several occasions the women's studies summer school has made newspaper headlines. Even when the idea of married women getting off with men ceased to be newsworthy, there was always the lesbian angle.

LK: One year there was a little piece in the *Sunday Express* about how women were being told that marriage was prostitution and went on about "compulsive heterosexuality".

Then, when you've got a course linked to feminism very powerful things come up and they can't just be cooled out. But that makes 'bother'.

It's about this crisis of consciousness, this shifting up a gear for some of the women. Other women would find it profoundly threatening and they'd resist it. The worst situations were when it began to be resisted by the men, who then recruited the women who were uneasy about some of the questions being raised.

It was always worse if there were fewer men. If there was the usual ten or 12%, the men would divide and there'd be arguments and debate between them and women felt less need to support them.

The alliance between men and some of the women came up particularly around sexuality, sexual violence and women-only space. It happened a lot around the section on prostitution. One of the things we would raise, if it didn't come from the students themselves, is whether there were parallels between prostitution and marriage. Mostly the students made the connection straight away but some of the married women felt this was profoundly insulting and outrageous and that was linked particularly to a feeling that 'too many' of the tutors were lesbian.

JS: There was the T-shirt incident. One of the men on the course had come into one of the tutorials wearing a T-shirt which read "U221 needs more male members", with "members" in capital letters. He'd been asked either to remove it or remove himself, so the next session he persuaded one of the women to wear it and this saga went on throughout the week with reaction and counter-reaction.

But you do see some extraordinary shifts. The number of women who wanted to be in a mixed group would diminish dramatically from the beginning of the week to the end. Some of that was to do with wanting to assert a kind of normality at the beginning of the week, but by the end of the week the value of talking with other women far outweighed that.

DL: Of course some of the women on the women's studies course wanted to meet up with men who were there on other summer school courses. Women would join up with the men, not necessarily to get off with them but to establish their normality.

LK: That could have repercussions: very distressed women who were asking themselves questions and thinking about things differently than they had ever done before, then their friend expects them to come out for a drink with some blokes from another course.

But the women on the course who were using it to explore these things took a lot of care of each other. That's one of the remarkable things about the summer school. There wasn't a counsellor who'd stay up with you all night, but there'd be a woman on your corridor.

CJ: So how did you get around the mixed session problem?

DL: Tutors could offer optional sessions outside the summer school curriculum, which could be women-only provided we ran a mixed session as well. There got to be a mini-tradition of a slot on the Monday evening where we'd do an optional session on some variation of compulsory heterosexuality, lesbianism and women's sexuality.

LK: It started off as a space for women on the course who were lesbian to meet, because they were very isolated and there was very little in the course about lesbianism and we thought this would be a slightly different way

of doing it. But very often there were 40 or 50 women at that session, sometimes 70 or 80 which was 80% of the people on the women's studies summer school.

The tutors who wanted to do the session specifically asked that it should be the first of the optional sessions because it raised issues we felt women on the course needed to have time to think about and discuss during the rest of the week.

Some of the lesbians on the course weren't happy with the emphasis of the session on heterosexuality; they didn't want to hear heterosexual women asking silly questions. But there were other lesbians who

Kate Cook

I enrolled on U221 almost from a sense of duty. I thought I was already the living embodiment of feminism in action: a self-supporting lesbian; bank manager; how could I change any more? I knew the course was due to end shortly and I felt I should support it.

The first six months of the course weren't earth-shattering. My excitement on seeing the cartoon "It's a lesbian" on the cover of units 2/3 was soon squashed. Inside the units studiously avoided lesbianism, if at all possible. The issues which were covered were interesting but it felt like just another half-credit course.

Summer school didn't start well. First I had a vile journey to Norwich; then I arrived to find men on the course. I was shocked!

I remember a conversation with another woman student. She told me how much she was getting from the course so far. I told her how much I wished I'd done it about five years earlier because most of it was very familiar ground. I was really smug.

The next day we were split into groups. The OU loves colour coding and I was in the green group. Us greenies did 'sexuality' first. Thankfully we were allowed to opt for a

thought it was the best thing they'd done for years, because these things were being said rather than whispered in corners; there was a space for a dialogue to take place.

Women came to the session for a whole host of different reasons: some were lesbians wanting to meet other lesbians; some women had questions around sexuality but couldn't articulate them; a few, I have absolutely no doubt, came for voyeuristic reasons, wanting to see what a real lesbian looked like. And I think these women were quite shocked when we turned the question round and started to talk about the compulsory heterosexuality argument.

Some of the questions were hostile; others came genuinely out of ignorance and interest. A lot of the women there had no idea about the facts of lesbian oppression. I've been in sessions where women have cried hearing accounts of what happens in lesbian custody cases, or what it's like to be spat at in the street because you are walking along holding hands with another woman.

JS: Then there were women who had made the decision not to have relationships with men, but hadn't thought there was an alternative. And also realising what silence might mean if a woman didn't constantly drop into a conversation references to her

women-only group.

By the end of the day the rumblings began. The men (about six) weren't happy to be in a men-only tutor-group. Some of the women (around 100 of us in total) started to complain on their behalf. Eventually it threatened to disrupt the entire week and some of us were outraged. What followed (for me) was that I began to speak. I said how marginalised I felt by this focus on the men's experience of the course. The response I got encouraged me to say it more publicly. Other women felt the same and over the next three days we formed a 'resistance movement'. The culmination of this was writing and performing a sketch in the course revue, as the most public way to express our anger.

Doing the summer school confronted me with a new self-knowledge. All of my liberal feminist ideas were challenged one by one. It wasn't easy facing up to the inadequacy of those beliefs. It was only possible because of the willingness of women there, particularly the tutors, to allow space for women (myself included) to voice doubts, contradictions and fears. We were allowed to reach our own conclusions and in a decade when CR groups are all but extinct that environment is all too rare.

male partner; or how they would feel if their daughter chose to be a lesbian.

DL: A lot of women were very angry that they'd been fed so many lies about lesbians.

LK: But there was also some discomfort: students I'd been getting on with who couldn't look me in the eye the next day.

CJ: Was there a way in which doing the course helped women put academic theory into practice? Did it really change lives?

DL: There was a lot of rethinking and reconsidering: women working through their relationships with their mothers, fathers, brothers; women thinking about whether to



The
changing
experience
of
women

leave their husbands, whether to have children.

LK: Women wanted to make some sense of what it meant to be a feminist, to live this politics and to do things with and for other women. They went back home and, say, got a job in the local refuge or worked with the local rape crisis group or set up a campaign group. It's like a taster: you can put your foot in and take it out again. Some put their foot in and took it out, gave up the course; others jumped into the pool.

JS: The course and the summer school politicised even women who hadn't expected it. I remember one woman who everyone thought was a major problem because she was making racist, homophobic remarks and

course. It's a full credit now and instead of being called "The Changing Experience of Women" it's called "Issues in Women's Studies". It very much reflects the particular strand of academic feminism which focuses on subjectivity, identity, difference, representation – cultural studies – and gives quite a lot of space to psychoanalysis.

There's just the odd reference here and there to sexual violence, nothing about sexual abuse and any stuff around sexuality is mainly from a psychoanalytic perspective.

It's a reflection of the dominant strand in academic women's studies in Britain now. It's become much more focused on the Academy; what the men in the Academy are doing and saying and writing, and linked

Barbara Hughes is 46 years old and has three children.

I did the women's studies course in 1988. It started when I watched a programme on child abuse. It was probably the first TV programme on child abuse. I was abused myself when a child by my father and it started me thinking about why it happened and what it was about. Doing the women's studies course was a logical extension of that.

What the course did for me was slot things into place all at once. Understanding patriarchy – it sounds trite now, but it was a big thing for me; understanding compulsory heterosexuality: the impact and how dominant it is. Once that fell into place, other things clunked into place about myself and the way I lived and how I'd been when I was young.

I left school at 16 and went to secretarial college; got married when I was 20, got divorced, married again to the father of my children and got divorced again in 1985. I

realised then that I didn't need a man to live with. But it was only on the summer school that I understood why. I knew these things in my head but I couldn't put them into words.

But the Monday night session was the real light bulb for me! Suddenly so many things made sense.

When I came back from the summer school and finished the course I thought, "Right, now I'm going to work with women". I hadn't a clue what I was going to do or how. I volunteered with the local rape crisis group and when a job came up I got it. I've been working there now for two and a half years.

Summer school just had such a big impact. Meeting some of the tutors... I remember promising myself that I would learn and understand and actually do something and not be an armchair critic.

It isn't academic; it's real; it's how I live.

just wasn't interested in discussion or dialogue. But by the end of the week she was going to the disco with a bucket collecting for the Sara Thornton appeal.

CJ: There's a new women's studies course this year. Has it changed for the better or worse?

LK: The world around has changed in the last few years. We've had post-feminism and some women took that on. There were a lot more with the "I've made it; I've never experienced discrimination" attitude.

DL: The old course was designed to run for six years but it ran for nine and it was definitely showing signs of wear. It hadn't even been updated.

LK: The new one is a very different kind of

much less to any kind of activist women's movement. The connection between feminism theory and practice is much more tenuous.

CJ: So a lot of what was important about the old women's studies course has gone?

LK: In the course materials, yes. But part of what made the summer school so extraordinary will still be the case; there will still be 120 women coming from all over the country with all sorts of different experiences; there will still be the opportunity for the tutors to do these optional sessions outside the formal course. And for some women it was those sessions which were the spark to everything else ☐

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