

# Trouble

The radical feminist magazine

# & Strife



**A taste of sweet and sour:  
*Spare Rib*  
1972-1993**

Questioning Queer  
politics

Women's Aid to former  
Yugoslavia

Audre Lorde:

A Burst of Light

Outing heterosexuals

Ex-prostitutes organise

**NO. 26**

**£2.95**

*Trouble & Strife is cockney rhyming slang for wife. We chose this name because it acknowledges the reality of conflict in relations between women and men. As radical feminists, our politics come directly from this tension between men's power and women's resistance.*

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

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# Trouble & Strife

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Cover design by Ruth Wallsgrove

**READERS MEETING**

Saturday 12 June  
2.30 pm  
Wesley House, London  
All women welcome.

# Letters

## Degrees of alienation

Dear Trouble & Strife

I would like to address the issues expressed in Nanette Herbert's letter (*T&S* 25) regarding Women's Studies courses. I also think that the personal is political but I reject the analysis of academia that she presents. She says, 'to me, a truly feminist women's studies would emphasize subjectivity, and personal experience, and use creative and artistic methods to explore women's situation, through discussion groups, creative writing, painting, etc.' I feel as alienated by these activities as Nanette Herbert does with 'theorizing' and academia. I (and other feminist women I know, some of them working class and/or lesbian) use academic forms to explore women's situation and do not always find it alienating.

Although we must recognize the hierarchical nature of our society and academia as occupying a place near the top of that hierarchy, academic forms of expression are not necessarily less feminist than creative ones. We should all struggle to help all women (recognizing their diversity) to realise their potential and fight their oppression. We also need to recognize our own power (when we have it) and how it is used to enable or limit other women. However, we also need to recognize the limits imposed from outside of us. Feminists in academia face a lot of resistance and each woman makes her own decisions about how to deal with it. We need to be critical of some of these strategies while still supporting their struggles.

I also wonder why Nanette Herbert, and others like her, decided to do a Women's Studies course. It is possible to do the things she wants to do both within higher education (e.g. community arts courses) and in the community (e.g. women's creative writing groups). Are some of us critical of the content of our degrees but uncritical of why we so

want a degree in the first place? We all need to address the wider issue of the purpose of higher education, especially in the light of current policy pushing it towards supplying the needs of an economy based on inequality and oppression. Although I think some academic work is valuable I would also like to see other forms of expression (like those mentioned in her letter) valued more than they are currently, and not just by awarding degrees for them.

Jo VanEvery  
Wivenhoe

## Theory without jargon

\* Dear Trouble and Strife

I read with great interest (and some difficulty) Stevi Jackson's critique of postmodernism (*T&S* 25). As I read it I was struck by how abstracted feminist and other political theory has become, so much so that it becomes hard to follow the line of argument. The multitude of 'isms' that are the jargon of theorists are now so complicated that anyone without a university degree or insider knowledge would be hopelessly lost. It is almost a case of 'isms' for 'isms' sake and only serves to cloud the issues actually at hand.

I'm not attempting to say that the questioning and re-evaluation of concepts and 'facts' on an abstract level is not a useful exercise. Stevi Jackson makes some very important points about the dangers of postmodernism for the feminist movement. My problem is that theory is becoming so far removed from everyday experience that it is incomprehensible to the ordinary woman and is symptomatic of the growing exclusivity of feminism.

Feminism should be for all women, not just the academics and their theories that only they understand.

Connie Palmer  
Norfolk

## Report back on T&S readers questionnaire.

Apologies, dear readers, for taking so long to report back on our questionnaire. Your responses were so detailed and wide ranging that it took considerable time and effort to pull it all together, especially since a number of you pointed out (often with good humour) problems with some of the questions.

You confirmed to us that the two most likely points of contact with T&S were either in a bookshop, or through word of mouth. And our concerns that T&S is often not stocked, or that stocks run out quickly, in bookshops were also echoed by your experiences. Some of you said you didn't trust our subscription system. We have tried to plug all the loopholes in it over the last year, and urge those of you who can afford it to subscribe, since we (rather than the distributor and booksellers) get all the money that way. If any of you have/had problems recently with subs please write and tell us, and we'll sort it out. Whilst we will be targeting the bookshops you told us should stock T&S and don't, they are more likely to do so if you keep going in and asking for it!

Most of you thought our price was about right (although we have had to put it up in the meantime - and no we weren't testing you out in advance, it's simply to cover recent increases in production costs). A substantial number felt T&S was too expensive, and that this was a deterrent for women on limited incomes. We are aware of this, and the way we have tried to take it into account is by having a low-income subscription rate which hardly covers our costs.

## Likes and dislikes

In your assessments of the content of the magazine the vast majority of you appreciated both the range and mix of articles. One

first (and possibly last) time reader; however, disliked long letters, "stodgy, paranoid, boring and self righteous writing". Although many of you found the T&S approach to theory accessible and this was what you bought it for, some of you still found the pieces inaccessible and "too academic".

*T&S and OOB are the best things to come through the post box. Radical feminist discussion is hard to find, and there is always something provoking, encouraging.*

*I hope some women offer more than I have the time or confidence to - T&S offers a really important place to air issues without being over-theoretical. I really appreciate the day-to-day usefulness of what you produce. Thanks.*

*T&S is the only magazine which I wait for at the bookshop... For me your magazine is invaluable. I've read it for years, persuaded other people to read it, and been educated, lifted up, inspired even and had a good laugh because of it. I'm glad to get the chance to tell you really - please don't ever stop! I'd love it if you could come out more regularly but I expect you would if you could... Thank you! Overall your magazine is excellent.*

*I love the design of T&S; length of articles is perfect...*

*I was very impressed with T&S, as this is the first copy I have read. Although I subscribe to Spare Rib...the format is like glossy women's mags, and rather uncritical of certain pop groups, films books etc.*

As was to be expected many differences were apparent in what you liked/disliked - one woman's delight and inspiration can be another's misery and disappointment. The most positive mentions went to the piece on Rachel Field's work, followed by articles on sexual violence/activism, but there were 63 articles which at least one (and usually more) of you said 'you liked'. We were very surprised that lots of you couldn't think of any articles that you had really disliked, and only ten were mentioned explicitly. Some of you made more general comments about what you didn't want: "long tedious academic book reviews. Socialism, socialism yawn..."; "any Labour party orientated stuff" and several of you didn't like our coverage of international women's struggles. To this last comment we can only say that many more of you in a later section saw this as second only to theory and WLM history in what you wanted more of.

Some of you pointed out strongly that our arts/cultural pieces were "too mainstream... not challenging articles at all, just versions of an OK/not OK debate". So sisters, we will attempt at our end to develop more radical pieces/ideas, but we need you to write them, tell us about women who are doing exciting/challenging work.

## The future

As to what you wanted to see in future issues of T&S, we could fill the next ten issues with all the suggestions, and we'll follow up as many as we can. One very strong request though was for more debate, and we have taken up the suggestion some of you made about having round-table discussions. Two are currently planned on pornography and couple relationships. It can be frustrating for us, knowing that passionate debate is going on about pieces in T&S (we even overheard them, or are approached at women's events - not mention parties - by impassioned readers), yet so few of you write to us about it! Many of you also wanted a longer letters section, and we want to use this opportunity to encourage more of you to write them.

Many of you also offered us advice on how to market the magazine better. This is a priority for us at the moment and we are recruiting women to a sub-group of the collective to take on this area of work. If any of you are interested in either joining or supporting this group please write to Diana Leonard at our postal address. Lots of you also offered either practical help in terms of selling copies, distributing fliers, or writing articles. We have replied to some of you, but not to everyone yet. Another reminder, that if there anything you want to write about for T&S, do write to us with the idea/outline. We work very closely with our writers, and lots of women have written for the first time for T&S.

One of you suggested a complete issue reassessing/reaffirming radical feminist politics, another wanted "a tough materialistic radical feminist analysis". The Winter issue this year is planned around the theme Radical Feminism into the 90s. Please get in touch if you have ideas for this issue, either

things you want to write yourself/ves, or areas you want us to cover. As part of this process we are holding a readers meeting in London on Saturday June 12th, 2.30 pm, at Wesley House, 4 Wild Court WC2. Hope to see lots of you there to continue the discussion about the magazine and radical feminism more generally. We will be arranging further readers meetings in the North and Scotland later in the year.

We should also take this opportunity to tell you that we are reviewing and changing the way the T&S collective works. Producing T&S in our 'spare time' with no grant-aid is extremely demanding, and the time commitment involved has put off many women from joining the collective. We are taking some time out this year to find a better way of working, which will open up membership of the collective and make the process less draining for the current members. This means we will only be publishing two issues this year (don't worry about subs, they last for three issues, not a time period). However, we see this as a way of ensuring the future of T&S, and of widening both the membership of the collective and our readership.

Thanks to all of you who completed the questionnaire, your responses have played a part in our review process, and we hope you'll see them reflected in future issues of T&S. □

## READERS MEETING

Saturday 12 June, 2.30 pm, at Wesley House, 4 Wild Court, London WC2.

Agenda:

1. Radical feminism in the 1990s - ideas for our Autumn issue.
2. The restructured Trouble and Strife collective and marketing group.
3. Readers' feedback.

# SWEET AND SOUR

*The loss of 'Spare Rib' in March produced mixed responses from British feminists. Ruth Wallsgrove reflects on the role and meaning the magazine had for the Women's Liberation Movement.*

Spare Rib has gone, abandoned by its former friends and finally killed off by the banks. One of the most successful and influential women's liberation publications in the world - at its height it was read by probably more than 100,000 women every month - it reflected activist politics and the state of the movement more than most of us cared to admit in public.

My mother and her friends bought the first issue, in July 1972, to see what all the press publicity was about. It was not tremendously radical at the time, but rereading its early review and events pages in particular reminds you how much less was going on then. There was no Woman's Aid, Women's Theatre Group, not even Women's Monthly Events.

My mother didn't buy it again, but I did when I left home and became a student,

creeping towards involvement. It became less comfortable for the mainstream media: it turned into a collective fairly fast, and one of its two founders indisputably became a feminist in touch with women's groups. In the mid-1970s it went through its 'socialist realist phase' - no longer being able to afford full colour, choosing Madame Minh instead of Janis Joplin to put on the cover - and everyone began to buy it and grumble, as we continued to do for another fifteen years.

In 1977 I was bumming around the USA and went into one of several women's bookshops in New York to find out what was going on there. The only publications I could see which acknowledged the existence of activist politics were a self-published pamphlet by Jeanette Silveira, and *Spare Rib*, with extensive coverage of the National Women's Liberation Conference in London and a sub-punk green women's symbol on

Original photos by Angela Phillips (2), Jill Posener

Collective members shown include Rozsika Parker, Rose Ades, Marsha Rowe, Marion Fudger, Ann Scott, Janie Prince, Anny Brackx, Natasha Morgan, Jill Nicholls, Eleanor Stephens, Alison Fell, Laura Margolis (the hands are also hers), Ruthie Petrie, Amanda Sebestyen, Carole Spedding, Zoe Fairbairns, Susan Hemmings, Linda Bellos, Sue O'Sullivan, Louise Williamson, Jan Parker, and Roisin Boyd. I'm the vampire.



the cover. My heart was won, and I returned to Britain to volunteer and be part of it.

### The best years

The next few years were, I fondly believe, its best ones. In the late 1970s and very early 1980s, *Spare Rib* was itself involved - pushing consciousness raising, running interviews with activist groups, publishing debates on hot issues, taking a full part on actions (like the first London Reclaim the Night - I'm the vampire on the front cover) and marches. In one way, it seemed to us, it was luckier than some parts of the women's liberation movement at the time, in that feminists with very divergent views managed to work together on the magazine. We tried to combine commitment with interest, not always to write the same worthy story, to experiment with visuals and humour. We were taken on by Comag, distributors of *Vogue*, who thought we were quite a good commercial bet, and *SR* was advertised on the back of buses - at the same time that the collective had radical and revolutionary feminists active in it.

The afterword to the Penguin anthology, *The Spare Rib Reader*, explains what our vision was in 1981: 'We wanted *Spare Rib* to take the women's liberation movement to women who'd never encountered it, and involve them in it. We also wanted to be exciting and challenging for women already active in the movement.'

*Spare Rib* contributed to the birth of *Trouble and Strife* in 1983, through women who worked on or with *SR* (Dianne Ceresa, who designed the format of *T&S*; Judy Stevens, who was one of *SR*'s favourite illustrators; and myself, contributing some of the procedures and mechanisms of producing a magazine, all learnt at *SR*) and lending its office and equipment for layout weekends.

*Spare Rib* even managed to be in the vanguard on one particular issue: race and identity politics. It tried hard, and failed, to deal with the confusions that ripped apart many existing women's groups in the 1980s. Most notoriously, it refused to print letters from Jewish women in response to its hysteria about Palestinians in the slow, incoherent aftermath of the massacres in the camps of Sabra and Shatila. I was still on the collective, part-time, so I had a full view, and I still

find it hard to explain clearly. Somehow, women who were angry about Ireland and Latin America, Black women, an Iranian woman who hated America for what it had done in Iran, and a hard-Labour Left Jewish woman came together on the collective to agree, or at least feel unable to disagree, that Israel was intrinsically evil, and that no women could have a voice as Jewish without first denouncing Zionism. Some of these women I cared for, and could understand where their original anger sprang from, if not why they believed this rhetoric; some I did not.

What began for me around 1984, and sadly I think for quite large numbers of other WLM Activists, was a sense of powerlessness to change anything by arguing back; and ulcer-forming frustration that, somehow, women in bad faith could take over women's groups. *Spare Rib* was not the first to suffer. It is, however, undoubtedly the latest fatality.

### New look: old politics

*Spare Rib* was redesigned in 1988 with a new look, a new logo, to aim itself at young women. In its last years, it had a terrible dulling, hectoring line - the way it responded to women's groups who wrote in to protest was appalling - that was calculated to make activism more difficult. In the end, it was not identity politics that killed it, but the fact that it had been entirely taken over by an old-style lefty tradition, and women who had little understanding of the women's liberation movement. It is hard to imagine a more unappealing mixture than 1980s style and 1960s pre-feminist ultra-leftism.

As a colleague from brighter days, Sue O'Sullivan, put it, we had had a sense of 'guardianship' about *Spare Rib*. It was part of the women's liberation movement and far more than the sum of the individuals who happened to work for it at any time. This got lost somewhere in the mid 1980s. I found I didn't mourn at hearing of its demise, because I had grieved for it years ago. Perhaps the most surprising thing is that *Spare Rib* lasted so long after it alienated most of the movement and all its ex-workers. Could any of us, the WLM collectively, have saved it? Or, better: agree what we will do, from now on, to reclaim what we made for women. □

# One World Women

*In 1992 four women founded Equality Now - a women's global action network. Liz Kelly interviewed two of the founder members, Jessica Neuwirth and Navi Pillay, about their plans for the future of the organisation.*

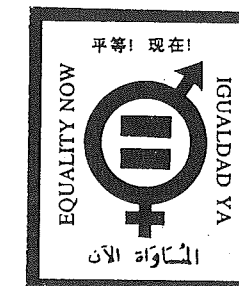
*Liz Kelly: Where did the idea for 'Equality Now' come from?*

Jessica Neuwirth: I guess the immediate inspiration was some of the news articles I was seeing. One was the mass rape of schoolgirls in Kenya in which 19 girls were killed. That was widely reported at the time, but what struck me was that there wasn't really any international structure to deal with that kind of violation. More recently there was a case of a ten year old girl who was crying on a plane and it turned out that she had been sold to the Saudi Arabian man sitting next to her, a 60 year old man, for \$230. There was a lot of press in the US about that case and part of the press reporting included the Indian reporting of the incident which focused on why there was such an international furore, that it was such a common thing, so why the big deal. That struck me very much too. That that little girl just happened to be crying, and someone happened to ask her why she was crying. But a lot of girls don't cry, or no-one asks them why. There is no systematic attention being paid to these issues.

So I talked to a few people I knew, mostly people involved in Amnesty International

and the international human rights world about why there hadn't been a focus and on following up of these issues. We got together a small group who were really interested in pursuing it. Our first task was to look around and see what there was. I couldn't imagine that it really wasn't there. I thought maybe I just couldn't find it, didn't know about it - which in itself was problematic because our work in the human rights field would make us people who ought to know about it. But the more we looked the more we realised that it just wasn't happening. So that when something like what happened to the Indian girl when she goes back to her home town there's someone following up that case to make sure that she's not on another plane the next week.

Navi Pillay: This may sound a little bit flip-pant but I think that Jessica got this idea after she visited South Africa last year. In August you didn't have this idea, but you came to South Africa and saw the work we were doing on domestic violence and she took away with her a video tape of the one woman who agreed to 'tell it all' for television. I'm not sure about England, in the US that is now very common, but in South



### FOUNDER MEMBERS OF 'EQUALITY NOW'

The organization was founded by Jessica Neuwirth, former Policy Advisor for Amnesty International USA and the first chair of Amnesty International USA's Women and Human Rights Task Force. She is currently an associate specializing in international finance for developing countries at a law firm in New York.

Feryal Gharani holds a Bachelor of Science in nuclear engineering from Oregon State University and a Juris Doctor from Georgetown Law School. She worked for seven years as an engineer at Bechtel Corporation and Stone & Webster prior to returning to Georgetown for a law degree, where she specialized in international law and human rights. She is currently practicing as a criminal lawyer in Washington, D.C.

**Veronica De Negri** was arrested, "disappeared," and held in a concentration camp in Chile after the coup d'etat in 1973. She was subsequently forced into exile and has since lived in the United States, where she has worked in community outreach and youth counselling in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. She is currently a member of the Board of Directors of Amnesty International USA and works as a full-time activist for human rights and women's rights. She is also the Director of the Rodrigo Rojas Fund, a fund dedicated to the memory of and justice for her son, who was burned to death at the age of 19 by soldiers of the Chilean Government, and to youth education on human rights issues.

**Navanethem (Navi) Pillay** holds a Bachelor of Law from Natal University, a Masters of Law and a Doctorate in Juridical Science from Harvard University. She has been practicing law in Durban, South Africa for twenty-five years. Navi Pillay handled a number of precedential cases in South Africa relating to human rights and prisoners' rights and has acted in political trials for trade unionists and members of the African National Congress, the Unity Movement and the Black Consciousness Movement. She is co-founder of the Support Group for Abused Women in Durban and co-author of *Violence Against Women - their legal rights and remedies*, a book scheduled for publication in 1993.

\*The campaigns around Karanjit Ahulwalia, Sarah Thornton and Amelia Rossitter.

'Change the Law - 2', Jill Radford and Liz Kelly, *Trouble & Strife*, No. 22, 1991.

Africa it was the first time a woman didn't hide her identity and talked about what had happened to her. And all the other issues came in: the general oppression at home, the in-laws, the lack of police protection. It really had a big impact. What it brought home to us was how effective it is to highlight a case, and she then represents the millions who are abused.

We feel the way human rights have been tackled is by regions or countries - women in this country, women in that country, but not issues of women globally.

JN: That's right. When I saw that tape it struck me so much. I had seen so many testimonies about torture in Amnesty. But I had never seen a tape like this woman; she was a woman whose face was partially disfigured. She had difficulty speaking because some of the bones in her face had been broken with a bush knife. She had these horrendous scars, and it was painful for her to tell this story. And I thought this is just like seeing the torture videos, why aren't we seeing these videos? The more I talk about it the further back the idea goes.

NP: When I think of *Equality Now*, assuming I hear about something, like you telling me, Jessica, that women in Kuwait don't have the vote, then that gets you thinking about your own situation. So even though that's not a priority in your own country, it gets you to think about women's representation. So the three cases here that Justice for Women are highlighting of women who killed their abusive husbands, gets us to think about how similar court cases are handled at home, or sentences generally.

### Outrage and action

JN: There is just so much outrageous information that people aren't aware of. Just the facts for me have been startling - like the number of women who die every year as a result of domestic violence. A lot of people just aren't aware of that, or they just don't react to it. I realised that I knew some of these things, but hadn't really thought what they meant.

Another example would be, during the Persian Gulf war we had lots of information, including about Kuwait more generally. And one of the little facts that slipped out in a

background story was that women don't have the vote. And I remember thinking at the time, why isn't that a big deal in itself? Why don't we do a campaign on a world wide level about the vote for women in Kuwait? Because it's an institutional form of discrimination, just like the campaigning we've been doing on South Africa.

Another issue which came up at that time was the 200 Filipino women who had been working as domestic servants in Kuwait who took refuge in the US embassy. They all told stories of their mistreatment, physical and sexual violation, being virtually imprisoned, not being paid their wages. Nothing happened to them for months because the Kuwaiti government were demanding something like \$2000 per woman from the Philippines to cover their air fares, and to pay damages to their former employers! They were eventually flown home at the Kuwaitis expense. But both governments colluded in nothing being done about the treatment of those women by their employers; in not exposing that.

NP: The ultimate goal is to effect change. Apartheid is a good example of worldwide action and protest, otherwise it would have gone on for another 300 years.

JN: I think the lesson to be learnt from Amnesty and the Anti-Apartheid movement is that you really gain from collectivising energy on an international level. Right now it appears that there is no structure to allow that to happen for women. There's a lot of thinking going on which is very international and crossing all these boundaries, but it doesn't translate easily into a rapid response action technique; so that in the long term you have an impact on issues, whilst in the short term you may have an impact on someone's life that really makes a difference. That's what we are hoping to do - have an impact immediately on individual cases and use those cases at the same time to illustrate the wider problems.

JN: We don't want to set an international agenda, that would be presumptuous. What we are hoping to be is a support network for those groups which do have a very clear agenda of what they want to see in their own countries, which would have a beneficial impact from international attention. We want

to talk with those groups, discuss our thinking, maybe offer information about techniques and principles which have been developed by international human rights groups, to give them some idea about what kinds of actions would be possible, how we might translate some of those principles and use concepts like public exposure and effective pressure. We'd work together to find an



Human rights violations against women have for too long been denied the attention and concern of international organizations, national governments, traditional human rights groups and the press. Meanwhile, hundreds of millions of girls and women around the globe continue to endure debilitating and often fatal human rights abuses.

■ **India, October 20, 1991:** A 10-year-old girl is rescued by a flight attendant who notices her crying. Her father has sold her to the 60-year-old Saudi Arabian man sitting next to her for the equivalent of US\$240.

■ **Kenya, July 14, 1991:** At a boarding school, 300 boys attack the girls' dormitory. Seventy-one girls are raped. Nineteen are trampled to death in the stampede to escape. The school's vice principal remarks, "The boys never meant any harm against the girls. They just wanted to rape."

■ **Brazil, August 29, 1991:** A man who confessed to stabbing his wife and her lover to death is for the second time acquitted of murder by an all-male jury. The acquittal is based on the argument that he acted in legitimate defense of his wronged honor.

■ **Ireland, February 1992:** A 14-year-old girl, raped by the father of her best friend, learns she is pregnant. She is prohibited from travelling to England where abortion is legal. Only when she indicates she will commit suicide if forced to carry the pregnancy to term does the Supreme Court allow her to proceed.

■ **United States, March 9, 1992:** A 51-year-old woman is stabbed 19 times and killed by her former boyfriend as she waits inside a courthouse to extend an order of protection. Twice before he had been charged with harassment. Both times the charges were dropped.

These are only a few instances of abuses which occur every single day. Human rights violations against women must be documented, publicized—and stopped. We need EQUALITY NOW.

Eleanor Roosevelt



*Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home....Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity, without discrimination.*

appropriate action. So we are trying to follow, not create agendas.

There are three issues we have picked out initially, just thinking generally where we could have the most valuable impact, the issues which have been most neglected, and where the violations are most severe and universal. They are trafficking in women, domestic violence and reproductive rights.

## What is EQUALITY NOW?

EQUALITY NOW is an international human rights organization dedicated to action for the civil, political, economic and social rights of girls and women.

Taking advantage of both traditional and "high-tech" action techniques such as letter-writing and fax campaigns, video witnessing, media events and public information activities, EQUALITY NOW mobilizes action on behalf of individual women whose rights are being violated and promotes women's rights at local, national and international levels.

Some of the many human rights issues of urgent concern to EQUALITY NOW include:

- rape
- trafficking
- domestic violence
- female infanticide
- genital mutilation
- reproductive rights
- gender discrimination
- political representation
- sexual harassment
- pornography

Human rights principles articulated in international law reinforce the work of EQUALITY NOW. These principles are found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and other international conventions.

### The Women's Action Network

The Women's Action Network is the nerve center of EQUALITY NOW's worldwide action for the human rights of women.

Information about specific abuses and ongoing violations is gathered from an international network of activists and organizations and by EQUALITY NOW's fact-finding missions and research staff. Appropriate actions and strategies are established in collaboration with local experts and are rapidly publicized and implemented through the network.

EQUALITY NOW carefully scrutinizes the objectivity and evaluates the accuracy of all information it receives.

EQUALITY NOW is committed to multiculturalism, multilingualism and grassroots participation. In carrying out its mandate, the organization strives to embody its values of equality and respect among all.

URGENT  
APPEAL!



But that's tentative, very much an initial starting ground.

### **The first action**

*LK: Can you tell us about the first action 'Equality Now' has taken?*

JN: The first action we have taken is in Poland, where the Polish Medical Society has revised the Hippocratic oath. Doctors under this new oath are required to view life as beginning at conception. The code of ethics in which this revised oath was included was passed in December 1991 and it came into effect in May 1992. So as of that date doctors were technically in violation of the code by performing abortions, even though in Polish law abortion is permitted pretty much without restriction. So it is a very unusual situation, where a medical society has put itself above the law and defined itself as the ultimate authority on the morality of abortion.

Under Polish law that medical society is empowered to revoke medical licenses for people performing abortions and it seems that that's their intention. The latest information we have is that hospitals all over the country are now turning women away. And in Poland there are no contraceptives available and to the extent they are available, they are extremely expensive. The only recourse women have if they don't want to continue a pregnancy is abortion. What we have done is to organise a letter writing action to the Polish medical society, particularly targeting leaders in the medical community outside Poland, to put pressure on about the fact that what they have done is so irregular in terms of democratic process.

We've been really pleased because many doctors have written, heads of departments, deans of medical schools. A lot of the letters we have seen are very moving, very personal, with doctors writing of their experiences in the US before Roe v Wade with backstreet abortions. We don't know what impact it will have, but it's been really successful so far in generating letters. And we don't have much of a network yet, so that's been exciting for us. It's also been useful as an illustration of the kind of action you can take.

*LK: What have the connections been like with women in Poland developing the action?*

JN: Most of our information has come from Poland, but indirectly. We've been in touch with the Polish Feminist Association, which has done a lot of work on this issue. But it seems - and I can't say this with a lot of confidence - that it is not a very large network, so it has been very difficult for them to gather support. The Catholic Church has been pouring in tons of money, churches distributing fliers and all kinds of very elaborate material. But we know indirectly that they really wanted us to do this, to build up international pressure.

### **Future plans**

*LK: Have any ideas been floated yet about how you might tackle domestic violence or trafficking?*

JN: With respect to domestic violence, one thing Navi and I have been doing is working on something more like an exchange, linking up people from the US and what she is trying to do in South Africa. There's a very exciting project in Duluth, Minnesota, and we are going to look at the legislation and see if there is anything which could be adapted for South Africa. We haven't really planned this much in detail, but one thing we were thinking about is to use the support that's built up locally to lobby for that in South Africa. So let's say there are police in Duluth who support the project, getting them to talk to police in South Africa and say 'look this is really good'. There are also some judges in New York, a committee, who I have been talking to about the possibility of passing on some of the legal thinking about how to make changes in a system. That's the only concrete idea; others will develop as we check in with groups working on domestic violence.

NP: We are also keeping in touch with Canadian women and their lawyers' association, LEAF. They have brought actions in the court and they have won some really interesting cases; made even further advances than the United States. The kind of cases I was thinking of were bringing an action against the police for failing to provide protection. I'm really keen on that one, but I need to look at the kind of legal arguments they raised.

JN: And at a grass roots level we could think about targeting police non-responsiveness. In some cases that kind of international

pressure would be really shocking for people. I think it would really make them think twice before ignoring the next call.

NP: These are just a few ideas, Others we will pick up as we go along. For example, I just saw an extract of your article on the defence of provocations - and realised how universal those kind of male interpretations are, it's just global. All legal systems are dominated by men, they are all trained to think like that.



*LK: You mentioned some initial contacts with Gabriela, the umbrella women's coalition in the Philippines, about possible actions regarding mail order bride agencies in the US. Are there any ideas there about future action?*

JN: We have been talking mainly with the New York representative of Gabriela. At this point we are mostly collecting information and trying to come up with some creative strategies to get at some of these traffickers, which we wouldn't want to talk about until we did them. But they could be really dramatic and exciting. The idea really is to scare people and say we going to zap you - we don't know how effective that will be. No, we know it will be effective, we don't know how easy it will be to get it done. It seems to be a very highly organised network and we know there's a lot of money involved, as well as corruption and official involvement at different governmental levels. We have a lot of energy for that, so the trick is to really figure out what our approach should be.

Our sense is to use the media, to catch people in the act and to be able to say 'look at this, this is really what these people are

doing'. We want to let the public know.

While we all may be fully aware of what's going on, it's just not something that most people know about. I talk to people everyday about mail order brides and they really can't believe that it is legal, that it exists. So I think there's a lot of room there to develop, to get governments involved and basically to harass some of these people through exposure.

*LK: Is what you see as one of the strengths of 'Equality Now' that it intends to target beyond governments?*

JN: Yes. Traditional human rights work has been directed almost exclusively at governments or the United Nations, which represents governments. I think governments have a critical role in protecting people, which goes way beyond an obligation not to torture people. So I do think there is a great amount we can do with governments, because ultimately they are responsible. It's just as much a violation if they fail to protect women from domestic violence - and women are dying as a result of that - as if they fail to stop soldiers torturing people who die.

There needs to be that equivalence and we do want to come up with concrete measures for governments to take to protect women which are very straightforward - legislation, enforcement and prosecution.

But the creative side of this for those of us who come from Amnesty is to go after some of these other targets, like traffickers and the Polish Medical Society. The theory behind government work on exposure around human rights has been to embarrass governments. I think governments are particularly insensitive, whereas some of these smaller entities and individuals are going to be much more susceptible. They don't want people knowing what they do. Abusers only do it in many cases because they can get away with it and nobody knows, and just telling two people can sometimes stop that guy.

*LK: It could get over a problem that occurs a lot, where women know something is going on, but for them to expose it is an enormous personal risk. If you can pass that information on to an international network that opens up another set of possibilities.*

JN: Yes exactly. That seems to me very much the case currently in China where there is a huge trade internally, traffick in women.

As far as I can tell unbelievably brutal things are going on. I've seen pictures of women who have been sold. I gather they are sold for two or three hundred dollars and treated as chattel or slaves. If they try to run away they have their feet cut off. I've seen a picture of a woman with her feet cut off. It's something I don't think I'd have believed if I hadn't seen the picture. But it is really hard to get that information, and I think it is impossible for women inside the country to say much about it, although I gather the government is somewhat interested in stopping that practice. I think we could have a political role in finding information like that and then putting pressure on governments.

### Building the network

LK: What do you want in terms of contact with women in various countries at this point?

JN: We want them to think about what if any international contact and support might help them in their work and how we could work with them to get the information we would need. We really want to be as detailed and meticulous as possible, collecting information and then forming actions with those groups on that basis. So it's taking a look at what you are doing and seeing if there are ways in which international pressure would help and if so how and who it would be directed against. What kind of actions would it be best to do? Are there particular countries where pressure would be more effective coming from than others? All of these questions need to be thought about. Another aspect is whether the UN is a possible focus. So, are there areas of international law which we could use when we put together an action?

LK: What kind of structure is Equality Now developing?

JN: Well we have set ourselves up institutionally and we are currently looking for

Since this interview was conducted, Equality Now have issued a number of Action Alerts, and an article in the March edition of *Off Our Backs* reported that they were linking women's groups in former Yugoslavia with Catharine MacKinnon to take international legal action on the mass rapes of women.

If you want to be part of the rapid action network write to:  
Equality Now  
PO Box 20646  
Columbus Circle Station  
New York 10019  
USA

funding, mainly in the US. We are doing this Polish action, which we just jumped into, but it is an urgent situation and we wanted to get going as quickly as possible. Primarily at the moment we are doing programme planning. We are networking internationally and nationally to tap into the thinking that is going on and to gather some of the information we need to get. That is moving along, it's happening and we're really excited about that. We really want to be in touch with women's groups which are collecting information on particular issues, that will be incredibly helpful.

The other thing we should say is that we are putting a high priority on translation because our sense is that there is a hierarchy linked to language in the international human rights movements. We have a strong commitment to translating everything we do in terms of actions into at least English, French, Spanish and Arabic. We have done that with the Polish action and we are committed to that even in these early stages. It's really easy not to do that because it's expensive and takes more time to do it accurately.

LK: So is the idea not to become a huge organisation like Amnesty, but to be more of a resource, clearing house, support network?

JN: We'd like to have a huge, what we have called, a women's action network. So we do want massive membership of the network so that when we have things which really do need international attention and women are saying help us with this, we can zap it out to people all over the world and get immediate help for them. We're planning to use the fastest kinds of communication technology - electronic mail, fax. So in that sense we want a massive grass roots presence. What we don't want is a lot of organisational bureaucracy, and layers of structures. We are trying to keep it really simple. □



# QUEER STRAITS

*In your face radicalism or part of the backlash? Julia Parnaby looks at the political activities and assumptions of the Queer Movement and argues we should not be fooled.*

It has been a long haul back to reclaiming the right to call my cunt, my cunt, to celebrating the pleasure in objectifying another body, to fucking women and to admitting that I also love men and need their support. That is what queer is.

The above is a quote from *Lesbians Talk Queer Notions* in which Cherry Smyth argues that the new 'radical' Queer movement has brought about a transformation in lesbian politics.

Smyth argues that Queer has grown out of AIDS activism in the United States, and from a dissatisfaction with the way lesbians and gay men have previously worked around issues of sexuality and homophobia. Not surprisingly, Queer has been quick to take hold in Britain where the agenda is so often set by what goes on in the US. Queer activism is centred around actions which make gays and (supposedly) lesbians more visible in straight society. Outrage is the most apparent of these groups and they have employed a number of 'shocking' tactics, such as staging a mass lesbian and gay wedding, 'Wink-Ins' and 'Kiss-Ins', all of which are designed to highlight the ways in which lesbians and gays are excluded by the British legal system. Other aspects of Queer activism have been argued to be somewhat more threatening to both the gay and straight 'mainstream'. Most notable here is the Manchester group Homocult, who have achieved more than an ounce of notoriety through their 'upfront' poster campaigns and sloganeering, including their infamous 'Paki Poof' images. Even the FROCS\* outing hoax, which turned Queer activism on its head by tempting the homophobic press with

its planned revelation of closeted lesbians and gays, only to leave them foaming at the mouth with a statement about homophobia, and none of the promised star names, was hailed as a triumph for Queer tactics.

What became clear from reading *Queer Notions*, however, is that the 'In your face radicalism' which is claimed to be its outstanding characteristic, has, in the end, much in common with plain old liberalism. Queer's 'shocking' tactics constitute little more than a plea to be included in straight society, rather than a demand that we change it. The Queer demand that lesbians and gays should be allowed to get married too, doesn't question the validity of the whole institution. It seems clear that in the wake of the backlash around feminism (and indeed socialism), Queer as a lifestyle has found its audience.

### Reclaiming 'Queer'?

So why the term 'Queer'? Queer - that old style homophobic insult - has been 'reclaimed' we are told, as a way to remind ourselves of how we are seen in heterosexual society. Smyth quotes Joan Nestle, proponent of butch-femme, who says,

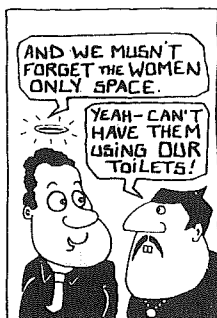
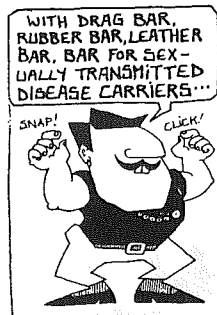
I need to remember what it was like to fight for sexual territory in the time of McCarthy ... to keep alive the memory that in the 1940s doctors measured the clitorises and nipples of Lesbians to prove our biological strangeness.

Recycling terms of hatred has been a method employed by some feminists in the past for our own purposes, and to help illustrate our arguments. *Trouble & Strife* for example. However, this has not been done in a simplistic belief that



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in so doing we have the power to redefine the term's meaning in a wider context, or indeed remove from it its misogynist associations. Nor would feminists wish to advocate that men should continue to use such terms. Reclaiming 'Queer' as a name is based on the assumption that merely to do so strips it of its homophobic power, that it turns the world against the queer basher, rather than the bashed. It is a direct consequence of post-structuralist arguments around language which claim that the meanings of words are constantly redefined each time they are used by the individuals who use them, and that we can therefore make words mean what we want them to mean. Clearly such arguments remove language from both its historical and social context. In heterosexist society 'queer' cannot be other than abusive, just as in white supremacist society racist insults are statements of hatred, and words like 'bitch' reflect patriarchy's misogyny.

### Mixed movement

'Queer' also is a very specific word. It is not only a term of abuse but also a term of abuse for men. Queer betrays its origins in male politics even as it names itself, and despite Smyth's attempts to claim otherwise, the book fails to convince that Queer ever did or could include women, and address their concerns. Queer, just like other attempts at mixed movements, has been plagued with accusations of sexism. Attempts to form a lesbian wing of Outrage - LABIA (Lesbians Answer Back in Anger) - failed. Indeed, the few lesbian members left in Outrage have consistently had to shout to make themselves heard, and have also been obliged on several occasions to prove their existence in the gay (sic) press, after reports that, exhausted by the misogyny in Outrage, all the women had left.

Radical feminism has long recognised the contradictions of working in mixed movements. Queer, however, tries to make lesbians believe that it is in their interests to ally with gay men. What this fails to comprehend is the way in which patriarchy functions to oppress lesbians. By falsely assuming that lesbians and gay men have shared interests, Queer aims to provide an arena where women and men work together to fight men's battles. One of the major demands of Outrage, for example, has been a change in the age of consent laws. Clearly this is an issue which does not affect les-

bians, yet Queer tries to convince women to join a movement based almost solely on a male agenda. Queer is not an attempt to challenge the very basis of the hetero-patriarchal society we live in, but rather a campaign for liberal reform to increase the 'rights' of the vocal few. For lesbians to be really free from oppression it is crucial that we engage in struggle for much more fundamental change.

### An alternative to feminism?

Nonetheless, *Queer Notions* tries hard to present Queer as an attractive alternative to feminism in a post-feminist age. Feminism, with its emphasis on fighting patriarchy and heterosexuality as institutions, has - Smyth argues - failed. It has failed because it has not addressed the fact that some women like dominant/subordinate relationships; some women want to be objectified; and hey - and here she really gets to the point - some women want to objectify other women. What can a woman do, if she wants to call herself a feminist, and yet she wants the right to do sexually to women what men have always done? Where can she go? Cherry has the answer - Queer:

The attraction of queer for some lesbians is flavoured by a rebellion against a prescriptive feminism that had led them to feel disenfranchised by the lesbian feminist movement.

Lesbian feminism, it seems, has disenfranchised some lesbians through its very analysis of heterosexuality as an institution and men as a class as oppressors of women. What about women who also want to be fucked by men? What about women who want to act like men? Well, Queer provides a place for them too, by arguing that it is possible to have sexual relationships with men, yet still call yourself a lesbian. The most integral point seems to be naming oneself (in true postmodern fashion):

... there are times when queers may choose to call themselves heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian or gay, or none of the above. If queer develops into an anti-straight polemic, it will have betrayed its potential for radical pluralism.

One can be Queer whatever one does if that's what one chooses to be known as. The concept actually has very little at all to do with lesbian or gay sexuality. As Smyth clearly shows, Queer is about breaking down the 'strict binary Homo-hetero opposition which still tyrannises notions of sexual orientation.'

One of the most bizarre aspects of Queer politics - and one which enables those disenfranchised lesbians who want to do what men do, without feeling guilty - is its emphasis on the importance of 'gender fuck', a concept most vocally coined by pornographer Della Grace. Gender-fuck means to 'play' with gender, and has resulted in 'lesbian boys' and 'daddy dykes' - a direct imitation by women of gay male sexuality. Thus lesbianism becomes the poor copycat cousin of male homosexuality.

In the past two years more lesbians have been discussing their erotic responses to gay male pornography and incorporating gay male iconography into their fantasies, sex play and cultural representations.

Here there is no desire for the female, but rather a worship of the penis, second only to that of many gay men. 'Chick with a dick' is the slogan and reality most likely to be adored. For Smyth and her ilk, this is the height of Queerness.

Della Grace's photograph, 'Lesbian Cock', presents two lesbians dressed in leather and biker caps, both sporting moustaches and one holding a life-like dildo protruding from her crotch. In this delicious parody of phallic power, laced with an envy few feminists feel able to admit, these women are strong enough to show they're women. [My emphasis]

The theory buys straight into the age old Freudian and homophobic arguments that all women are frantic with penis envy, and that lesbian sexuality cannot possibly exist without a penis substitute. This, of course, is a lie.

### Transgression or reversion

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the logical conclusion of Queer politics is a reversion to heterosexuality. The deification of gay men has reached such a peak that the ultimate experience for Queers has been sex between 'lesbians' and 'gay men'. This is yet more gender-fuck, dabbling in what is seen to be naughty and unconventional, but really what could be more boring than men and women sleeping together!

The play around butch-femme and gender roles, however, is not a flippant bit of fun. Smyth attempts to pay dues to her 'feminism' by pointing out that,

when lesbians take on behaviour perceived as macho and beat up their femme or lesbian-boy identified lovers in the name of transgression, then it's plain old reactionary chickshit.

However, it is not 'reactionary chicken-shit', Smyth believes, if the partner 'consents' to this abuse. Consent is one of the major focuses of Queer's position, but there is no understanding of the way such a concept may or may not operate in a hetero-patriarchal society. Consent is not something which is freely given, based solely on an individual's desires. If a person pressurises her or his partner, then it may well be the case that s/he gives her 'consent'. It may also be the case that an individual is threatened into a situation. The coercive partner can easily claim that s/he agreed to being tied up or beaten, and s/he will be the one who has the loudest voice. Smyth cannot say that some scenes of abuse are OK if both partners 'agreed', and that others are abusive. It is clear that all situations of power inequality are oppressive and must be challenged, not celebrated as some part of Queer liberation.

Queer represents a violent and forceful attack on women who have spoken out about abuse and degradation. Here sexuality is



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explicitly about power games. Whereas lesbian feminists have questioned the notion that sex is necessarily about dominance and subordination, Queer chooses to celebrate and deify such forms of behaviour. It is a reversion to the old argument that what consenting adults do in private life is fine - or rather, it is even better if they do it in public shouting 'Fuck You'. Queer politics is the apotheosis of teen rebellion - it's as naughty as we want to be and you can't stop us.

The widespread hysteria around the so-called tyranny of 'political correctness' is a large part of what Smyth has swallowed. Queer claims to be challenging the alleged rampant feminist censorship of the individual right to do just what one likes, as and when one feels like it. Anyone who has been active in radical feminist politics will be painfully aware that radical feminism has never had a stranglehold over any part of our hetero-patriarchal society; and to claim that we are the powerful majority denying the libertarians their chance to fuck who and how they like is astounding! Queer however is providing a powerful voice for the libertarian community, a voice which says 'we do what we like without your permission, in the 'new' lesbian and gay politics, if you're not Queer then you might as well not exist, and you're certainly not credible or worth listening to.

Queer is a deeply conservative movement. It says nothing can change - we've got to stop believing that it can. We've got to accept the inevitability of our situation, and not try to pretend that the world can change. For Smyth, the most we can aspire to is minor Parliamentary reform. For her, the burning issue is:

With its anti-assimilationist stance, can the queer agenda help to achieve constitutional reform in Britain?

In the Queer world we learn that power exists and that's all there is to it. Individuals should just choose which side of the power divide they are on and then get on with acting on it. This, Queer argues, is what lesbians and gay men have wanted all along, not the idea that fighting heterosexism ought also to mean fighting the way we oppress

people in our own lives. The long standing feminist position that the personal is political is nothing but an oppressive slogan denying people's right to choose how they have sex, and indeed making them feel guilty about their desires.

In choosing its name, 'Queer' gives its politics away. It fails to recognise the reality of the material world we live in and the fact that neither lesbians nor gay men can or do live in a vacuum. 'Queer' remains a term of abuse for an oppressed group, and as such cannot form the basis for political action to end homophobia. What Queer seems to forget is that we know that there has always been hatred and oppression of lesbian and gay men, and we know that this continues to this day and is no less vigorous. We do not need to remind ourselves by using the language of our oppressors. Revolution requires more than this.

### *Queer and the backlash*

Queer has certainly found a niche for itself, and the movement is in the ascendant, but lesbian feminists should be very wary indeed of a system which fails to acknowledge the role that patriarchy plays in oppressing us and which seems to have rejected feminist arguments almost entirely. Queer fails to address seriously the ways in which men oppress women, and as long as it continues to be a male-led movement there will never be any serious considerations of issues relating specifically to women.<sup>1</sup>

Cherry Smyth tries her hardest to show that Queer can appeal to women, but she fails to convince. Queer is far from the revolutionary movement it would like itself to be, it is little more than a liberal/libertarian alliance. It represents the logical conclusion of 'post-ism'. Post-structuralism suggests that there are no longer clear gender categories - girls will be boys and boys will be girls; and post-feminism means there's no contradiction in 'feminists' working in a male led movement for male defined goals. We know however that this is not the case. Queer offers us nothing. It is yet one more face of the backlash, trying to pass itself off as something new. We will not be fooled! □

<sup>1</sup> Hence the emphasis on AIDS for example; whilst breast cancer, which is reaching enormous proportions amongst lesbians, is never mentioned.

C. Smyth (1992) *Lesbians Talk Queer Notions*, Sheba, London

# Resisting War Rape in Bangladesh

*Jumma women in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh are facing systematic rape as part of the repression of their people by the Bangladesh government. Joyoti Grech looks at the ways in which women have been specifically targeted within this war, and at the relationship between nationalism and the control of women.*

Jumma women, as the rest of their people, are Bangladeshi. They live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh. They are part of the people of Bangladesh. But they are not Bengali.

The Jumma community of the CHT is made up of 13 distinct tribes, each with their own culture and language. Some practice Buddhism, others are Hindu or Christian or animists. In collectively naming themselves Jumma, in reference to the practice of 'Jum' (swidden or shifting slash and burn agriculture) common to all the hill people, they have chosen to gather around a unifying cultural characteristic.

In the war that has taken thousands of lives over the last twenty years, the non-Bengali nature of Jumma identity is the key to Bangladesh government propaganda, which seeks to present Bangladesh as a smoothly homogeneous nation of Bengalis living together in harmony. Even setting aside the glaring inequalities of class and gender which keep the rich so far from the poor in Bangladesh, with poor women at the bottom of the pyramid, this is evidently untrue. But the myth serves two purposes. First, it hides the true nature of power in Bangladesh similar to that of any developing country which lies in the purses of the aid giving nations and the International Monetary Fund. Second, it props up state policies aimed at the destruction of the nation's minorities.

The Bangladesh state faces a double urgency in validating its national identity - both as a young nation state and as an aid dependent nation whose national sovereignty is constantly under threat of erosion. No modern nation state is ethnically homogeneous, yet a common strategy of nationalism is to uphold a mythologized national homogeneity which outlaws any form of difference. Bangladesh is no exception.

In Sylhet, a growing language movement demands separate recognition. Santal and Garo tribespeople of Bangladesh struggle against economic exploitation. And in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the thirteen distinct tribes collectively self-named Jumma, are fighting for their lives against state genocide. Their existence, their difference, shows up the lie of a homogeneous Bengali Bangladesh. The fierce resistance of the Jumma people singles them out for particularly brutal armed state oppression. By whatever means, the Bangladesh government aims to turn off the current of Jumma resistance - either by extermination or 'assimilation'. Either of these methods hold particular horrors for women.

Apart from the violent realities of war that threaten all members of the Jumma community, Jumma women face an added, multi-faceted trauma - the blatant use of rape as a means of state terror. Jumma women are raped during village attacks, in public and

Bangladesh came into being as a nation state in 1971. The history of Bengal is one of long centuries of resistance against foreign rule. It was here that the British first landed, setting up the East India company in 1775 in what came to be known as Calcutta. And it was here that the first War of Independence began in 1857. Two centuries later when the British finally pulled out, they left a Bengal divided in two. The Western section remained part of India, and the Eastern section was handed over to Pakistan. The experience of colonial exploitation, carried over from the British by the Pakistani ruling class, was full of contradictions which led to the growth of a powerful resistance movement. One of the cornerstones of that resistance was the language movement - the right to speak Bengali and not the Urdu of the foreign rulers. In the war against Pakistan and for self-determination, thousand of East Bengalis were killed and thousands of women raped by the Pakistani armed forces. From this bloody experience Bangladesh was born.

It is important to tell this story, because within the very boundaries of this new nation, bought at such a high human price, the same story is being replayed, with the state of Bangladesh now playing the role of oppressor. The war in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), is the story of East Bengal in reverse. 'What the Pakistanis did to us we are now doing to them. It has been recognised as such by many, articulated as such by the voices of dissent within Bangladesh - but it continues.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the first premier of Bangladesh, came to power on the strength of the East Bengali people struggle for their rights. Yet in the aftermath of the Liberation War, when the people of the CHT articulated their need to safeguard their own rights, within the broad constitutional framework of the new nation state, they were shut up and dismissed. Mujib told them to forget their ethnic identity and 'become Bengali'.

Mujib's successors continued his policies of 'Bengalization' of the indigenous Jumma people. Amongst these was a massive population transfer policy. From the 1970s on, Bengali Muslim landless families were relocated on Jumma land that had been vacated by military land theft and massacre. Official figures put the number of Bengali settlers moved to the CHT at 400,000. Add to this the incalculable numbers unofficially encouraged to move up and claim Jumma land for themselves in the interest of the state, and you begin to have an idea of the scale of dispossession and displacement of Jumma people on their own land.

During the mid-1970s, after attempts at political negotiation had failed, the Jumma political party (Jana Sanghati Samity or JSS) took up arms and continued the struggle on the battlefield. Since then successive Bangladesh governments have used the excuse of 'counter-insurgency' against Shanti Bahini (Peace Force - the armed wing of JSS) guerrilla activity to wage a violent war against all Jumma people in Bangladesh. Its most brutal and long-lasting war weapon is the rape of Jumma women. It fits perfectly the state's desire to 'Bengalize' the Jumma people, to force them to forget their ethnic identity. It also allows the state to fill up the CHT with new 'Bengalis' without the expense and responsibility of population transfer schemes.

within their homes, at market or at work, and abducted to army camps where they are repeatedly raped by soldiers of the Bangladesh army. They are raped by members of the police force and by men in the state-organised and armed Village Defence Party. They are subjected to multiple rape and gang rape. Jumma women are also forcibly prostituted and forcibly converted to Islam and married to Muslim men.

Women are raped for being women, for not behaving within the bounds of the oppressor's system, as retribution for male kin's activities - real or not, as a means of breaking community honour, as a means of wiping out or breaking down the Jumma race - for any number of reasons. In several instances, men have also been physically penalized for female relatives' resistance - particularly where women have successfully defended themselves against rape. Women are punished for being part of a community under siege, a community at war, a community of resistance. In the war in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, women's importance and vulnerability has taken on increasingly urgent life-or-death dimensions.

#### **Women and nationalism**

We have become familiar with the horrifying prevalence of war rape in former Yugoslavia, where women are being raped as part of a policy known under the chilling euphemism of 'ethnic cleansing'. Within patriarchal structures, women's sexual/gender roles are recognised as integral to the survival of the nation. As reproducers of the race, as carriers and transmitters of culture, as markers of the boundaries that define national groups, women come to symbolize national honour and, in a similar way, the language of nationalism often speaks of the nation as a woman. Women's actively chosen contributions as fighters, planners and public workers, are all crucial in themselves, but it's their particular contributions *as women* which make them so indispensable to the patriarchally-defined nation, and so vulnerable when that nation is under threat from another patriarchally-defined national entity.

There are clear national-political implications to war rape that revolve around manipulations of national honour, racial purity and national integrity. These make it so terrify-

ingly effective and widespread as a weapon of war - and mark out women as the crucial group at the centre of nationalist warfare.

All of this exposes state strategies behind the policy of war rape. But the bottom line is finally the integrity and wholeness of the women at the centre of this phenomenon - the damage done to them and their struggle to emerge from it.

Many Jumma women have fled their homes as the result of attack and war atrocities. There are now more than 50,000 Jumma women, men and children living in inadequately resourced relief camps in the Indian state of Tripura. They are not recognised as refugees by Delhi, and The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has been denied access to carry out humanitarian work with them. Many of the women living there are the survivors of rape by the Bangladesh military and paramilitary forces. Speaking to members of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission, an international human rights group that visited the camps in late 1990, some of them recalled their experiences.

One young woman said:

There was an army operation... they encircled the village and brought everyone out of their houses. I couldn't get out because three soldiers came in and raped me. I was 12 years old. It was 13 June 1986. After that all the houses were burnt. People were tortured like anything and some others were raped and beaten. At the time I didn't know that others had been raped. I fled to the jungle and stayed there for one year eating jungle potato, bamboo shoots, jungle fruits. Sometimes we were without food.

Another woman told of the army attack on her village which left most villagers dead.

The army came in at night at about 1 am and opened fire and killed my family as they were sleeping. Only myself and (my) daughter survived. I was crying over the dead bodies, soldiers heard me, came in and raped me. I was raped by three soldiers in front of the dead bodies.'

Another woman said.

I was raped by three soldiers in the room (in her home). After this I didn't want to live anymore, but what am I to do. I am still suffering from it... I want medical treatment as I am still suffering from the rape. Still afraid of Muslims... This happened in June '86. I am still just like mad.'

One woman of the Marma tribe was raped, four years earlier, on the pretext that she had provided food and shelter for the Shanti Bahini. She described her experience of setting up home with other women survivors of military rape:

Even nowadays, I feel like crying. I am afraid. I have nightmares. I live together with some Marma women who had similar experiences and we talk a lot. I never get relief because this reminds me of the past.



Another woman, who was 14 when she was repeatedly raped in a military attack on her village, finished by saying,

We are not the victims, the victims are those hungry people, the Muslims... I pray never to meet these people again.

War rape depends on the dehumanisation of the soldier/rapist, making him into nothing but a biological weapon. It aims to dehumanise the woman, casting her as nothing but a reproductive vessel. In the ugly face of the brutal violation these women have experienced, the simple fact of their survival as human beings is a seed of their victory as resisters.

One survivor of a joint army and settler attack in 1984 on his village in Het Baria, Barkal, CHT, revealed the events of that day in an interview with Amnesty International. He recalled:

They destroyed our village, raped women and killed people... The memories of that day are still a nightmare for me. I sometimes wake up in a cold sweat remembering the sight of the soldiers thrusting bayonets in the

private parts of our women. They were all screaming, 'No Chakmas will be born in Bangladesh'.

Another villager from Logang who survived the military attack of 7 May 1986 recounted how the local Muslim settlers joined with the army:

The officer ordered them to start killing men but to take women away so that at least the next generation of Chakmas will behave like good Bangladeshis.

These accounts give a frightening indication of the methods used by the Bangladesh state in its policy of 'national assimilation' of Jumma people. Another woman's story gives an indication of the terrifying tightrope of Jumma women's daily lives:

I used to work in the rubber plantation as a worker. One day I was to go to work after cooking rice for my meal... The way from my house to the rubber plantation was a bit far so I could not go alone. I would go with another woman. But on that day my friend did not come on time. I left my food at my house and went to look for my friend. Meanwhile army personnel came to my house, found the prepared food and ate it all. Suddenly when I returned I found everything eaten by them. I scolded them and charged them why they had eaten the food of such a helpless woman. But in reply they threatened me saying that a woman does not do that. Then I was taken out of my house and gang raped by them until I lost consciousness.

The same woman observed,

Women targeted for rape are those who go to college or who work in offices. Many of them were taken to army camps.

Her observation is obviously true, but this does not exclude non-educated and non-professional women from being targeted by the 'security' forces for rape. One woman has described how the woman in domestic service in her household was taken out of the house and raped by soldiers, while she was left in the house. Old or young, employer or employee, silent or outspoken women are still being raped in a calculated system of terror in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

It is evident that the war rapes of Jumma women are not isolated incidents. Women of the Chakma tribe have been targeted because of the high levels of Chakma participation in the JSS and Shanti Bahini. But women from all across the Jumma community, from different tribes and religious backgrounds, are being raped by the occupying forces - a category which includes the armed Muslim set-

tlers as well as regular army and police.

One man from the Tripura tribe, which follows Hindu religious practices, survived an army attack on his village in May 1986. He told how

The officer-in-charge said, 'You Hindus have no place in Bangladesh'. The village was burnt down and ten days later the army returned. 'As bullets rained down from all sides, the Muslims too descended on the valley, raping women and killing people with swords, spears and knives...

Women are forced to pay for the resistance of the whole community. In trying to break them, the state aims to break the community. In a maliciously calculated way women are targeted for their sex as well as their race. By raping Jumma women, the Bangladeshi policy is clearly exploiting nationalist concerns about racial purity, trying to wipe out the Jumma people by turning them into Bengali people. But the central issue here is not what makes a person Bengali or Jumma. The issue is hatred of and violence against women of a particular community - a community of difference within the nation state and a community of resistance against state oppression.

The practice of marriage or union across race and culture is as old in the Hill Tracts as it is throughout the world, nor is it socially prohibited in itself. As recently as three generations ago (my grandmother's generation), the Chakma Rani was a middle-class Bengali woman who left her home in Calcutta, West Bengal, to join her husband the Chakma Raja, in the Hill Tracts. Class and power obviously affect the boundaries of choice in social behaviour. But the limitations of choice open to a woman raped in war are severely restricted. It is the forcible miscegeny behind the strategy of war rape that aims to confuse the boundaries of the Jumma nationalist movement and in so doing to annihilate a community that is militant in its right to be different - and to have that difference recognised and respected.

### Resistance

There has been and continues to be protest and resistance against war rape in the CHT. There are documented reports of Jumma women fighting back in successful ways, managing to avoid rape. Instead they are beaten and traumatised in other ways. The consequences are severe.

In April 1992, in Logang, CHT, three Jumma women fought off Bengali settler youths who assaulted and attempted to rape them. One youth later died of his injuries. His companions, on their return to their village, claimed to have been the victims of a Shanti Bahini ambush. In immediate retaliation, Bengali villagers, including armed

members of the Village Defence Party and armed Jamaati Islami supporters, attacked the neighbouring Jumma settlement, burning all the homes down and leaving vast numbers of Jumma people dead.

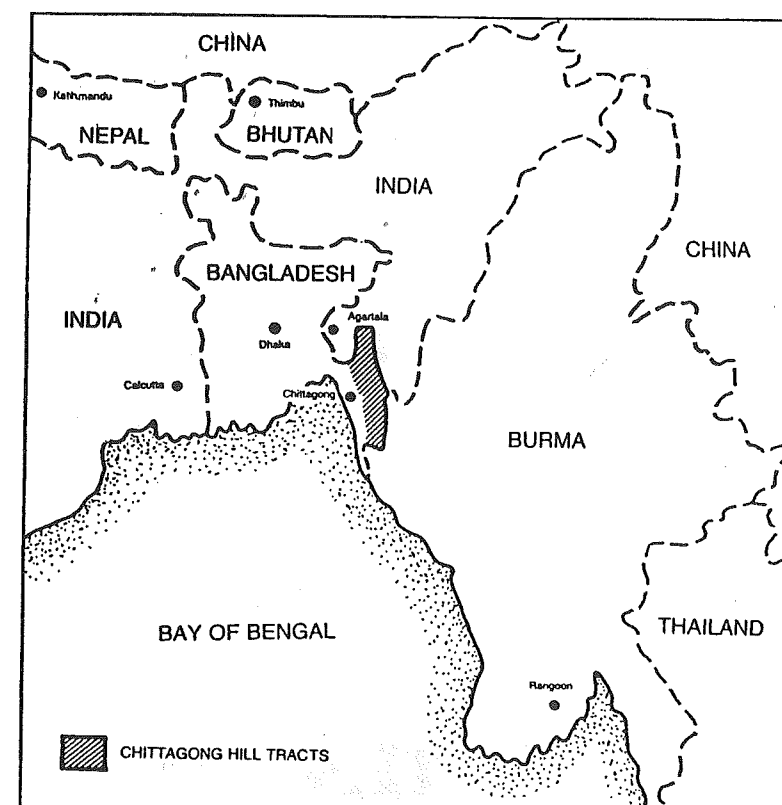
The women's courage and determination in defending themselves are inspirational. But the cowardice and lies that followed to protect the egos of the would-be rapists sparked off an attack with perhaps the highest death toll in a single incident in the history of the war.

However, resistance and strategies for coping are struggling to grow, despite continuing oppression. Within the camps in Tripura, women have begun to set up their own informal self-help structures. Recently a project aimed at building up women's independent economic activity through handloom weaving was initiated.

It is also important to recognise that Bengali Bangladeshi support for the Jumma cause has been gaining momentum, particularly after the overthrow of President Ershad in the winter of 1990. Relaxation of censorship laws has meant a certain increase of access to and circulation of information, although in some cases this has resulted in Bengali as well as Jumma activists being subjected to surveillance and intimidation by the Bangladesh state. Following the Logang massacre, Jumma groups led the first mass anti-war demonstration ever to be held within the Chittagong Hill Tracts in the history of the military occupation. They were joined by a group of Bengali supporters, men and women, who had travelled from Dhaka to show their support. In London, too, members of the Bangladeshi community joined with others to protest outside the Bangladeshi High Commission. Another picket is planned one year on, and these will continue.

The war in the Chittagong Hill Tracts is not the outcome of inherent communal or ethnic hatred. It is a genocidal drive against the people of Bangladesh by the state of

## Location of the Chittagong Hill Tracts



Bangladesh. It cannot be separated from state oppression of the other disenfranchised sectors of the Bangladeshi people. In effect it is class war with an added weapon of race propaganda, fought in specific, strategic ways on the battleground of women's bodies - not metaphorically, but physically.

There is no neat ending to this comment on the rape of Jumma women - it is still continuing. A seventh attempt at peace talks between government and JSS representatives goes into its third round this spring. It would be over optimistic to expect that these talks could bring an end to the war. Even during the unilateral Shanti Bahini cease-fire in the run-up to the talks, Bangladesh government forces led an attack on the first branch meeting of the Pahari Chattra Parishad (Hill Students Council) in Dighinala last October.

Even when, one day, the war does end, the process of healing the damage will take a long time. The women of the Chittagong Hill Tracts need support - in their attempts to build up their own networks of self-help and in calling for a peaceful, negotiated political settlement to the conflict. □

You can write to the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office and demand that British aid to Bangladesh be channelled into humanitarian work in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, with the active consultation of Jumma representatives.

You can write to Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia and urge that the current peace talks be used as a genuine means of negotiating a solution. The war rape of Jumma women is an integral part of the military occupation. Bangladesh troops must be withdrawn from the Hill Tracts and the Jumma people must have their basic rights of self-determination respected.

Douglas Hurd  
Foreign and Commonwealth Office  
Whitehall  
London  
SW1A 2AH

Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia  
Sugandha House  
Prime Minister's Secretariat  
Dhaka  
Bangladesh

There is a monthly vigil outside the Bangladesh High Commission in London organised by Survival international. Call them for details on 071 723 5535

### Further reading:

*Life is Not Ours* - report of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission, available from the CHT Campaign & Information Network, c/o Anti-Slavery International, 180 Brixton Road, London SW9 6AT

Amnesty International documents:  
*Bangladesh - Unlawful Killings and Torture in the Chittagong Hill Tracts* (1986)  
*Bangladesh - Human Rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, 1989-1990*

*Bangladesh - Reprisal Killings in Logang, Chittagong Hill Tracts, in April 1992.*

Nira Yuval - Davis and Floya Anthias, (eds), *Woman - Nation State* 1989 Macmillan.

'Coming to that conference is like coming home. WHISPER is the women's movement.'

somebody finally knew what it meant to be who I was, as a woman who had been used in prostitution'

# Women Hurt In Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt

You don't have to be an ex-prostitute to do something about this issue - but if women who have had those experiences are not part of your thing, it will make a difference'

*Evelina Giobbe, radical feminist organiser, survivor of prostitution and pornography and founder member of the Minnesota based organisation WHISPER (Women Hurt in Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt), talked to Anne Mayne and Rachel Wingfield from the Campaign Against Pornography at the Speech, Equality and Harm conference in Chicago.*

*Rachel Wingfield: Could you tell us about how you first got involved in the feminist movement?*

Evelina Giobbe: Essentially my first involvement with the feminist movement was the anti-pornography movement. I had the opportunity to learn about feminism and activism from Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon, Dorchen Liedholt and Kathy Barry. It was an incredible opportunity for me as a young woman. The first time I heard anybody from Women Against Pornography (WAP) in New York speak, I had this sense of recognition. Realised that somebody finally knew what it meant to be who I was, as a woman who had been used in prostitution and pornography, and it was absolutely an incredible experience. So I started working for WAP. Actually I was one of these women that every organisation hopes walks through the door one day. I came once, I realised this was my issue, eventually I left my job, and I worked with them for next to nothing!

Eventually I became WAP's staff coordinator and found myself in the midst of conferences in the early porn debate; they were not so friendly as this one. There were pro-porn and anti-porn feminists 'debating' the issue of pornography. Then there was this fateful moment, I think in 1985, at the Women in the Law conference, when I came out as a survivor of prostitution! That was the long and the short of it. In the debate no-one was identifying themselves as a prostituted woman or a woman who had been used in pornography. And I did publicly!

The women's press picked up my statement and women who were survivors of porn and prostitution started writing to me. I was really naive. I was just saying this because it was true. And I didn't realise what a response I would get from women. Here I was sitting with all these letters, and I thought that we, all of us that had been used in prostitution, should have a newsletter. After all, Women Against Pornography had a newsletter, women who had been raped had a newsletter, and incest survivors had a newsletter. There was nothing about us, except COY-OTE (Prostitutes Rights Group) saying prostitution was great and all that, and I knew in my heart that that was not what it was. So I began with, 'That's not true', that was my

basic concept. 'This is not nice, it hurts.' Women get fucked over and end up poor, if not poorer, and with more problems than they started out with.

*RW: So how did WHISPER emerge from that?*

EG: Cookie Teer in North Carolina asked me to speak at a conference. Right then I made up the name WHISPER (I made it up on the bus one Saturday, it just came to me.) What was really important about it, was that I wanted to distinguish us from any kind of pro-prostitution lobby. The acronym accurately made clear who we are. There were a hand full of us, and essentially we were writing to each other, or calling long distance - trying to speak out for the first time.

At first I didn't want to speak at the conference, I didn't feel ready to do this, I didn't want to be it! Cookie said, 'Well you know Evelina, you want to write this newsletter, we would be happy to pay you \$500 to come to speak, and you can speak under a pseudonym. We won't let the press take a picture of you. And then you could publish the newsletter.' So then I made up flyers for subscriptions for this newsletter, which only existed in my mind at that moment. I figured I needed more money. I didn't know what to do, I didn't know how to do this. So, Cookie gave me \$500 and I met Marilyn Waring who was giving a presentation at the conference.

Later at a party I told Marilyn that I wanted to publish this newsletter. She knew Laura Lederer, and at that time Laura Lederer was working for the Skaggs Foundation. She told her that she'd met this incredible woman - at that time it was incredible for a prostitute to say that she didn't like prostitution - and about the newsletter. So Laura wrote me a letter, I didn't know her or anything, I had read 'Take Back the Night' of course and all that. Essentially what her letter said was 'do you want money?' It is like a feminist fairy tale when some funder writes to you and asks you that. I didn't know what a grant was, I didn't know anything. And then I published the newsletter, which means typed it and pasted it up and then took it to the printer that did WAP's newsletter. It was a sorry looking thing, but it was basic, it got it out there.

*Anne Mayne: How did you distribute it?*

EG: We did it through subscription and we introduced it through Women Against Pornography, if memory doesn't fail me. So then, I became a 'hot ticket' at conferences. I learnt to say I wanted to go to conferences to do participant initiated workshops, which were primarily me talking about why prostitution hurts women. So the earlier newsletters looked like that too - you know: this is why it hurts, you get exploited by pimps, the sex with the johns is like a nightmare, and they take pictures of you too - and it was really majorly basic. I had women who wrote me letters and I published them like articles, with their permission.

Then in 1987, I did a workshop at the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence National Conference and three women heard me speak there who were with the Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women (MCBW). They said they liked what I was talking about. At that point my line was that battered women's shelters would be to prostitutes like the underground railroad was to slaves. Making the links with abolition. These women said, 'Yeah that makes sense.' So I was invited by the MCBW to do a 10 week project on the conditions of women and girls in prostitution in Minnesota, a survey of existing services, and to make recommendations about the role of battered women's shelters and programs in providing services to women who were attempting to escape prostitution.

The report went over really well, so much so, that I was invited to teach at St Cloud State University for a quarter. At the time I was still in college in New York. I had gone back to college as an adult because I thought I was going to be a therapist and help women. I really did! I wanted to help women, and I'm so embarrassed to say that, because a lot of my work has been a total critique of therapy and how disempowering and depoliticising it is and I was one of the first voices speaking out against co-dependency as victim blaming.

I decided to leave college and make a contract with MCBW to trade a year of training for battered women's shelters around the state, for office space and materials to start doing WHISPER stuff here. So I went to teach up at St Cloud and taught prostitution

somebody finally knew what it meant to be who I was, as a woman who had been used in prostitution'

'When you can't turn another trick, turn to us.'

and pornography as a form of violence against women and a course on therapeutic interventions as disempowering, depoliticising for women. That was the one that was scandalous, not the course on prostitution. The long and the short of it was that WHISPER then reorganised in Minnesota, from a very small grassroots response to what it is today.

AM: *So what services does WHISPER provide?*

EG: We work very much like a non-residential battered women's shelter. We do groups for women, we do direct advocacy for them. The reason we decided to do that is there are too many prostitutes to make one prostitute shelter and so we have a real mainstreaming philosophy. These services exist. These are battered and sexually abused women. Therefore they deserve to have access to these services.

The role of the service provider is to sensitise themselves to the issue. At this point in time, from zero, when I first came to Minnesota, to most recently, 88% of battered women's shelters in Minnesota will provide services to women in prostitution without ancillary abuse.

MCBW has adopted a resolution that prostitutes are battered women because prostitution in and of itself, without ancillary abuse, is violence against women. The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence has adopted the same resolution, as has the National Coalition Against Sexual Attack.

RW: *I saw one of your posters that says, 'when you can't turn another trick, turn to us'. How did you get the funding for your publicity, and was it difficult?*

EG: To do the posters, flyers and everything we're a simple 501C3 non profit organisation. We just got some state money. We get a small amount of money that is allocated for battered women's services through the Department of Correction Victim Service Program. Not from the people who put our girls in jail, directly. We just for the first time got money for our Juvenile Prostitution Prevention Curriculum this year, which is state money. Hopefully, it will be continuing. We raise about \$10,000 a year doing materials, speaking engagements etc.

We have a collective structure, a management team made up of the staff and we're paid equally. We are constituency based. The majority of our staff are survivors of commercial sexual exploitation. We attempt to do that on a broad level. It's much more difficult. The rest of our funding comes from private foundations. For instance one of our staff members does primarily funding and administration. Another is our advocacy director, who deals with all the changeable advocacy needs of women who come to our program, which is everything. They need everything. We also have a juvenile prostitution prevention curriculum director, and for a lack of a better word, I am a front person. I do a lot of research, I do a lot of theoretical political writing. I try to get published more and more. I do some program development with the support groups. I edit our newsletter. I co-ordinate and do the majority of our PR work, in terms of serving as liaison with the media.

### Surviving Prostitution

EG: One of the things that allows me to do this is that I made a decision a long time ago to stop holding on to the illusion that I could protect myself from what the culture would do to me with the information that I was in prostitution and pornography. The only thing that it is comparable to is like being an out lesbian, although, it's good to be a lesbian if that is who you are, and it's bad to have prostitution happen to you, and after it happens to you people use it to hurt you. But it's too complicated not to be out.

Because I have the privilege of doing political work, and it really is a privilege, I can live my life like this, and so I live my political life, my family life and my personal life as integrated. That's who I am, a radical feminist organiser and a survivor of prostitution and pornography. I don't have a lot of time in my life for people who have problems with that. So, it cuts through a lot of shit. And it doesn't have to make your world smaller. I also don't have children and so I don't have to deal with that in the same way as being an out lesbian woman and losing custody. I don't work in the market place. I work in the movement and in one sense it's very interesting, have lots and lots of privileges. I see that as a privilege.

So, part of why I end up doing a lot of public work is because people keep wanting to see real life prostitutes, which is something that I resent very much and that's part of what I try to incorporate into my remarks. You know, and then I will say 'I am never doing it anymore, I'm not picking up my dress for anyone' and on the other hand I have found out that you don't have to pick up your dress necessarily, although whether you lift it or not, some people will just see right through it, because that is what they are looking for. I think that's been really hard. One of the impediments to the progress of this movement has been that women are punished when they reveal that they have been exploited in this way on every single level.

The movement can 'thingify' you. You can become it. It has happened at different times. I can cope okay with speaking as a survivor in public, but on the other hand there is a particular element in doing this kind of work that's unfortunately reminiscent of prostitution in that you are paid to talk about your abuse, and as Meg Baldwin said at the conference today, there is so much in prostitution that is just all *talk, talk, talk*. So I hate Speak Outs - I don't do them, because I think it ghettoises women. I know there is an argument to be made that women need a place to speak, but I think the place for them to speak is in the political arena, not standing on a line by a microphone talking about how they feel about what happened to them, but talking about what they think should be done about the abuse they have been subjected to. There are battered women who do this, rape survivors who do this. The only point that is different is there is at least on some level in our society an understanding that hitting or raping a woman is not nice. It's only some level of understanding, but when you talk about the abuse in prostitution it's *sex* to the majority of the world. To almost everybody.

One of the things you have to do in prostitution is to be what the john wants you to be and then you get money for that and that's about whatever sex is about for him. Well speaking about this as an organiser, it means that you have to be what the people want you to be, and they pay you for that and so it can be very disempowering as opposed to empowering. It is particularly exhausting and it's a real sort of conundrum, because

you have to do it to get the truth about it out there. But as Mari Matsuda said at the conference, women's testimony of their abuse is often turned into pornography. As I was doing my presentation, I picked up on the floor a conference tag of some guy from *Playboy*. And the whole time I was talking, I had it in front of me. I was going to make a remark about it.

RW: *I know. We get rung at the CAP office all the time by the media and they always want to talk to a 'survivor'. They want someone to go on TV to describe their abuse. They are not interested in hearing about the campaigning work we are doing.*

EG: We really pick and choose what TV we do. We take crap shoots, we went on a Geraldo Show recently. I never thought I would do that. It is a tabloid show. We never do stuff like that, but it turned out that this particular show was about a woman who shot her pimp. What made it even more particularly interesting, she was an NYU college student. He was an Ivy League white guy, and she got acquitted.

And what was important to me about that show was, one, that they didn't want to know what it was like to be a whore from me, and two, it gave me an opportunity to talk about how escort services are nothing but pimps who have phones and advertisements. That it's not just black men who do this to poor white girls, that it is not just girls who are, you know, bad girls, that this happens to... and so there were a lot of myth points. They also said they would run our telephone number and address and everything. The phones did not stop ringing for 3 days. We had calls from Canada and all over the United States.

### Making Contact

RW: *Do you feel that you are reaching women in the industry?*

EG: Yes and no. I think that the most hidden women we don't. Those women who work in escort services and so on. They are separated away from the rest of us. After we did the Geraldo Show, we got lots of calls from women in escort services. Lots of calls from 18 to 19 year olds who were going to work in escort services, wanting to know if they were really going to have to have sex. We said thank you for calling; yes you do! It is the age, class, race disparity that makes

It is the age, class, race disparity that makes prostitution possible. It's the foundation of the industry.'

I hate Speak Outs - I think they ghettoise women.'

Coming to that conference is like coming home. WHISPER is the women's movement.'

The anonymous women in the unmarked porn are turning out to be our women-survivors of prostitution.'

prostitution possible. It's the foundation of the industry. Inequality is what prostitution is built on. It is total 'power over'. You know, it sounds like a feminist cliché, but it is really true. Old, rich, white men, lots of money, big cars, suburbs, wife, three kids; young African-American women, poor white women, 16 - all right, okay, let's be fair, 19, she's grown up - no education, usually a prior history of sexual abuse, with the entire culture telling her, 'here's how you can make a buck bitch'. This has everything to do with class race gender disparity. This has everything to do with inequality. This is *the* sex of the inequality. Another feminist truism!

RW: *Are your services reaching the women in the porn industry?*

EG: Well, as I said in my speech at the conference, these tend to be the same women. Pornography can't exist without prostitution. It's a permanent record of abuse. It's the technological recycling bin of prostitution. The anonymous women in the unmarked porn are turning out to be our women. When I talk, I talk about our women, our girls, our people, my people - meaning survivors of pornography and prostitution. With all the kind of love and solidarity, for example, a Jewish woman might say, 'my people' and talk about other Jewish women. It's like they all belong to you, and they do, in that if they don't belong to you, nobody else wants them. You know, we *are* them. It's like, there is that affinity. And another thing that is really funny, if you hang out with us everyone thinks you are a whore. We have women that work with us that are simply activists, and not necessarily exploited in that way, but people just assume that we are all prostitutes.

A woman said to us - 'It's like you guys are all over the place, something comes up and someone responds to it. It's incredible!' It is incredible, because there are comparatively few of us doing this work and that shows there is more than an affinity, it is almost like a kinship we have with each other. But there is still a lot of alienation from mainstream feminism. I mean for me coming to this conference is like coming home. You know, this *is* the women's movement to me. You know the anti-pornography movement *is* the women's movement. WHISPER is the women's movement. I would like our movement to be more race

and class conscious. God knows, some of us really try hard to make that an issue. It's really essential to understand these issues, if the women's movement is going to understand prostitution.

Interestingly enough, some of our strongest alliances are made with African-American women. And I think it is because so many African-American women are exploited in pornography and prostitution. Even if they are not, the culture just views them as whores. So we are kind of throw away girls. So I think this has been important for me in my political growth, my growth as a human being. I've had a lot of opportunity to work with a diversity of women, particularly African-American women, who are so incredibly generous and sharing. Sharing their friendships, sharing their lives, you know, building a bridge of trust. There really are so many benefits to doing this. There really are. It's hard but I'm really excited about what we do. And we get to meet and network with women such as yourselves who are doing this work all over the world.

#### New Service

RW: *We want to set a helpline up through CAP. Already if we do something that's public, we get calls from women who have survived pornography, and women who have survived the pornography industry. And we would like to be able to do more than to tell them to ring Rape Crisis. We are worried that we may not be able to cope with the demand.*

EG: I think you have to figure out what it is that you *want* to provide to women and what it is that you *can* provide to women. I mean, you can't provide legal remedies to them, so that's like out of the box. So, what are the other things that they need? If they have been abused through the use or production of pornography in an intimate relationship, well, then they need to get to a battered women's shelter. But they might not go there, as the battered women's shelters may not define that as abuse. So your role is to be the conduit to educate the battered women's program, as well as to let women know that they are being abused in this way in their homes. If, for example, women are being used in prostitution, they may need a number of things. They might need to be

able to get away from immediate abuse; they may need cheap or transitional housing; they may need job training; they may need lots of stuff. You may not be able to give them that. WHISPER can't, but what we can do is act as the conduit between them and the service that exists. And so we simultaneously work with the women and work to educate the systems. We do change systems.

You also may want to begin an educational support group for women. Although we're all kind of busy doing radical feminists politics, and we are so sick of the therapists, we forgot that there is good old fashioned CR. And it does not have to be political rhetoric and it does not have to be disempowering therapy. You can make a space where women can meet, to begin to talk about whether pornography has had a negative impact on their lives. The best way to start is to develop something like that amongst yourselves and women that you know who have been victims of pornographic abuse. To say, what do we need to get it out there, in the open?

AM: *What you say gives us a good idea about how to get started. We have been counselling, talking to women on the phone ...*

EG: And I think that's good too. And now ask them what they want. You know, ask them to join you, to think about what women want.

RW: *We have a group in Britain, called the English Collective of Prostitutes.*

EG: I know all about them! Don't fight with these people. We stopped fighting with them long ago. We had a notorious 'madam' who was under indictment, who was just baiting us for a debate, and we wouldn't give it to her. She didn't have a show without us. We stopped giving them a show. You know, one of the standard things is, if women need help getting out of prostitution, or dealing with abusive pornography, we're here to do that. If they are women who due to the circumstance of their lives have sadly accommodated themselves to living with this kind of abuse and disrespect, whatever it is, it's unfortunate, but we certainly wouldn't interfere with them.

I think it's important to be part of the people that you represent. Here is an easy example. Some feminists say they are having real

another thing that is really funny, if you hang out with us, everyone thinks you are a whore'

problems in getting women of colour involved in what they are doing. But if you talk to the majority of white women who are in leadership positions in the women's movement they have no contact with people of colour except at conferences, and then they go home, and so there is no connection between the mainstream feminist movement's agenda - as put forth by primarily white middle-class women - and the concerns of women of colour. So, a lot of it has to do with where you live, who your friends are. I'm not trying to say that you have to go out and make friends with lots of prostitutes, though you know that wouldn't be a bad thing to do, they don't have many friends. But I am really trying to say that you need to have an accessible language, and share a common language.

I like nothing better than kicking back and hanging out with the gals, being around women who have shared my experience recently, or in the past. What we do should be something that is connected with their reality, and not just a theoretical analysis of it; and I think that different women could speak to different women. For example, pornography has had a particular influence on young women. You know, in enforced sex, or in shaping sexuality and stuff like that, so that's a constituency that is uniquely accessible to young feminists. They know the language, the music, they go to the same places, more or less. And so I think the more diverse you are amongst yourselves the more diverse group of women that you can reach. If you're not, and I'm not assuming that you have not been prostituted women, then maybe what you need to do is to connect with women who are prostituted women, then that becomes part of who you are.

But you can only do what you can do at this very moment, in this place and time. And you don't have to be any of those things to do something about this issue. You don't have to be an ex-prostitute, you don't have to have been abused in pornography. But if women who have had those experiences are not part of your thinking and growing, it will make a difference, you know. And usually women's organisations which work around sexual abuse of any kind are constituted of women who have survived those specific harms. □

this conference launched a new historical phase for feminists and black activists jointly fighting material which oppresses us

# Pornography as hate speech

*Anne Mayne, Julia Parnaby and Rachel Wingfield report back from the conference - Speech, Equality and Harm, Feminist Legal Perspectives on Pornography and Hate Propaganda - which was held in Chicago in March this year.*

This was a ground breaking conference for a number of reasons. It brought together for the first time the issues of pornography and incitement to racial hatred, as 'hate speech', and launched a new historical phase for feminists and black activists in jointly fighting material which oppresses us. Hence the conference brought together well known names in feminist and anti-racist campaigning, as well as academics and lawyers.

Kathleen Mahoney opened the conference with an account of how Canadian feminists managed to achieve a change in legislation around pornography and hate speech. This was followed on Saturday morning by a more detailed discussion about whether it would be possible to achieve changes in the law in the States, given there is currently no equivalent to the British incitement to racial-hatred law. Richard Delgado and Mari Matsuda, both civil rights lawyers, addressed the particular problems of working in the United States in a context in which the supreme Court had recently defended Klu Klux Klan cross burning as 'free speech' and had rejected the Dworkin MacKinnon Ordinance on the grounds that, because pornography had the power to harm women, it must therefore be protected as 'speech'.

## **Feminist Activism**

The afternoon focused on feminist activism. Kathleen Barry received a standing ovation after reminding feminists that although we

had been pushed into a corner in the recent porn debate, we should not allow ourselves to be put on the defensive and concentrate on the 'extremes' of the harm done by pornography. She pointed out that the sex in pornography was as much of a problem as the violence. She talked about her work within the U.N. around sex trafficking, but reminded feminist activists that the coerced and forced sex going on amongst teenagers was part of that wider context.

Barry was the first speaker in a panel that was, for us, the highlight of the conference. Evelina Giobbe and Meg Baldwin spoke about the relationship between pornography and prostitution and the situation of women working in those industries. Ann Simonton spoke about the abuse she suffered as a top model who had appeared in *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Seventeen* and *Sports Illustrated*. She talked about forcible drug abuse, rape and photographers' masturbating behind the cameras, as part of the relentless sexual harassment that is the daily experience of a fashion model. She is the founder of Media Watch which is a feminist organisation set up to highlight the negative effects of violence and gender stereotyping in the media.

Olivia Young then spoke. She described herself as a survivor of sexual harassment through pornography. A registered nurse, she stayed behind for an after work meeting with

her male colleagues and was then asked to watch a so called new medical film which turned out to be the porn film *Deep Throat*. She spent ten years fighting a sexual harassment case and has lost at every stage of the American legal system, although the courts have never denied what happened to her. Her marriage has broken up and she is still on medication. She said she feels that pornography has destroyed her life.

Barbara Trees then spoke about her experiences of sexual harassment in the construction industry. She described how men in the industry used pornography as a key weapon to drive women out of the work place. Despite serious harassment, she went on to found the first Women Carpenters' Committee, and organised Legal Hearings to enable women to speak out about sexual harassment in manual trades.

The next speakers, Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, pointed out that their Ordinance was about to be ten years old, and had still not been passed in any state. Nevertheless, the need for it is as strong as ever. Women whose abuse has been recorded in pornography still have no means to prevent it being distributed, and other women continue to be harmed in the use of pornography and remain unable to make pornographers accountable for the damage sustained. Andrea Dworkin went on to say that women always feel lucky if we are only being humiliated and insulted, 'Goddamn lucky if whatever it is falls short of rape!' She said it is time for us to stop that. Both

argued that pornography is not just pictures or speech, but an act in the real world: 'Speech acts: Acts speak.'

## **Professionals vs Activists**

We felt that the debate was advanced considerably during the weekend, but the conference was characterised by a clear split between professionals and activists. We had been given scholarships to the conference as British activists from the Campaign Against Pornography, but this meant no more than waiving the conference fee. Along with other activists (including some of the speakers!), we couldn't even afford the lunch boxes provided. It didn't help, either, that the conference was being held miles from the centre of Chicago with very little access to public transport. We were left waiting an hour for a taxi late at night whilst those who were privileged enough to be able to stay at the Hilton were provided with a free shuttle bus service. There were no women with disabilities at the conference, nor were they mentioned or provided for, with the exception of hastily knocked together ramps, on Andrea Dworkin's insistence. All these issues meant that there were tensions and it was clear that despite being organised by two well known radical feminists, there was a very limited understanding of sisterhood, particularly where women who had very little money were concerned, which was disappointing.

## **Inspiration and Contacts**

Nonetheless, the conference provided us with much inspiration as well as valuable

Speech acts: Acts speak



Jo Beckelheimer/Spare Rib



the conference really did bring home the strength and success of radical feminist politics

contacts and new ideas for our campaign. It was very exciting to meet women who had been working around the same issues as us for a long time, and to learn from them what is possible. The panel on direct action gave us lots of ideas! Nikki Craft tore up Madonna's book *Sex on stage* with the help of women from the audience. Dorchen Leidholdt described how she had got off with a plea of self-defence after being caught defacing an advert for *Penthouse*; and Loretta Ross spoke about Black activism around the KKK. She pointed out that there was virtually no monitoring of the 'enemy' in feminist campaigns and that her organisation - the Centre for Democratic Renewal - had a database of 25,000 names and addresses of Klan members. She felt that feminists had a lot to learn from anti-racist monitoring, and indeed from the Klan and the pornographers' own tactics. (They know who we are, do we know who they are?) We think that this is right, and perhaps it is something for feminists to think about!

The group we learned most from was WHISPER (Women Hurt in Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt). One of CAP's major aims is to set up a helpline for women harmed in the making or use of pornography, and Evelina Giobbe gave us a lot of inspiration and advice. We have learned a lot from them about how to begin trying to provide services for survivors of the industry.

As radical feminists, this was the first time we had been able to attend a conference where our politics were taken as read, and where we could speak to other radical feminists on an international level. It was fascinating to see our arguments being taken on board on a wider level for once! The difference between American and British radical feminism, however, was startling - in particular we were surprised and disappointed at the lack of lesbian presence on the platform. It was never mentioned as an issue and the hard work done by lesbian feminists in the anti-porn movement so far was not acknowledged. Christopher Kendall, an anti-porn gay man, gave an excellent analysis of gay porn - it would have given a fairer account of anti-porn politics if there had been a lesbian there.

Campaign Against Pornography  
11 Goodwin Street  
Finsbury Park  
London N4  
071 831 3870  
CAP London Group meets  
alternate Mondays. Phone for  
details or to know of groups in  
your area.

### Past successes and future campaigns

Despite all of this, the conference really did bring home to us both the strength and success of radical feminist politics - and the urgency for us to keep working for our goals. It was evident that radical feminism comes directly out of women's experiences of their oppression, and has managed to retain its emphasis on activism, and on the importance of taking that activism from our own and other women's needs. Women survivors at the conference had found that an anti-racist radical feminist understanding of patriarchy and capitalism was the only analysis which really addressed their experiences. It is one of our strengths as a movement that we have not retreated into academia, abstract 'post' radical analyses, 'healing', therapy, or anything else. Especially since these are difficult, complacent times, where the backlash has attempted to make liberal individualism the only analysis of women's reality, rather than our understanding of the functioning of gender, race and class as global structures.

We are more keen than ever to ensure CAP's future - even though we are being funded solely by members bankers orders at the moment and are desperately in need of more if we are to survive. If we can raise a sufficient subsidy in the next few months to keep on our worker, we would like to begin a new series of direct action campaigns, and to begin the long haul towards setting up our helpline, and to be able for the first time to offer practical support for women who contact us who want to escape the sex industry.

We'd like to ask any women who want to get involved in this, to contact us as soon as possible. And if you can afford a small donation each month, then please write to us for a bankers order form. This will be the first time in this country that there has been a serious attempt to offer support to women trying to escape the sex industry - we think that's very important. We're also highly motivated to begin the work of keeping tabs on the pornographers, and to start taking action which is really going to damage them. Pornographer Paul Raymond was recently named Britain's richest man - it's time that it wasn't women who had to pay the price for porn. □

## BEHIND THE LINES

Sian Jones of Women's Aid to Former Yugoslavia, a Southampton based group, reports on the situation of women in former Yugoslavia, and on what their group is doing to support them.

One of the four speakers from former Yugoslavia on the recent National Peace Council 'Voices for Peace' tour was a young Bosnian woman from Sarajevo. By very difficult, complicated and dangerous means she had been able to get out of Sarajevo in order to come to Britain, to tell those who will listen about the situation there. What shocked her most about people she met in Britain was that no-one actually asked her how she managed to get out of Sarajevo. This seemed incredible to her: surely all the world knows how trapped the people of Sarajevo are?

What is happening in Sarajevo, in Serbdom, is happening all over Bosnia. And what of the situation in Croatia: how long will that fragile 'peace' last? While men continue to murder, maim and rape, other men draw maps that bear no relation to reality; meanwhile, all over former Yugoslavia, women's lives are being devastated by this war. As in all wars women suffer: those who have not been killed or injured have seen their friends and families killed and injured, have seen their houses burn, those who have not been taken away from their homes to be raped and sexually abused have been forced to become refugees who live in limbo, with no control over their lives.

But it is also women who are doing what they can to enable themselves and others to survive this war and what men have done. Women like Sadika, who worked in the Peace Centre in Sarajevo, like *Red Lily*, sev-

enty young women, who work as volunteer nurses in the main hospital in Tuzla, like the women's groups working to help women who have been raped in this war; women's groups setting up refugee and phone lines for women who suffer increased domestic violence and rape. And the women working on peace & reconciliation projects in Croatia, and the 'Women in Black' who stand on the streets of Belgrade to oppose the war.

'Women's Aid to former Yugoslavia' was set up in August 1992 by women who were involved in peace and anti-military groups and campaigns. We are a women-only, non-sectarian, anti-war group who try to support women working against the war, to support those working with refugees. Many of us had, and still have, reservations about the politics of aid, but taking aid enabled us to talk face to face with refugees, refugee workers, anti-war campaigners and women's groups. In support of these women and at their request, WATFY conducts a practical programme of solidarity which includes the following: campaigning for the recognition and prosecution of rape as a war crime; rape counselling; work with women refugees; lobbying the British government about its policy on accepting refugees.

Our next visit to former Yugoslavia will be at the end of May, and our priority for aid is medicines and medical supplies. A vast proportion of the medicines delivered as 'aid' to former Yugoslavia are out of date, sometimes by years, and have to be thrown



Billie Rafter

away as soon as they arrive. TV dinners and aged army rations are other delights that refugees can look forward to, courtesy of Britain and the U.S. The scandal of what passes for 'aid' is gradually being understood by more and more people. Whether it is to former Yugoslavia, Somalia or Nicaragua, aid means whatever governments want it to mean, and has more to do with their own needs than the real needs of the recipients, who are lucky if they've even been consulted.

Women's Aid to former Yugoslavia talks directly to women living and working in refugee camps to find out precisely what they need and how ordinary women like ourselves can best support them. Our next aid convoy leaves Britain on May 26th. We will be delivering medicines and other supplies which have been specifically requested for Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia. We are also taking office equipment, books and other

resources for war-raped women's centres, refugee support groups and women's groups in refugee camps. One of the most important parts of the May visit will be meeting again with anti-war groups and in particular joining the 'Women in Black' anti-war vigil in Belgrade, Serbia - if we can get visas! With great courage, in the face of fierce hostility 'Women in Black' have been maintaining a vigil every Wednesday since October 1991 as a visible and sustained witness of opposition to the war. WATFY is working to raise awareness about the anti-war movement in Serbia as well as the struggle of women in all countries in former Yugoslavia to express their non-sectarian, non-violent resistance. As in all wars, women are bearing the brunt of this war, experiencing terrible atrocities and hardships whilst at the same time forming the backbone of support systems for refugees and of the anti-war movement. □



Billie Rafaei

Resnik refugee camp, Zagreb, Croatia; October 1992



Billie Rafaei

Resnik refugee camp, Zagreb, Croatia; October 1992

**Rape is a war crime:** At a conference held in Zagreb in September 92, women from the former countries of Yugoslavia urged that rape be acknowledged as a war crime. Following international pressure recent resolutions have been passed by the UN to support the principle of setting up a War Crimes Tribunal, and by the UN Commission of Human Rights, acknowledging rape as a war crime. This is a start but we believe the campaign needs to be continued to ensure that prosecutions occur, and that rape is seen as a war crime in all wars. WATFY is part of the Women against War Crimes coalition.

**Rape Counselling:** Through the Zagreb Centre for Women War Victims, and the Association for Preventive & Voluntary Work in Ljubljana, we are providing moral and material support to women working with war raped women. In particular, we are helping to fund experienced Rape Crisis Counselling Trainers to train refugee workers and women's groups in counselling skills, and are recruiting volunteer trainers. Two women trainers are visiting groups to provide a two week training session in April and to assess how we can best help in the future.

**Women Refugees:** WATFY are also part funding a local woman to work with Suncokret, a Zagreb based refugee support group, to enable the development of autonomous women's projects in refugee camps. We are also trying to organise the placement of another woman who is experienced in working with refugees to work on this project. We have yet to find a woman willing to work on this project, and would welcome applications from interested women.

**Refugees' Work:** Many refugee women knit and sew, often based on traditional Bosnian designs. We are supporting the development of refugee co-ops which will enable refugee women to sell this work and earn some money of their own.

**Refugees in Britain:** We are collating information about the situation for refugees already in Britain and are supporting campaigns which call for the visa restrictions on Bosnian refugees to be lifted and to challenge this government's inadequate policy on accepting refugees.

#### How you can help -

You can offer direct support to women in any of the following ways: money, aid, skills, campaigning and lobbying.

**Money** - money will buy medicines, food and other aid. It can buy books, help establish women's centres and counselling services, and provide resources for the peace movement. Please make cheques payable to 'Women's Aid to former Yugoslavia'.

**Aid** - you can donate goods (such as sanitary towels, wool, knitting needles and baby food) at collection points around the country, or organise a collection yourself.

**Time** - you can take the time to lobby your MP and MEP over the prosecution of rape as a war crime, and about British policy towards Bosnian refugees. In Canada gender persecution is a now valid reason for seeking asylum: put pressure on the British government to allow Bosnian and other women who have been raped to enter the UK until they want or feel safe enough to return to the former Yugoslavia. You can collect signatures for a petition which we will deliver to the UN World Conference on Human Rights in June. Contact WATFY or Women against War Crimes on 071 700 2800

**Skills** - experienced counsellors and women with other skills are needed in former Yugoslavia. To send donations, or for further information contact: WATFY, c/o 20 Tennyson Rd, Southampton, SO2 1GW 0703 551094

# A BURST OF LIGHT

*We are publishing this extract from 'A Burst of Light' in recognition of Audre Lorde's contribution to feminism. Each of the current T&S collective has her own connection to Audre Lorde's work, but in talking about her we all recalled being moved, challenged and inspired by something she had written/said. She is one of a number of Black feminists by whom we, as a predominantly white collective, have been urged to be honest, to stop being obtuse about racism, and to move out of guilt into action and change. Audre Lorde's message was always one of hope and urgency - not only that we could, but that we must, create an inclusive Women's Liberation Movement; that we could, and must, be part of a politics of changing the world. That hope was, however, based on a profound awareness of what prevents us from realising our best. Her inspiration was in never losing a vision of what our best could be.*

*Audre Lorde believed passionately in liberation and in the power of communication; she constantly sought out new audiences attempting to reach beyond those who were already familiar with her work. She steadfastly refused to be silent about any aspect of her identity or her experience. To read her prose and poetry was to know of her womanhood, her Black identity, her lesbianism. She wrote movingly of being the mother of a son, of intimate connections with white women, of her battle with cancer. She consistently took on difficult and contentious issues, and provided us with dazzling accounts of why and how a range of issues from the erotic to the treatment of cancer were political issues.*

*As a taker of the 'long road', the one where we struggle with life's complexities and contradictions, Audre Lorde offered us a vision of possibilities in the present, rather than ideals we hope to realise in the future. It is this message, this challenge, which is her legacy. She would hope for nothing more, and nothing less, than that we learn from it and use it.*



Ingrid Pollard

*August 1, 1984  
New York City*

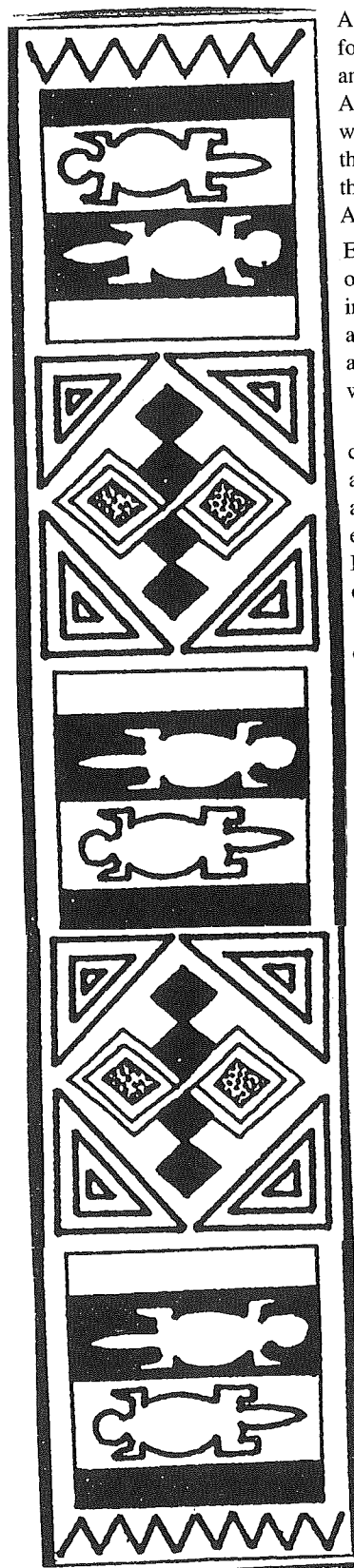
Saints be praised! The new CAT scan is unchanged. The tumor has not grown, which means either Iscador is working or the tumor is not malignant! I feel relieved, vindicated, and hopeful. The pain in my middle is gone, as long as I don't eat very much and stick to fruits and veggies. That's livable. I feel like a second chance, for true! I'm making myself a new office upstairs in Jonathan's old room. It's going to be a good year.

*October 10, 1984  
New York City*

I've been thinking about my time in Germany again, unencumbered by artificial shades of terror and self-concern. I don't want my involvement with health matters to obscure the revelation of differences I encountered. The Afro-European women. What I learned about the differences when one teaches about feeling and poetry in a

*language that is not the original language of the people learning, even when they speak that language fluently. (Of course, all poets learn about feeling as children in our native tongue, and the psycho-social strictures and emotional biases of that language pass over into how we think about feeling for the rest of our lives.) I will never forget the emotional impact of Raja's poetry, and how what she is doing with the German language is so close to what Black poets here are doing with English. It was another example of how our Africanness impacts upon the world's consciousness in intersecting ways.*

As an African-American woman, I feel the tragedy of being an oppressed hyphenated person in America, of having no land to be our primary teacher. And this distorts us in so many ways. Yet there is a vital part that we play as Black people in the liberation consciousness of every freedom-seeking people upon this globe, no matter what they say they think about us as Black Americans.



And whatever our differences are that make for difficulty in communication between us and other oppressed peoples, as Afro-Americans, we must recognize the promise we represent for some new social synthesis that the world has not yet experienced. I think of the Afro-Dutch, Afro-German, Afro-French women I met this spring in Europe, and how they are beginning to recognize each other and come together openly in terms of their identities, and I see that they are also beginning to cut a distinct shape across the cultural face of every country where they are at home.

I am thinking about issues of color as color, Black as a chromatic fact, gradations and all. There is the reality of defining Black as a geographical fact of culture and heritage emanating from the continent of Africa - Black meaning Africans and other members of a Diaspora, with or without color.

Then there is a quite different reality of defining Black as a political position, acknowledging that color is the bottom line the world over, no matter how many other issues exist alongside it. Within this definition, Black becomes a codeword, a rallying identity for all oppressed people of Color. And this position reflects the empowerment of the 1960s, the effects of which are sometimes more obvious in other countries than in our own.

I see certain pitfalls in defining Black as a political position. It takes the cultural identity of a widespread but definite group and makes it a generic identity for many culturally diverse peoples, all on the basis of a shared oppression. This runs the risk of providing a convenient blanket of apparent similarity under which our actual and acknowledged differences can be distorted or misused. This blanket would diminish our chances of forming genuine working coalitions built upon the recognition and creative use of acknowledged difference, rather than upon the shaky foundations of a false sense of similarity. When a Javanese Dutch woman says she is Black, she also knows she goes home to another cultural reality that is particular to her people and precious to her - it is Asian, and Javanese. When an African-American woman says she is Black, she is speaking of her cultural reality, no matter how modified it may be by time, place, or

circumstances of removal. Yet even the Maori women of New Zealand and the Aboriginal women of Australia call themselves Black. There must be a way for us to deal with this, if only on the level of language. For example, those of us for whom Black is our cultural reality, relinquishing the word in favor of some other designation of the African Diaspora, perhaps simply *African*.

*The first half of 1985 spins past: a trip to Cuba with a group of Black women writers, a reading tour through the Midwest, the great workspace I created from my son's old room, the beginning of a new collection of poems, my daughter's graduation from college. My general health seemed stable, if somewhat delicate. I removed the question of cancer from my consciousness beyond my regular Iscador treatments, my meager diet, and my lessened energies. In August and September I spent six weeks travelling and giving poetry readings in Australia and New Zealand, a guest of women's groups at various community organizations and universities. It was an exciting and exhausting time, one where thoughts about cancer were constant but never central.*

#### **May 28, 1985 Cambridge, Massachusetts**

My daughter Beth's graduation from Harvard this weekend was a rite of passage for both of us. This institution takes itself very seriously, and there was enormous pomp and circumstance for three days. I couldn't help but think of all the racist, sexist ways they've tried through the last four years to diminish and destroy the essence of all the young Black women enrolled here. But it was a very important moment for Beth, a triumph that she'd survived Harvard, that she'd made it out, intact, and in a self she can continue living with. Of course, the point of so much of what goes on at places like Harvard - supposed to be about learning - is actually geared to either destroying these young people, or altering their substance into effigies that will be pliant, acceptable, and non-problematic to the system. So I was proud of Beth standing there in the manicured garden of Adams House, wearing her broad white Disinvestment banner across her black commencement gown, but I was also very scared for her. Out there can be even more difficult, although now she knows at least that she can and did survive Harvard. And with her own style unimpaired.

I embarrassed myself because I kept trying to find secret places to cry in, but it was still a very emotionally fulfilling occasion. I feel she's on her way now in a specific sense that must leave me behind, and that is both sad and very reassuring to me. I am convinced that Beth has the stuff - the emotional and psychic wherewithal to do whatever she needs to do for her living, and I have given her the best I have to offer. I remember writing 'What My Child Learns Of The Sea' when she was three months old, and it's both terrifying and wonderful to see it all coming true. I bless the goddess that I am still here to see it.

I tremble for her, for them all, because of the world we are giving them and all the work still to be done, and the gnawing question of will there be enough time? But I celebrate her, too, another one of those fine, strong, young Black women moving out to war, outrageous and resilient, plucky and beautiful.

I'm proud of her, and I'm proud of having seen her this far. It's a relief for me to know that whatever happens with my health now, and no matter how short my life may be, she is essentially on her way in the world, and next year Jonathan will be stepping out with his fine self, too. I look at them and they make my heart sing. Frances and I have done good work.

#### **August 10, 1985 Melbourne, Australia**

A group of white Australian women writers invited me to give the keynote address on 'The Language Of Difference' at a Women's Writing Conference held in Melbourne as part of the 150-year celebration of the founding of the State of Victoria. These are my remarks.

I am here upon your invitation, a Black African-American woman speaking of the language of difference. We come together in this place on the 150th Anniversary of the state of Victoria, an Australia State built upon racism, destruction, and a borrowed sameness. We were never meant to speak together at all. I have struggled for many weeks to find your part in me, to see what we could share that would have meaning for us all. When language becomes most similar, it becomes most dangerous, for then differences may pass unremarked. As women of good faith we can only become familiar with the language of difference within a determined commitment to its use within our lives, without romanticism and without guilt. Because we share a common language which is not of our own making and which does not reflect our deeper knowledge as women, our words fre-

quently sound the same. But it is an error to believe that we mean the same experience, the same commitment, the same future, unless we agreed to examine the history and particular passions that lie beneath each other's words.

When I say I am Black, I mean I am of African descent. When I say I am a woman of Color, I mean I recognize common cause with American Indian, Chicano, Latina and Asian-American sisters of North America. I also mean I share common cause with women of Eritrea who spend most of each day searching for enough water for their children, as well as with Black South African women who bury 50 percent of their children before they reach the age of five. And I also share cause with my Black sisters of Australia, the Aboriginal women of this land who were raped of their history and their children and their culture by a genocidal conquest in whose recognition we are gathered here today.

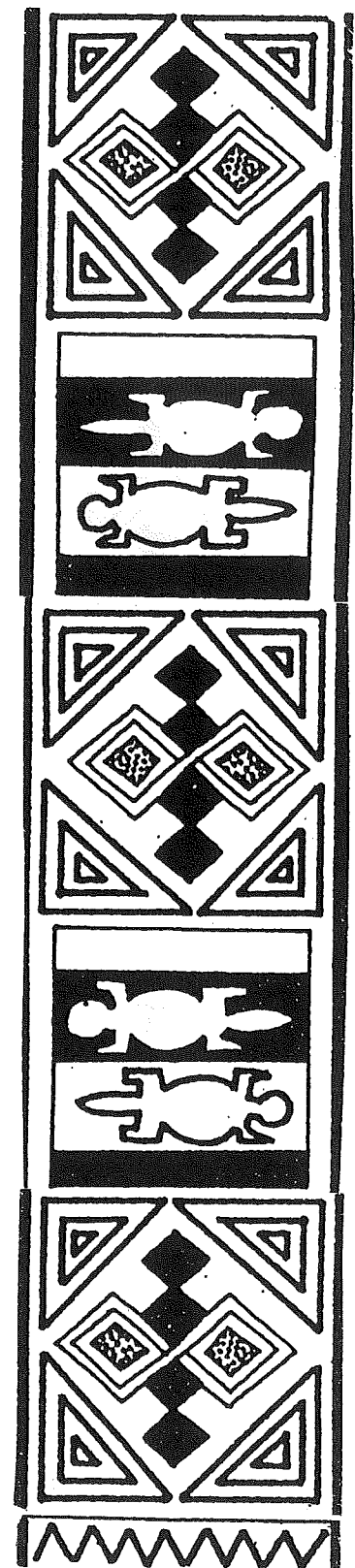
I have reached down deep inside of me to find what it was we could share, and it has been very difficult, because I find my tongue weighted down by the blood of my Aboriginal sisters that has been shed upon this earth. For the true language of difference is yet to be spoken in this place. Here that language must be spoken by my Aboriginal sisters, the daughters of those indigenous peoples of Australia with whom each one of you shares a destiny, but whose voices and language most of you here have never heard.

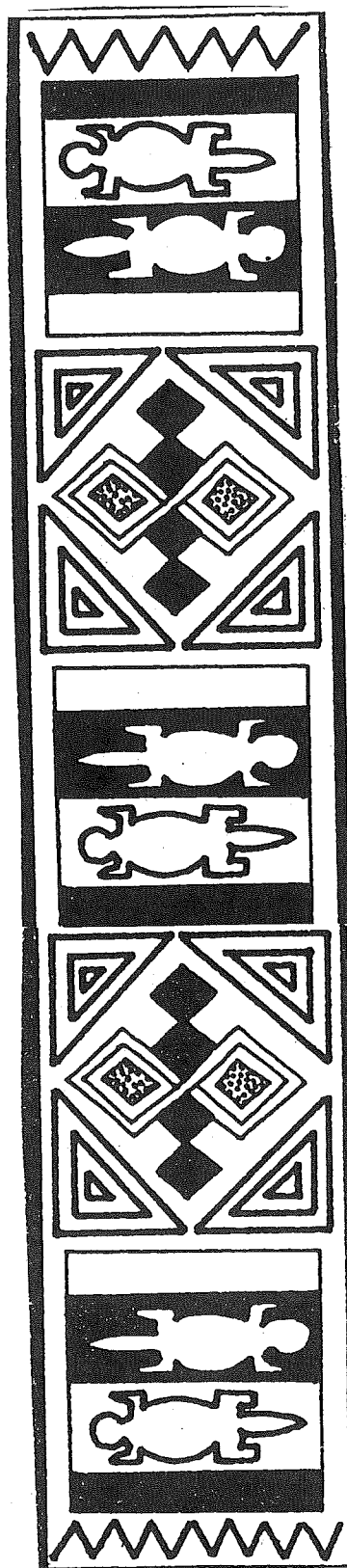
One hundred and fifty years ago, when the State of Victoria was declared a reality for European settlers, there were still 15,000 Black Aboriginal people living in this land that is now called Victoria. Where we sit now today, Wurundjeri women once dreamed and laughed and sang. They nurtured this earth, gum tree and wattle, and they were nurtured by it. I do not see their daughters sitting here among you today. Where are these women?

Their mothers' blood cries out to me. Their daughters come to my dreams nightly in the Windsor Hotel across the street from your Parliament. And their voices are haunting and brave and sad. Do you hear them? Listen very carefully, with your hearts open. They are speaking. Out of their mouths come what you have said you most want to hear.

Their history is my history. While white immigrant settlers in Australia were feeding Wurundjeri women and children bread made from arsenic and flour, white immigrant settlers in North America were selling seven-year-old African girls for \$35 a head. And these same white immigrant settlers were giving blankets lethal with smallpox germs to the indigenous peoples of North America, the American Indians.

Each of you has come here today to touch some piece of your own power, for a purpose. I urge you to approach that work with a particular focus and urgency, for a terrible amount of Wurundjeri women's blood has already been shed in order for you to sit and write here.





I do not say these things to instigate an orgy of guilt, but rather to encourage an examination of what the excavation and use of the true language of difference can mean within your living. You and I can talk about the language of difference, but that will always remain essentially a safe discussion, because this is not my place. I will move on. But it is the language of the Black Aboriginal women of this country that you must learn to hear and feel. And as your writing and your lives intersect within that language, you will come to decide what mistress your art must serve.

**October 24, 1985  
East Lansing, Michigan**

Tomorrow is the second anniversary of the invasion of Grenada. The smallest nation in the western hemisphere occupied by the largest. I spoke about it to a group of Black women here tonight. It's depressing to see how few of us remember, how few of us still seem to care.

The conference on 'The Black Woman Writer and the Diaspora' being held here is problematic in some ways, particularly in the unclear position of Ellen Kuzwayo, who had come all the way from South Africa to give the keynote address and arrived here to find the schedule shifted. But it was so good to see Ellen again. I'm sorry to hear her sister in Botswana has had another mastectomy.

It's been very exciting to sit down with African and Caribbean women writers whom I've always wanted to meet. Octavia Butler is here also, and Andrea Canaan from New Orleans. I haven't seen her in over a year, and the look in her eyes when she saw me made me really angry, but it also made me realize how much weight I've lost in the past year and how bad my color's been since I came home from Australia. I've got to see Dr. C for a checkup when I get home.

**October 25, 1985  
East Lansing**

I gave a brief talk tonight on 'Sisterhood and Survival', what it means to me. And first off I identified myself as a Black Feminist Lesbian poet, although it felt unsafe, which is probably why I had to do it. I explained that I identified myself as such because if there was one other Black Feminist Lesbian poet in isolation somewhere within the reach of my voice, I wanted her to know she was not alone. I think a lot about Angelina Weld Grimke, a Black Lesbian poet of the Harlem Renaissance who is never identified as such, when she is men-

tioned at all, although the work of Gloria Hull and Erlene Stetson recently has focused renewed attention upon her. But I never even knew her name when I was going to school, and later, she was the briefest of mentions in a list of 'other' Harlem Renaissance writers.

I often think of Angelina Weld Grimke dying alone in an apartment in New York City in 1958 while I was a young Black Lesbian struggling in isolation at Hunter College, and I think of what it could have meant in terms of sisterhood and survival of for each one of us to have known of the other's existence: for me to have had her words and her wisdom, and for her to have known I needed them! It is so crucial for each one of us to know she is not alone.

I've been travelling a lot in the last two years since my children are grown, and I've been learning what an enormous amount I don't know as a Black American woman. And wherever I go, it's been so heartening to see women of Color reclaiming our lands, our heritages, our cultures, our selves - usually in the face of enormous odds.

For me as an African-American woman writer, sisterhood and survival means it's not enough to say I believe in peace when my sister's children are dying in the streets of Soweto and New Caledonia in the South Pacific. Closer to home, what are we as Black women saying to our sons and our nephews and our students as they are, even now, being herded into the military by unemployment and despair, someday to become meat in the battles to occupy the lands of other people of Color?

How can we ever, ever forget the faces of those young Black American soldiers, their gleaming bayonets drawn, staking out a wooden shack in the hills of Grenada? What is our real work as Black women writers of the Diaspora? Our responsibilities to other Black women and their children across this globe we share, struggling for our joint future? And what if our sons are someday ordered into Namibia, or Southwest Africa, or Zimbabwe, or Angola?

Where does our power lie and how do we school ourselves to use it in the service of what we believe?

Sitting with Black women from all over the earth has made me think a great deal about

what it means to be indigenous, and what my relationship as a Black woman in North America is to the land rights of the indigenous peoples of this land, to Native American Indian women, and how we can translate that consciousness into a new level of working together. In other words, how can we use each other's differences in our common battles for a livable future?



### —The Speaking Profits Us—

All of our children are prey. How do we raise them not to prey upon themselves and each other? And this is why we cannot be silent, because our silences will come to testify against us out of the mouths of our children.

**November 21, 1985  
New York City**

It feels like the axe is falling. There it is on the new CAT scan - another mass growing in my liver, and the first one is spreading. I've found an anthroposophic doctor in Spring Valley who suggests I go to Lukas Klinik, a hospital in Switzerland where they are conducting the primary research on Iscador, as well as diagnosing and treating cancers.

I've known something is wrong from the returning pains and the dimming energies of my body. My classes have been difficult, and most days I feel like I'm going on sheer will power alone which can be very freeing and seductive but also very dangerous. Limited. I'm running down. But I'd do exactly what I'm doing anyway, cancer or no cancer.

A. will lend us the money to go to Switzerland, and Frances will come with me. I think they will be able to find out what is really wrong with me at the Lukas Klinik, and

if they say these growths in my liver are malignant, then I will accept that I have cancer of the liver. At least there they will be able to adjust my Iscador dosage upward to the maximum effect, because that is the way I have decided to go and I'm not going to change now. Obviously, I still don't accept these tumors in my liver as cancer, although I know that could just be denial on my part, which is certainly one mechanism for coping with cancer. I have to consider denial as a possibility in all of my planning, but I also feel that there is absolutely nothing they can do for me at Sloane Kettering except cut me open and then sew me back up with their condemnations inside me.

**December 7, 1985  
New York City**

My stomach x-rays are clear, and the problems in my GI series are all circumstantial. Now that the doctors here have decided I have liver cancer, they insist on reading all their findings as if that were a *fait accompli*. They refuse to look for any other reason for the irregularities in the x-rays, and they're treating my resistance to their diagnosis as a personal affront. But it's my body and my life and the goddess knows I'm paying enough for all this, I ought to have a say.

The flame is very dim these days. It's all I can do to teach my classes at Hunter and crawl home. Frances and I will leave for Switzerland as soon as school is over next week. The Women's Poetry Center will be dedicated at Hunter the night before I leave. No matter how sick I feel, I'm still afire with a need to do something for my living. How will I be allowed to live my own life, the rest of my life?

**December 9, 1985  
New York City**

A better question is - how do I want to live the rest of my life and what am I going to do to insure that I get to do it exactly or as close as possible to how I want that living to be?

I want to live the rest of my life, however long or short, with as much sweetness as I can decently manage, loving all the people I love, and doing as much as I can of the work I still have to do. I am going to write fire until it comes out of my ears, my eyes, my noseholes - everywhere. until it's every breath I breathe. I'm going to go out like a fucking meteor! □

With thanks to Sheba Feminist publishers for permission to reproduce this extract from *A Burst of Light*.



# A Straight Outing

*How can heterosexual feminists account for their heterosexuality? Julia Swindells takes issue with some of the ways in which the editors of a 'Feminism & Psychology' special issue approached this vexed question.*

Both psychology and, for the most part, feminist theory, have tended to assume heterosexuality as 'a given'. Heterosexuality needs to become 'a serious target for analysis and political action', because quoting Adrienne Rich, heterosexuality is 'a political institution which disempowers women'. These arguments, articulated in the editorial introduction, provide the explicit and powerful rationale for focussing an entire issue on the attempt to theorise heterosexuality. The task is all the more pressing, and embattled, in the light of efforts by writers such as Naomi Woolf to reclaim (or invent) a version of 'radical heterosexuality' for feminism.

As avowed lesbians, approaching a range of 'feminists... none of whom had ever, so far as we knew, made public statements identifying themselves as anything other than heterosexual', the editors knew that they were asking for what might be a problematic set of declarations. Clearly, some respondents were not going to play at all, and others were only willing to do so after the expression of much resistance to being categorised. We hear such replies as: 'How dare you assume I'm heterosexual?', and 'Don't you think you are making one hell of an assumption?', and 'Is this a witch trial or a trial by witches?'.

Perhaps the most interesting question thrown up by this project is about why the editors met with these responses (and what this might tell us about the attempt to theorise heterosexuality). And a secondary ques-

tion is about how the editors, and therefore the journal issue as a whole, handled these responses. The editors profess themselves to be 'delighted' with the range of responses they elicited (although they are all from published feminists, which might suggest a certain limitation to variety). They are particularly proud of the special feature within the volume, which prints the first-person accounts of a number of women whose heterosexual testimonies they successfully procured.

## Revealing labels

At one level, the response. 'How dare you assume I'm heterosexual?', would appear to confirm what the editors say about the difficulty, for certain women, of accepting that their sexuality might have something to do with oppression. It might lend force to the argument that heterosexual women are not prepared to take responsibility for the political meanings attached to their sexuality, and are wilfully resistant to the idea that, like race or class, sexuality has its silent referents too. As with those Tories who declare that they have no politics (or are political doubters), or those members of the middle-class who declare they have no class (and society is classless), the resistance to labelling can serve to reinforce the oppression of others: 'my class doesn't exist, so your attempts to liberate the working class is spurious'. 'My sexuality is none of your business, so your declaring yourself a lesbian is

# WHAT EXACTLY IS HETEROSEXUALITY?

a lot of fuss about nothing'. Indeed the editors' explicit concern to draw on Adrienne Rich, and specifically consider heterosexuality in political terms as an oppressive institution, seemed to suggest that it was precisely these kinds of failure to take responsibility that they wanted primarily to address.

However, we need to look at the questions they had been asking when they met with these indignant, and often evasive, reactions. In their introduction, the editors list the questions they posed in their call for contributions. The key question was, 'How does your heterosexuality contribute to your feminist politics?', but the subsidiary ones tend to lean away from the politics of sexuality towards a preoccupation with sexual activity, and towards unexamined biologist assumptions about sexuality: 'What is heterosexuality and why is it so common? Why is it so hard for heterosexuals to change their "sexual orientation"?' While it seems fair enough to ask for a definition of heterosexuality, the other questions scarcely encourage the kind of analysis and self-challenging investigation that the editors claim to be seeking.

## Turning the tables

There is, of course, an understandable irony in their impulse to turn the tables, to address to heterosexual women the self-same, questions that have been asked persistently of lesbians, not only by psychologists, but by anyone whose hobby is the study of 'deviance'. The problem is that, for the sake of this witty reversal, they sacrifice the opportunity to ask some potentially illuminating and politically urgent questions. A glaring example of this is in the value judgement 'so hard' to change, while the question of why they might want or need to change is left hanging.

Am I alone, too, in being concerned that work (waged or unwaged) is hardly mentioned at all in the entire volume, nor is the way that heterosexuality operates as an institution vis-a-vis unemployment, the law, social services, the economy, education, the community beyond the family, etc, etc...? Neither, despite initial promises, is there much about how heterosexuality is taken for granted, and operates as a 'given' in psychology and in much feminist theory. Couldn't the questions have been posed in ways related to at least some of these issues? Indeed, isn't there a pressing need to understand how heterosexuality functions in relation to unemployment, poverty, homelessness?

Take the case of education, in which many of the contributors to *Feminism and Psychology* are involved. When we look at the oppressive features of the academic world, or perhaps of any classroom, how useful or important is it to try to understand, say, the power relationship between female students and male tutors in terms of the institution of heterosexuality? Feminists may be confident in making an analysis of this situation in terms of patriarchy. The superior earning power of the male tutor and his special relationship to the institutions of knowledge are all too evident historically and in

..... & WHAT  
CAUSES IT?

'Heterosexuality is a condition in which people have a driving emotional and sexual interest in members of the opposite sex. Because of the anatomical, social and cultural limitations involved, there are formidable obstacles to be overcome. However many heterosexuals look upon this as a challenge and approach it with ingenuity and energy. Indeed it can be said that most heterosexuals are obsessed with the gratification of their curious desires'.

### Parental Problems?

'In most cases of compulsive heterosexual behaviour, the parents will be found to have suffered from similar difficulties'.

### Economic Conditioning?

### Hormonal Imbalance?

'.....one theory advanced is that heterosexuals have an imbalance in their sex hormones'

### Cultural Deprivation?

'.....most heterosexuals come from a background in which an appreciation of the beauty of their own bodies has been ruthlessly suppressed. Many psychic disorders stem from this self rejection'.

the present. The male sex undoubtedly continues to be in a position of dominance in the power relations of education. But, should we also be asking how far heterosexuality is here giving us the illusion that his dominance is acceptable to, or even supported by the female student? It is not inconceivable that the female student may like the male tutor. She may even perceive him as a person, as well as a professional educator, from whom she wants to learn. Does any of this mean, though, that the context is any less oppressive of the woman student?

It may well be the case for many female students that their progress through formal education may be very embattled, well-nigh impossible, without compulsory heterosexual attractions. Whether or not these attractions serve to alleviate the pressures of patriarchy or to exacerbate them, surely the point is that, in either case, too much is left to the subjectivity of the individual male tutor, too much depends on how he perceives and responds to a female student who appears to like him and wants to learn from him. If the woman's central defence against professional and sexual exploitation in this context rests with the response of the man, then heterosexuality becomes the mechanism by which we heterosexual women equivocate over our position, when, had the explicit relations of patriarchy been exposed, we would have resisted or rejected our subordination.

#### Masking patriarchy

This is to accept that an analysis of patriarchy cannot give us a full account of the oppression of women, and perhaps that it cannot do so precisely because heterosexuality masks the full force of patriarchy. An analysis of heterosexuality, as this journal demonstrates, pulls us at our peril exclusively towards personal relationships, personal behaviour, towards desire and 'pleasure', and away from the formations operating between men and women throughout the public and social world; similarly, we are mistaken if we see heterosexuality simply as a choice for heterosexual women. I have given just one instance, that of the female student and male tutor, from just one area, that of education. We still need to explore, in more detail, the way in which heterosexuality operates as an oppressive institution in these and other

spheres where its function remains unacknowledged.

The special feature of the journal issue upholds the idea that those women whose contributions were solicited in the name of their heterosexuality felt that they had to respond with a particular kind of personal experience, characterised by 'activity' and 'nature'. In other words, when we turn to heterosexual women authors, there seems to be a firm pressure - husbands, partners, children, marriage, and of course, 'let's talk about.. desire'? Elsewhere in this volume, avowed lesbian authors write perfectly confidently about heterosexuality as an institution operating in and beyond the private sphere. Instances include Jenny Kitzinger's disturbing piece about sexual violence, the only piece in the collection to address heterosexuality as a problematic 'given' in psychology itself. Similarly, Patricia Duncker, in her reading of some fiction of Margaret Atwood and Jenny Diski, produces a persuasive critical analysis based on a theorising of heterosexuality.

The idea of 'the personal' as 'the political' has long been a keystone of feminist analysis and activism. The Women's Liberation Movement has needed to articulate those areas of women's experience which have formed significant sources of oppression, but have often, by definition, been denied by culture and history. Amongst others, I am a supporter of the attempt to retrieve women's autobiographical statements, and in helping to create contexts in which 'the personal', in this sense, can be articulated. At the same time, there seem to me to be real difficulties involved in articulating 'the personal' in the name of heterosexuality, perhaps in the name of sexuality at all. What frequently occurs, whether in the case of lesbianism or heterosexuality, is the elision of sexuality with sexual practice per se. In the case of heterosexuality, there is also a rather intricate slippage of 'the personal' into a representation of the woman's immediate 'family', to the exclusion of all other relationships, including friendships with other women, and all other areas of her experience (with an accompanying pressure to justify her sexual politics exclusively in terms of 'right-on' domestic arrangements). In terms of the politics of heterosexuality, the danger here is that we would see solutions not

### Childhood Trauma?

'A bad experience with a member of the same sex while young may cause rejection of all members of the same sex and emerges as a heterosexual neurosis'.

### Pathological Condition?

Many heterosexuals claim that they were just 'born that way'.

### Fear of Death?

'A terror of mortality lies beneath much heterosexual coupling. Driven to perpetuate themselves at any cost, most heterosexuals are indifferent to the prospect of the worldwide famine that will result if the present population explosion continues unchecked.'

in terms of broad political change, but exclusively in getting domestic arrangements straight, or in improving the sex act.

### Too far out?

The editorial riposte to such reactions as 'How dare you assume I'm heterosexual?', shows I think that the editors are not entirely free of culpability here. It does not appear to occur to them that, alongside the more questionable reasons for rejecting that label, there might be other reasons which relate more closely to that woman's understanding of her own political (rather than sexual) identity. No woman, certainly no feminist, would be likely to want to see herself summed up by a term which defines her primarily in relation to men. There is no room here for women who may have chosen celibacy, for example, and who may relate primarily to women even if they do not identify as lesbian. Neither does it appear to occur to them that the cry of outrage might come, with perfect appropriateness from an offended lesbian. They note cryptically, and rather dismissively, that one woman 'wrote back saying she was lesbian but we weren't to tell anyone'.

This apparent lack of interest in distinguishing between, at one extreme, heterosexuals outraged for the wrong reasons (failure to take responsibility for the political implications of sexuality), and at the other, lesbians rightly outraged at being falsely accused, suggests a failure on the editors' part to take full

responsibility for the project. They do not waste time worrying about the implications of the range of replies, or how that might have prompted them to reformulate their questions (and indeed the whole project). Instead they move quickly to arguing that they require of those women who have taken offence 'a public professional rebuttal' of their (assumed) heterosexuality. They are doubtless right to insist on the need for women who identify as feminists to be willing to recognise the political consequences of the relationship between heterosexual sexual practice and the rest of the institution. However, the notion of 'outing' heterosexual women simply serves to mirror a particular lesbian and gay phenomenon of debatable political consequence. Am I alone, again, in thinking that for us all to be 'out', regardless of our sexuality, would hardly solve the problem. Aren't heterosexual women too 'far out' as it is.

What I think they are plainly right about is that we need to look far more closely at the construction of heterosexuality, how it disempowers women, and what the political relationship is between lesbianism and heterosexuality in terms of women's liberation. The editors suggest that one of the reasons why lesbianism does not inhabit the same conceptual space as heterosexuality is that lesbianism is 'intrinsically politicised', whereas heterosexuality is not. This makes various assumptions about political consciousness and choice, but can we really accept that lesbianism - or indeed feminism - is intrinsically politicised, and what does 'intrinsically' mean in that context? Is that which claims to be 'right-on feminism' in a consumer culture magazine of the '80s intrinsically politicised? Or is that which is invoked in the name of feminism in this context (for reasons of promotion, provocation or whatever) simply not 'feminism'? A politics of change can surely never be intrinsic, and, now more than ever, it must be wishful, if not complacent, to think it could be.

What this volume does graphically recognise and register is the need to address heterosexuality as a political institution which oppresses women. In doing so, it represents an opportunity to address the continuing difficulties of understanding and criticising heterosexuality over and beyond our sexual and domestic arrangements; an opportunity seen, partially realised, and partially missed. □

Social Conditioning?  
heterosexuals  
must take responsibility  
for their own condition.

## Writing our own history

# A PRESS OF ONE'S OWN

*Onlywomen Press was launched on the crest of the wave of 1970s radical feminism. It was Britain's first - and only - radical feminist printing and publishing company. Its aim was not only to provide an outlet for women's writing - fiction, theory and poetry - but also to enable women to take control of the print production process itself. Only in this way would women truly realise the power of their words. Cath Jackson talks to founder members Lilian Mohin and Sheila Shulman, and to Brenda Whisker and Jackie Bishop, also involved in the early days.*

*Onlywomen Press opened its first print shop in a damp basement in north London, in Hackney's Mare Street. But the group of women who established and were members of the Onlywomen collective had been planning, preparing and working together for many years previously.*

Sheila Shulman: I had come to London from America in the early 70s. In 1972 I went to the National Women's Liberation Conference in Acton, west London and as a result of that got involved in a writers' group with Lilian Mohin, Astra, Judith Kazantzis and others. We wrote and wrote and wrote and then it occurred to us to publish a pamphlet of our poems. We couldn't think of a title for it - it got called 'Too late for ignorance' in the end, which is a line from one of Lilian's poems in the pamphlet - but we published it, as the Women's Literature Collective. The collective also published a journal: *Womens Literature Review*. A year went by and we decided to do it again and produced a more upmarket pamphlet which we called 'Seven Women'.

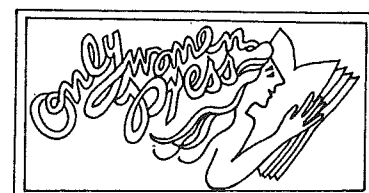
Lilian Mohin: The writers' group met in Notting Hill where a lot of lefty things were

going on and some of the first radical feminist meetings in London took place. We were very much part of everything that was going on then in the Women's Liberation Movement.

Our first publishing venture was in 1972, when our group and some other women published a pamphlet of Robin Morgan's collection of poems 'Monster'. It had been published as a book by a mainstream publisher in America and it reached us here in Britain, but then we heard that Ted Hughes was preventing it being imported or published in Britain because he interpreted the poem 'Monster' as accusing him of murdering Sylvia Plath. So we decided to produce a pirate edition.

The poem 'Monster' has the line: 'Just once in this my only life-time'. It's a poem about the power of words and it sums up why we did it - learned to print and began to publish women's writing - and went on doing it, getting covered in ink and working in damp basements: because it wasn't going to be just once in our life-time.

*In 1974 there was a meeting in Islington, north London, of women interested in femi-*





nist publishing and printing. Lilian, Sheila and Deborah Hart, another *Onlywomen* founder member, were all there - as were a number of other women who later went on to work with the more mainstream women's publishing houses, *Virago* and the *Women's Press*.

SS: There must have been about 20 women there of all different affiliations: women wanting to make a business out of feminist publishing; women working as printers with lefty presses; some who defined themselves as socialist feminist; some simply interested in getting into mainstream publishing, and those of us who consider ourselves not just part of the Women's Liberation Movement but also radical lesbian feminists.

To us women's printing and publishing wasn't about a job or a career; it was about politics. We would both be doing the feminist revolution by writing and printing and

publishing, and we would be furthering it by the work we were getting out.

LM: It was a specific kind of feminist politics that we shared. We were all heavily and individually involved in different aspects of activism, but underlying that was a shared philosophy: yes, the world is full of terrible things; you want to change it so you go out and do something about it, but meanwhile you want to change the way the world thinks as well. We all believed in the revolutionary power of words.

We didn't have any illusions that other women at the meeting would be like us, but we did have illusions about the possibility of doing it with other women, of some collaboration at some point. It didn't seem like a contradiction for feminists to work together even though our politics were different. So while many of the women there didn't share our views in every specific, that wasn't as

important as our belief that we shared certain concerns: that there should be women's publishing; that women should be listened to.

We went along believing that we would come together in a meeting about feminist publishing, but it didn't happen. The group split after very few meetings, but that was as much about the difference in the ambitions of the women there as about sexual preference or political ideology. We went away from the meeting more determined than ever and carried on meeting and discussing in our writers' group and with other writers' groups and feminist groups.

We were convinced that if we were to be heard, if our words were to be published, we would have to control the process of publishing. And that, for us at that time, meant learning to print. We felt strongly - and with some justification - that on the production floor our words would be changed: not just made not ours but also discarded - simply got rid of. They could be - and were - just thrown away. We had to control the process to get our words out there.

So the three of us enrolled at Camberwell College of Art to learn printing. We knew a woman who had already done an evening class there, which was how we knew they ran a printing course. But we were the first full-time women students on the course.

SS: To me it was a necessary, physical, material extension of our feminism. It was clear that lesbian feminist writing wasn't getting published. It seemed to us a necessary consequence of being writers. Somewhere too at the back of my head also was Trotsky: the notion that we would be physically making a revolution. In retrospect it was a slightly naive decision because technology was already outstripping us.

LM: We started college in 1974. All the instructors were male and the other students were all young male school leavers - but we hardly had anything to do with them. The tutors took a while to cope, but once they decided we were serious about learning to print, they became immensely helpful. Although they would call us all "the girls" and they refused to tell us apart, even though Deborah is tall and Sheila and I are very short. We had to buy a set of steps which we shared in order to be able to reach the machines.

It was a two-year course, learning print planning and production and the philosophy behind printing. We learned the jargon and the whole process from manufacturing the lead type to setting and printing in lead, off-set litho printing and the whole range of modern printing techniques.

Doing the course changed the way we thought about the books we wanted to produce. We became considerably less pompous about our publishing priorities than we might otherwise have been. It taught us about material reality, the mechanics of the real world.

SS: Learning to print made me think much more carefully about how things get done; the difference between thinking something and actually doing it. Before I always thought the world was made of words.

Jacky Bishop joined the group in 1975, as a member of the wider editorial collective.

Jacky Bishop: I was working in accountancy at the time. I'd known Lilian for years through involvement in feminists politics, in the London Women's Liberation Workshop. Back then there was nothing: no lesbian feminist presses, certainly in this country; very little feminism being published anywhere in Britain. But if you wanted something to happen, you went out and did it yourself.

LM: While we were on the course we carried on meeting every week. We used the college equipment to produce several pamphlets of poems as part of our course work, under what was at that time our name: the Women's Press. We did Judith Kazantzis' *'Finding Food'*, work done by Astra, *'Deviation'* by Judith Barrington, *'It'll Take a Long Time'* by Janet Gooch and some of my own poems, *'Cracks'*.

We also taught other women about the production process. It was part of the politics of the press. Later when we got the print business going, we taught women how to print.

JB: I remember sitting in meetings talking politics and binding by hand - literally sewing together - copies of the Astra poetry pamphlet. This was partly because we could not afford to pay to get it bound but more because we wanted to do every part of the process, to make the book ourselves. A few hundred copies could be accommodated by pressing lovers and friends into labour - but they wouldn't do it twice.



Lilian Mohin (left) and Brenda Whisker in the print room at the Mount Pleasant premises.



LM: We did have some problems at Camberwell. One of the technicians melted down the lead type that I'd set for the Judith Kazantzis pamphlet, *'Finding Food'*. It was his job to proof-read the work that the students had set in type and he took particular exception to one of Judith's poems, a short humorous poem about her husband. He said it was 'against nature'.

We would also take work outside and use the equipment of various sympathetic lefty presses. We printed and published the first ever women's liberation calendar that way and sold it at conferences. It had photographs of various women's liberation movements events taken by feminist photographers. We felt ourselves to be - and were - very much part of the movement and absolutely convinced we were in it together, whatever the political divisions.

SS: We made the plates at a community press in Thornton Heath. The plate-maker, camera and press were all plugged into one multi-socket which they kept in a puddle in the middle of the floor.

LM: There was an informal network of women working in the lefty printing trade - places like Calverts and Bread and Roses. That's often how we were able to use the equipment at these lefty presses, through our contact with the women there. And later there were women-only print shops, like See Red and Women in Print. We talked to each other and helped each other out, but to us at Onlywomen it was less the printing that linked us and more that we were all radical feminists. That first meeting in Islington and the conference we organised later were very much about both feminist printing and publishing.

When the course ended in 1976, Lilian Mohin went on to study binding and paper production for a year at the London College of Printing and then spent a year working as a jobbing printer - the sole woman printer in a commercial print shop. Sheila Shulman went to America for a year, where she worked with Judy Grahn and the Women's Press Collective - later, controversially, to be taken over by Diana Press. The press group continued to meet and the search for premises to set up a print shop began.

JB: Clearly a lot of feminist work wasn't getting published by the mainstream. There

was a lot of ephemeral stuff, conference papers, reaching a very limited audience. We felt there was all this work looking for an outlet and there had to be a means through which feminist work could be printed and published to reach a much wider audience. Papers got passed round conferences but to create a living politics you had to get a bigger audience involved in the debate; the ideas had to be more widely available.

*In 1977, Lilian and Deborah Hart organised the first national conference for women on printing and publishing, in Rosslyn Lodge, north London, a meeting place for many feminist groups in the mid-70s. However in the months running up to the conference Naim Attalah, owner of Quartet Books, decided to launch a women's publishing house which he called 'The Women's Press.'*

LM: We had decided earlier, in the thrill of political purity, that we wouldn't register the name with Her Majesty's Government when we first began publishing work. The innocence of it. So when we said to Naim Attalah, 'Wait a minute', he just said 'Tough'.

So we were having to print leaflets about it to hand out at the conference and come up with a new name. The point was that the world knew we existed as the Women's Press. We had said so in public and not just within the Women's Liberation Movement. It was important to maintain a connection. We came up with 'Onlywomen Press' with unseemly haste - and lived to regret it. People didn't get what we meant by 'only women' and it overlapped too much with The Women's Press.

*Brenda Whisker joined the press in 1977, when Lynn Alderson also joined. Lynn was one of the group of women who, a year later in 1978, opened 'Sisterwrite', Britain's first - and for several years only - women's bookshop. For several years Onlywomen Press printed the Sisterwrite mail order catalogue which, for women all over the UK, was their only way of getting hold of feminist writing published by groups like Onlywomen Press, and US imported books in particular.*

Brenda Whisker: I'd met Lilian at the 1977 Edinburgh radical feminist conference, the first national radical feminist conference in Britain. We were in the same group throughout the conference and after that she asked

me to join the press. I had no desire to get into what some people think of as the glamorous literary side. In fact I'd had quite an aversion to literature since school and saw myself as a non-literary person.

In Edinburgh I'd been involved in the *Scottish Women's Liberation Newsletter* and a lesbian newsletter called *Red Herring*. So I was quite interested in the idea of publishing as a means to get a radical feminist political message across; how women communicate their political ideas to each other and how we communicate our life experiences and perceptions about the world. I felt I had only found a voice and got courage to start writing from working on the newsletters. I found it an amazingly liberating thing to do. So when I met Lilian at the Edinburgh conference, it all came together.

I remember in the early meetings we did a lot of talking about how actually to start up the physical entity of the press and how to constitute ourselves. A feminist lawyer - Sue Olley - gave us her services for free and in November 1977 we became Onlywomen Press Limited, a company limited by guarantee. We decided to do it properly to make sure none of us ended up responsible for any terrible financial collapse or if anyone sued. But we chose positively not to be a co-op. It was very much the thing to be in those days, but I think we felt the co-op movement was very male-controlled and the rules in fact gave us less freedom than a company limited by guarantee.

*In March 1978 Onlywomen press found its first premises, in a basement in Mare Street, Hackney. The rent was £5.00 a week and included an off-set litho A4 press left by the previous occupant. Upstairs worked a feminist graphic designer, Ann Decker - later involved in the launching of Sheba. The press was loaned £200 to buy a clapped out A3 Rotaprint and a plate-maker.*

LM: The presses were old but they were very simple. You could mend them with sticky tape and string if you had to. You could also take them apart and put them in the back of a car. That was important because we seriously thought we might need to go underground one day. It was only later that we realised there's no point going underground if you're trying to go public - which

was what we were aiming to do or we wouldn't have been in publishing.

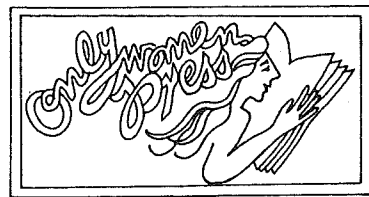
The idea had always been that the printing would support the publishing, so we'd always intended to earn our bread and butter as jobbing printers. We also intended to teach other women how to print. A number of women came, but mostly they didn't stick it. It wasn't easy, especially when the machines were so old and crappy and a lot of women would come wanting to be more artistic and writerly.



Lilian with a later collective member Sophie Laws and the A3 Rotaprint.

ONLYWOMEN PRESS

ONLYWOMEN PRESS



There were always some women working at the press who loved printing and wanted to focus on that aspect of the work. But Onlywomen was never just about printing as a 'women in manual trades' issue. It was about literature and politics: we did it because we wanted to be able to make certain that what we had to say would get into print. And for us that meant doing it - and teaching other women to do it - ourselves. It was a means to an end, not an end in itself.

We did a lot of work for various women's groups and organisations, as well as stuff off the street. We were printing to make the money to produce the books, so we would only refuse a job if the woman standing at the machine couldn't bear to look at what was coming out. The only feminist work we absolutely would not do was a poster produced by a revolutionary feminist group showing a man with his testicles in a bra. That was too silly.

Later, when we were working from Mount Pleasant in Clerkenwell we got work from a Star Trek fan club from somewhere like Welwyn Garden City. Two respectable women in two-piece suits and pearls came to see us; they couldn't get the work printed anywhere else. When the artwork arrived it was all pricks in space - a heavily illustrated account of a love affair between Captain Kirk and Mr Spock. We printed it; we needed the money.

JB: It was a different world in printing then. There weren't so many corner print shops and there was so much that people - feminists, socialists, people outside the mainstream - wanted printing. We did posters, handbooks, pamphlets and papers. We also took work from local businesses, but we drew the line at wedding invitations. We didn't want to be part of something that enslaved women. The printing paid, but never enough to finance the publishing.

BW: Lilian was starting to negotiate with the Arts Council and GLAA for a £1000 grant to publish *One Foot on the Mountain* and I more or less took over the physical running of the press and did a lot of the printing, ordering supplies, taking in jobs and doing the artwork. But it was never just a printing job because of the contact with the women's groups we did the work for. We were a part of the amazing sisterhood that

was around at the time, doing work for all the campaigns that were going on; discussing them with the women when they brought in their printing work.

At Onlywomen meetings we were talking about the politics of publishing, what to include in the contract, and how to do everything in a radical feminist way. We had a clause which promised to keep everything in print. The idea that books stopped being important just because they were ten years old was anathema to us. We liked to think we were publishing things with universal truth and interest, that would go on being important. As far as I know, everything Onlywomen has ever published in book form is still available.

There was also the discussion about the articles and poems which came our way and the pamphlets we would publish. I remember writing to Adrienne Rich to ask her permission to publish 'Women and Honor'. She was my total hero - and still is. That was what I was in it for - making important political writing available over here.

JB: We began with the pamphlets which we could print ourselves, but we always aimed to publish books. Pamphlets are so ephemeral; they have a market for a few minutes and then they're part of history. But it's interesting how the Onlywomen pamphlets like *Compulsory Heterosexuality*, *Down There*, *Love Your Enemy* which we brought out back in the early 80s have in fact survived. Years later you find them listed in bibliographies and referenced in books about feminist political theory being published today.

We decided to publish *Women and Honor* and *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (also by Adrienne Rich) because it was so difficult in those days to get hold of American publications. If you lived outside London there were hardly any bookshops which would stock feminist books. Sisterwrite in London was the only feminist bookstore in the country for years. In those days you got your books and pamphlets at conferences because there was simply nowhere else. You couldn't get hold of American journals unless you subscribed direct - and that meant getting hold of a copy in the first place.

There wasn't a lot of home-grown radical

feminist writing around then; the women who would have been writing were too busy creating the context in which it would be possible to write. It took time for women to identify as writers. Only a trickle of work came in to the press in the early days; one or two poems but never a whole body of work. But there was an important basis of feminist and lesbian feminist politics being published in America that wasn't widely available here. We wanted to make those ideas available over here so women would develop their thoughts and write their own.

LM: Women were sending work: poems and prose. In 1977 we put the word out about publishing Britain's first ever anthology of feminist poetry. That was *One Foot on the Mountain*, which we published in 1979. It includes the work of 55 poets, and for a lot of them it was the first time they'd been in print. A lot of them are now at the forefront of women's writing, but at the time they were very much on the fringes: women like Zoe Fairbairns, Alison Fell, Sheila Rowbotham, Micheline Wandor and Michelle Roberts.

We had always known we would have to get anything bigger than 100 pages printed commercially, because producing anything longer on a small press isn't economic and we would never have the kind of money it takes to invest in a printing works big enough to produce books. With *One Foot on the Mountain* we printed the cover and, as

with all our books, we did all the artwork ourselves - real cow gum and bits of paper. Dark Moon (a typesetting company run by lesbian feminists) set the text.

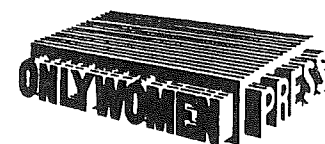
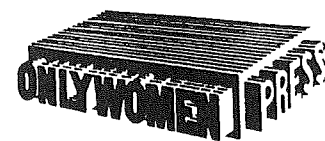
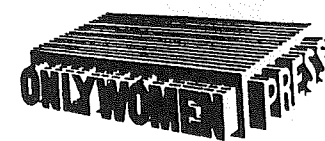
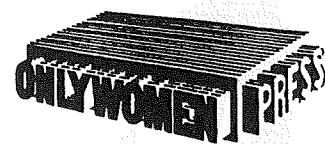
But we had always said terrible things would befall if women didn't have control over the production. In the first printing they fouled up the pagination and in the second edition (*One Foot* has been reprinted four times and is still selling) they used two different kinds of paper and held the artwork to ransom when we queried the bill - and got coffee stains all over it. Both times they broke the deadlines. I remember going with Liz Trott (another collective member) to remonstrate with the first printer and he raised his fists and invited us to step outside.

BW: They hated us - hated our name. I remember feeling: 'this is why we started the press, so we wouldn't have to deal with this.'

JB: I remember the first copies of *One Foot* coming back from the printers. We'd met at Sisterwrite and gone to a restaurant after for something to eat. We were sitting there and Lilian came in with a copy of *One Foot* - an actual book! It was terribly exciting. Everyone was laughing at me, but I felt we had produced something ground-breaking; that we'd succeeded in bringing together all these very disparate strands of feminism; we'd brought together all this enormous creative energy and it was all there, it actually existed in this book.



Brenda and Lilian with Jackie Bishop (centre) at the launch party for 'One Foot', held at the Women's Arts Alliance in London



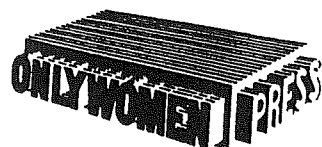
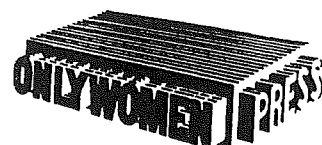
Onlywomen Press continues to publish a robust list of fiction, poetry and non fiction. Forthcoming publications in its 'Liaison' list of political writing are *An Intimacy of Equals: essays in lesbian feminist ethics*, edited by Lilian Mohin, and *Changing Our Minds: on lesbian feminism and psychology*, by Celia Kitzinger and Rachel Perkins. New in fiction are *Mosaic of Air*, short stories by Cherry Potts, and *Tough at the Top* by Nicky Edwards.

Full details and catalogue from:  
Onlywomen Press  
71 Gt Russell Street  
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**STOP PRESS**

Onlywomen Press' grant has been cut by the London Arts Board. Please write to the board to ask them to re-consider their decision!

Lavinia Greenlaw  
Literature Officer  
London Arts Board  
Elme House  
133 Long Acre  
London WC2E 9AF.



'One Foot on the Mountain' describes itself as a 'feminist anthology' and includes work by women who would not have defined themselves as radical feminist. The Onlywomen logo on the back of all its early publications defined the press as 'radical feminist'. Later, in the early 80s, the logo changed to read 'radical feminist and lesbian'. In the late 80s this changed again, to 'radical feminist lesbian'.

LM: When we started we defined ourselves as both a lesbian and radical feminist collective, to describe our politics in contrast to socialist feminism. But we also saw ourselves as part of the Women's Liberation Movement, which to us meant all feminists, straight women as well. We didn't aim to publish work only by radical feminists, or by lesbians. We were looking at the words on the page and what the printed word was saying, and in so far as any of the women in, say, *One Foot*, had socialist feminist views, they weren't expressed in the poems.

To begin with we felt it was enough to say 'radical feminist' because that, to us, meant radical lesbian feminism and to us the way forward was through radical lesbian feminism. Later we believed we had to be more explicit and actually put the word 'lesbian' on the covers. Getting rid of the ampersand was a necessary progression because it had given people the false notion that we were radical feminist on the one hand and lesbian on the other: that we published lesbian books out of tokenism, which was very much not the case.

Later we came to feel that what we put on the outside of the books, under our logo, had to be consistent with how we chose the material. We now have a clause in the contract specifying that the author is a lesbian - although we do get a few turncoats.

JB: To begin with we didn't want to exclude radical feminist writing that didn't come from a lesbian perspective, although all of us on the collective were lesbian. We defined ourselves as lesbian later in order to make overt the distinction between lesbian feminist and feminist politics. There wasn't that division in the early days.

Onlywomen Press continues to publish radical feminist lesbian writing, although it ceased running as a printing business in 1984.

BW: Printing and publishing as a joint project just doesn't work. I found just the physical grind of doing jobbing printing to earn money to pay the bills and rent consumed most of my energy. I ended up taking over a lot of the day to day running of the press, keeping it going, while Lilian was being creative with *One Foot*. But she could have done that in her bedroom at home - and quite often did - without the print business as well. I don't know where all the money from the printing jobs went to - bills and supplies I suppose - but I never made an income.

The practical slog totally detracts from working on publishing projects. Though I haven't entirely lost the idea that women can control the process. The newsletters we used to put out were some of the most radical things I have ever been involved in. The whole process of writing your own articles and duplicating and distributing them is a very empowering thing. But it all seems to have faded away now and become professionalised - like a lot of things in the women's movement. The benefits are that feminist books have got into the high street bookshops. But then look at the plethora of rubbish that's published these days as feminist writing and the way straight publishers have got into feminist academic stuff - it's all so dreary. Meanwhile the radical bookshops which used to stock pamphlets and newsletters have been pushed out of business by the big chains like Penguin and Waterstones.

SS: I think Onlywomen has a crucial historical importance as the kind of project it was - and still does even if it's more of a business now. A business that is committed to the responsible publication of lesbian feminist work is crucially important; there's so much lesbian publishing around now that it is just Mills and Boon.

But it was inevitable that the press would become more commercial. The problem with uncommercial publishing is the difficulty with distribution and getting publicity in the media. Women have to know the books are there to be able to buy them. To be heard and to make itself felt Onlywomen had to have the same presence as other women's publishing houses and become more business-like, particularly now when the alternative publishing network seems to have broken down. □

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