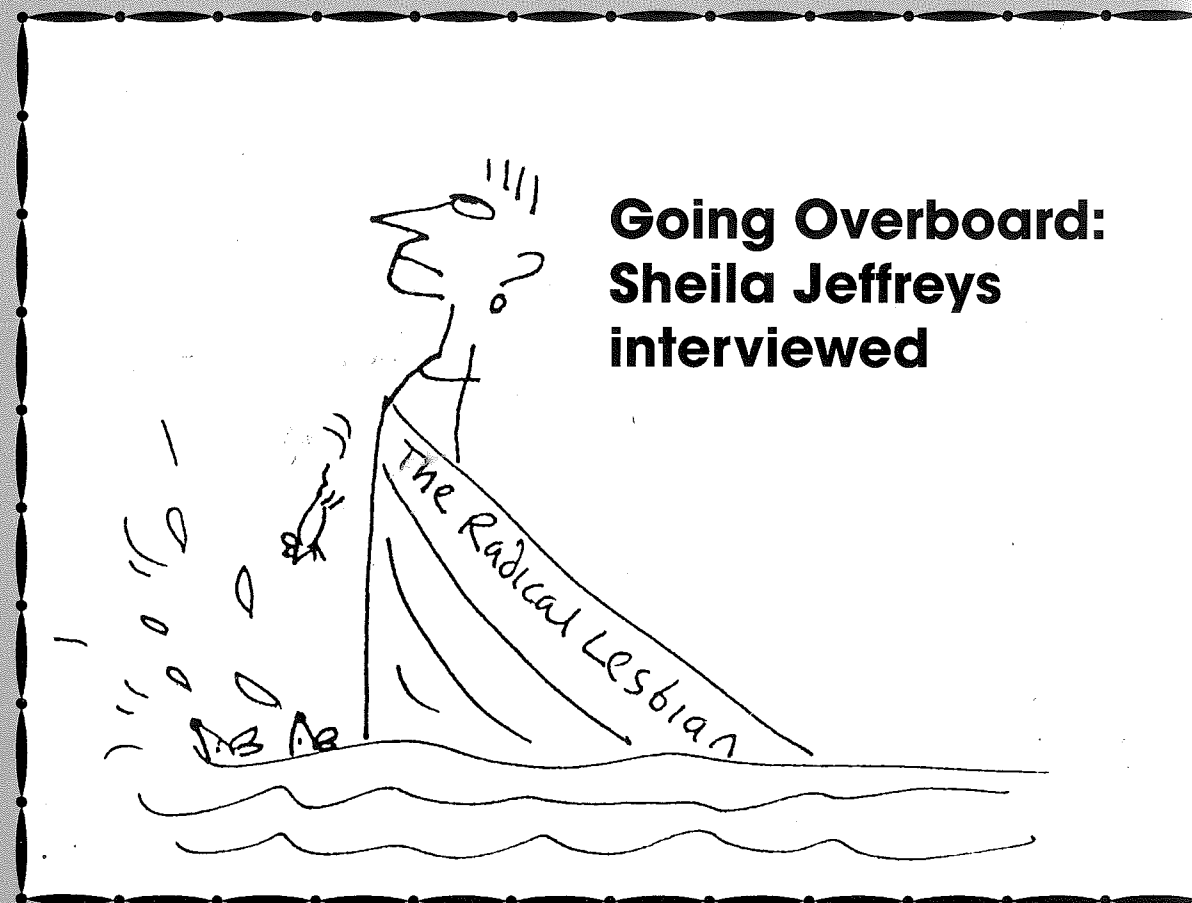


Trouble

The radical feminist magazine

& Strife



**Going Overboard:
Sheila Jeffreys
interviewed**

**Lies, lesbians and statistics
Standing up for single mothers
War and sexual violence**

**NO. 28
£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, Dianne Butterworth, Debbie Cameron, Marian Foley, Stevi Jackson, Liz Kelly, Sophie Laws, Diana Leonard, Joan Scanlon and Sara Scott: with help from Sue Botcherby, Kate Cook, Caroline Forbes and Sonia Noonan.

With many thanks to the Women's Health and Reproductive Rights Information Centre for the use of their space and resources.

Printed and Typeset by Sandypress Manchester (061-273 7535)

Distributed by Central Books (081 986-4854).

Please note our address: Trouble & Strife, PO Box 8, Diss.

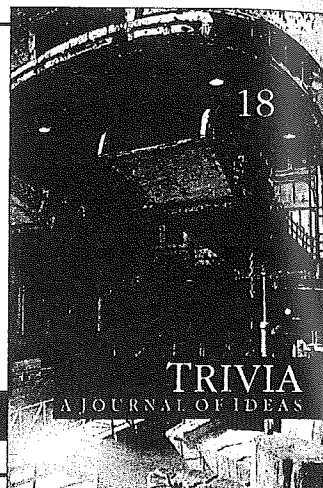
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Letters

Dear T&S,

The recent Tory attacks on single mothers are clearly reactionary and doubtless highly offensive to most, if not all, of your readers. Various MPs have been given considerable coverage in all sections of the press, expressing their opinions about how dangerous women alone with children are to this society and about how much children need male role models (what for?).

Perhaps it's time for a backlash against all of this? We could choose a day (International Women's Day, is a possibility) and let women know that this is a day for showing the Tories that women can be dangerous, if pushed.

We should decide where the protest could take place, perhaps at local Tory party offices, and then suggest some form the protest can take. It needs to be something simple and easy for women to take part in, and perhaps should be linked to money (or lack of it) since women's benefits are being threatened. My suggestion would be shopping trolleys, full of rubbish (to suggest both what we think of what the Tories are saying and the struggle of bringing kids up on a ridiculously low income).

That ought to get some attention, if we could fill up Tory party office entrances or car parks with shopping trolleys overflowing with garbage (including plenty of dirty nappies of course)!

Has anyone got any other suggestions? Or ideas for when this could take place, and how we can organise it?

In sisterhood,

Kate Cook

Dear T&S,

Picking up a copy for the first time in a while, I felt, to be honest very troubled by the tone that seemed to be prevalent. I felt that while

the issue contained some articles which were dynamic and inspiring (for me Zero Tolerance & Mary Daly), a lot of the rest were very introverted and written in restricted code. One of the problems of the academicisation of feminism, (and by this I mean the creating of histories, analysis and written culture) is that we can end up engaging in the meanings of different labels, the pinning down of different movements, the establishment of terms ourselves. I felt for the first time that we were not finding our own way or her-story, but that we were tying ourselves in knots over language differences which keep us firmly in the tradition of written, masculine analysis. In other words, locking ourselves in the library... 'Going on Endlessly' - was almost like reading a university booklist, a dictionary definition - more probably, you asked women from the same language group to respond, which is why it was all the same. Why all this emphasis on writing. What is wrong with oral culture?



Where is the balance? Feminism is hardly radical if it has become a list of texts and names of writers. Who is T&S aimed at? You also go on about the death of feminism - almost like you're clinging on for dear life to some notion of 'real' action in the 60s and 70s (Getting Personal?). You're really fixing yourselves in aspic with these discussions, like picking over a gravestone looking for dates which don't need to be read anymore - the meaning has changed. Can't we let go of this heavy impenetrable analysis?

What I am trying to say? Overall, that the magazine seems terribly narrow and self-serving; and academic, but in a way which is dressed up as popular, which is what I find difficult. Let inspiration come from Zero Tolerance - if a council can run such a campaign, then times have changed! Let's move! Good Luck

Yours

Jane Trowell

Dear friends,

I am a survivor of satanic abuse who is presently compiling an anthology of first person stories of survivors, their friends and families. I very much want to include stories of abuse that occurred outside the States, as I feel there is little awareness here that ritual abuse is a world-wide problem. I am also extremely interested in including stories of abuse that occurred under non-satanic ideologies.

Contributions should be short, about 20 pages, as we wish to include a wide range of experiences. You may tell us your own story or write about a particular aspect of your experience. Some of the topics we would like to cover are what you remember about the cult; what memories and flashbacks feel like; how you protect yourself today; experiences of disclosing to others; what its like to be a parent, partner, friend of a ritually abused survivor.

For more information about safety precautions and how to submit material, please write to: RS Speak Out, 4104 24th Street, 127 San Francisco, CA 94114, U.S.A.

Thank you so much for your help.
Sincerely Jeanne Marie Lorena

Dear T&S,

Jane Brown is the head teacher at Kingsmead, an inner city primary school on a Hackney estate which is one of the most socially and economically deprived in the country. She is held in high esteem by the parents of the children who attend the school. They call her "an excellent head." The governors of Kingsmead are also convinced Jane Brown is the right person to run their school, and as a result they have resisted all demands to suspend her. Jane Brown is a successful head teacher who once had the backing and gratitude of her local education authority (LEA). Now it wants to be rid of her. Why? Because she is still committed to equal opportunities policies that the authority no longer wishes to defend or endorse in public.

But why refuse the offer of a subsidised visit to the ballet? One important part of the answer - her wish not to reinforce the notion that passion is the exclusive property of heterosexuals - has been singled out and ridiculed by the national press. Actually a lot of other good reasons were put forward when the original offer was made. Many parents were unable to afford the £7 they would have to contribute towards the trip. And the cost to the school wasn't negligible either: the hire fee for the coach was equivalent to a full term's swimming lessons; extra staffing would have to be provided from an overstretched budget. There were also sound educational reasons for saying no: the ballet *Romeo and Juliet* bears no relation to any of the work going on in school at key stages 1 and 2.

When the press dressed up this carefully considered decision as a national scandal, Jane Brown was entitled to expect help, support

and understanding from an LEA that talks a great deal about equality of opportunity. Instead she was loudly and instantly condemned by Gus John, the Director of Education, Pat Corrigan, the Chair of the Education Committee and John McCafferty, the Leader of the Council (himself a member of the authority's Gay and Lesbian Committee). These three wise men decided to abandon Jane Brown to the homophobia of the government and the tabloid press. She has been told to stay silent while she is misrepresented and vilified. She is now suffering a public humiliation, press harassment and hate mail.

Hungry for blood, her critics are now suggesting that Jane's appointment two years ago was improper. But her appointment was endorsed by the local authority, and it has also been widely accepted that there was no relationship between Jane Brown and the Chair of Governors prior to her appointment. There is no case to answer.

This is not just an issue of gay and lesbian rights. It has serious implications for many of us who work here in Hackney. The local authority has offered Jane Brown as a sacrificial victim to a press driven by malice and a government going back to its baser

instincts. Both want to wreck and misrepresent the work that we do well. Unless councillors and officials are prepared to back us, it won't be long before none of us dares to put equal opportunities into practice.

Please write to the local authority and tell them what you think of their actions. Then write to the governing body of Kingsmead school and let them know they have your support.

Complain here:
 John McCafferty
 Leader of the Council
 Hackney Town Hall Mare Street E8
 and/or
 Gus John
 Director of Education
 Education Directorate
 Edith Cavell Building
 Enfield Rd N1 5AZ

Send your letter of support to:
 Vice Chair of Governors
 Kingsmead Primary School
 Kingsmead Way
 Homerton E9

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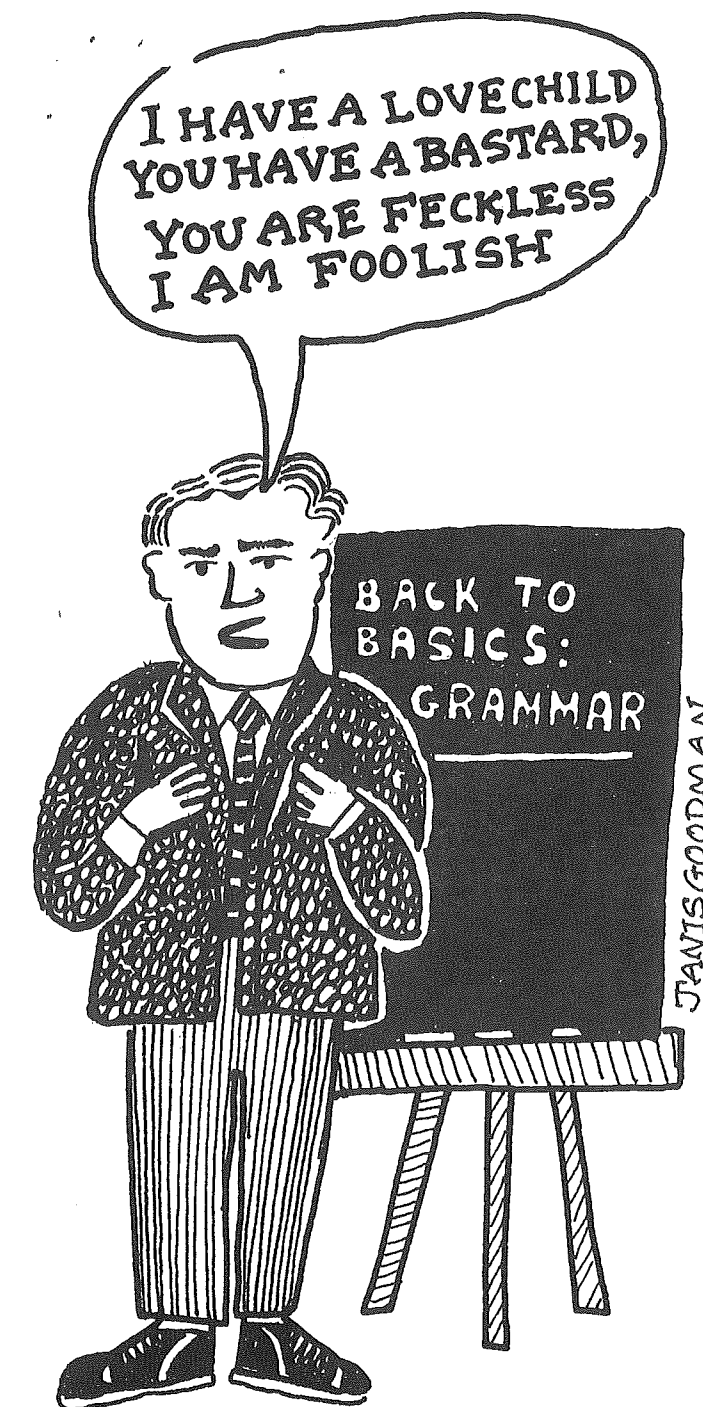
Un-Valued Families

In the last few months the British government's attacks on single mothers have become even more vicious. Sophie Laws looks underneath the glib and outrageous pronouncements and asks why feminists have failed to fight back.

Reading the papers is always a risky business, but for feminists the long series of denunciations of single mothers by Government ministers over the past couple of years has been particularly enraging and depressing. It has amounted to the most concerted ideological attack on women, and especially on women living in poverty, that I can recall.

There was some relief over Christmas, when to the great entertainment of the nation, John Major's foolish promotion of the slogan 'Back to Basics' was followed by a long series of scandals relating to the sexual and financial double-dealing of ministers and MPs. The one most people particularly enjoyed involved Tim Yeo, only recently the junior minister at the Department of Health responsible for policy on children, who turned out to have not one but two of what the media so cutely call 'love children'. In the end he was obliged to resign his ministerial post, though he clearly felt that this hypocrisy was a purely personal matter - the Tory women of his Suffolk constituency put their feet down.

So the Government has been forced to back off a little, but the issue is far from finished - many of the real social policy changes relating to this theme are only just coming through. My sense is that it is just as well that the government has shot itself in the foot by over-moralising the issue, because up to that point they seemed to have been winning all the way. And one element which contributed to this was the weakness of feminist resistance.



I actually talked with friends about organising some sort of campaign to resist the onslaught over the summer, and was counselled that any such effort would only make things worse. To argue publicly for women's autonomy in relation to child-rearing would have been to offer the press Public Enemy Number One. But haven't we sold women down the river by leaving the field to the established agencies to argue the poverty issues and avoid the feminist ones?

So were we once again struck dumb with horror? Were we unable to take in what was really being said? Or do we discuss this so little because it is so obvious to us all what we think? One friend says we are avoiding the acute sense of powerlessness that comes over us when we talk about issues immediately affecting real people, and it's so much more comfortable to talk about Madonna (she teaches in Cultural Studies). I wanted to write this piece to try to help free up more feminist voices to join in these arguments. In particular I think we should remember that while the Right knows what it doesn't like, there really isn't an obvious, clear set of changes that could realistically be made which would be supported by the whole Conservative Party. This is a very contradictory area, and it isn't only us who can see the contradictions.

Attacking women

So, at the risk of being obvious, why is this stuff so serious for women? What the Government is basically saying is that lone parents are in themselves a social ill to be eliminated or at least reduced, and that the increase in their numbers is due to social policies which give rewards for setting up house alone, or for leaving a marriage. It is argued, for instance in a Daily Mail editorial (19 Jan '94) that even if the proposed policies damage the real children of today, this will be a kindness to children as yet unborn as people will be deterred from creating more.

There's that popular touch of racism in it too, when it is reported that the proportion of lone parent families is higher amongst Afro-Caribbeans, while the fact that the figures are lower amongst Asian people than in the white population is given less prominence. In the US, the demonised 'welfare mother' is very much seen as a Black woman - I wonder how widely this is the image here too?

The Government want to revive the traditional bargain, where women with children are expected to put up with anything in return for being supported by a man rather than the state, and men are expected to financially support their children and their children's mother/s. Childcare and domestic work exchanged for the woman's and children's keep. Feminists have

always analysed this deal as exploitation of the woman, and *everyone* knows that there has always been a lot of cheating even within that bargain. We also know that massive levels of long-term unemployment remove it as an option for many people.

The image behind 'Back to Basics' is of a return to an earlier era, and we can be certain that a strong element in that nostalgia for the 'family values' of the past is the idea that women used to know their place and stay in it. Michael Howard, the Home Secretary, (supported later by Environment Secretary John Gummer) has argued that it would be a good thing if more single mothers gave up their children for adoption rather than raising them themselves: 'From the child's - and the mother's - point of view that may have been the best outcome'. They explicitly harked back to the times when working class women were routinely forced to give up their children for adoption.

All the advances over a long period, which have established some rights for women in relation to their own children, which have gradually reduced the stigma of illegitimacy, which have allowed more liberal access to divorce, are threatened by this trend. There are still today old women in psychiatric hospitals who were sent there as young women because they had an illegitimate child.

If women cannot leave a marriage with their children and ever expect a halfway decent life, and cannot choose not to marry in the first place, all women's subjugation is intensified.

All women, feminists or not, want choices in their lives, and this debate is all about ruling some of them out of order. The desperate thing is how far from the truth the propaganda is in presenting the current life of a lone parent as a bed of roses. Three-quarters of lone parents live on Income Support, below the poverty line (and 92% of lone parents are women). Their housing situation is consequently very bad. These economic factors are very familiar to those who work with women escaping domestic violence. It's no mystery why women go back - there are huge economic and social forces pushing them. These renewed efforts to label lone mothers as bad mothers only add to these forces.

Underneath and alongside the specific attack on the 'welfare mother' is a threat to all of us who think we can make our own rules about how to live. The Government are saying, clear as day, "heterosexuality really *is* compulsory, you know". And don't think you can change the rules within heterosexuality either.

Find your own home, lone mothers to be told

Ministers back adoption call as Archbishop speaks out

Don't keep babies, single mothers told

Pregnant girls will get worst housing

4 in 10 black mothers

Minister: We'll stop the queue jump mums

are single

Squeeze on benefits for single mothers

What is being proposed?

So what are they actually going to do? A wide range of policies have been discussed, and it has got quite confusing as to what is happening and what is not. Though direct cuts to benefits have been discussed (and argued for, for example by John Redwood, the Secretary of State for Wales), no such cut has been made or formally proposed. The most advanced process is the Child Support Act.

The Child Support Act

If you read the papers at all you will have heard some absent fathers' side of the argument on this recent legislation. The intention of the Act is to make men financially responsible for their children until they are 18, and to reduce the benefits bill. Much of the debate about the Act occurs in gender-neutral terms, which is confusing when the whole thing is really *about* gender. So yes, I know a few women are 'absent parents', but let's talk about the most common situation.

Whilst feminists would agree that men in heterosexual relationships should carry equal responsibility for their children with the woman, the Act is very alarming in that it gives women no control over the process. It actually makes it law that women *must* continue to be financially dependent on the father of their children after separation or divorce.

Still more outrageous is the fact that the absent father's child support payments are deducted pound for pound from the woman's benefits, so that unless he has an extremely high income she and the children are no better off at all, if they are on Income Support. The theory is that this situation frees women from a certain element of the poverty trap because if and when they take up paid employment they continue to receive child support payments. Women who are in paid employment may indeed receive higher child support payments - however of course the agency has been prioritising those on benefits, since the gain for the state is greater. Another difficulty is that many barriers still remain for lone parents to taking up employment - lack of childcare not the least among them. Proportionately fewer lone mothers are in paid work than married mothers. And you would need to earn a lot to compensate for the loss of the 'passport' benefits like free school meals you get on Income Support.

There is no longer any access to the courts in relation to child support, and settlements are made by social security bureaucrats. The only women who are 'let off' the process of the Child Support Agency chasing the man for money are those who can offer the only 'good excuse' allowed by the legislation - that of domestic violence. Women are being asked for

HOW READERS VOTED

The Sunday Express asked readers to answer these questions:

- 1) Should benefit for single mothers who have babies in the future be abolished? **Yes: 700 No: 39**
- 2) Should children born to unmarried teenage girls be adopted if their own families cannot support them? **Yes: 685 No: 54**
- 3) Should there be tax incentives to encourage young couples to marry? **Yes: 629 No: 110**

WHAT SORT OF TIME DO YOU CALL THIS?

SHUT UP

WISH I WAS A LOVE CHILD



JANIS GOODMAN

proof, good enough to satisfy the bureaucrats, that they have suffered violence, despite assurances made to the Women's Aid Federation England and women MPs that this would not be the case.

Early on, anger focused on the intention to financially penalise women who refused to tell the Agency the name of the father of their children. This remains in force, and has been used against a small number of women.

The final wild twist to the enforcement of the model of family life the government approves came when it was announced that under this legislation, lesbians or single women who got pregnant by privately arranged donor insemination would also be expected to allow the agency to pursue the donor for maintenance! Those using clinics, where the donor would be anonymous, had to be exempted. I do not know whether any cases like this have actually been pursued. Visions were conjured up of lesbians explaining to Child Support Agency staff that they had slept with so many men that they couldn't know who fathered the child.

The priority for the Agency is to save as much money for the Treasury as possible, and so for the first year of its operation, it has been concentrating on pursuing men with reasonable incomes, who mostly pay some maintenance already and thus are easily traceable, and whose children live with a woman dependent on Income Support. There have been howls of outrage from middle class men who had expected the Agency to concentrate on the alleged feckless poor. 'Absent fathers' have organised very effectively, (apparently 120 groups have been formed) and have got the rules changed in record time to ones which take more account of their needs.

There are a lot of complicated points to make around this legislation. Its full effects have not yet come through, as the Agency concentrates on new claims and on the group they think they can get most out of. Some research into mothers' experiences of its effects¹ found that one of their main concerns was that if the ex-partners are obliged to pay towards their children's support, even if the women and children see none of the money, they will feel more entitled to try to exert control over their lives, and will interfere where before they would have left them alone.

The Campaign against the Child Support Act (led by Wages for Housework) reported recently that more than 11,000 lone parents have stopped claiming Income Support to avoid involvement with the Agency.² The Agency appears to see this as a handy way of saving even more money.

A very serious conflict of interest between men and women is being played out here, and feminists need to get hold of the issues. The previous system certainly left many women to raise children in dire circumstances: will this one actually bring about a redistribution of wealth from men to women and children? Polly Toynbee (*Guardian*, 1 Feb '94) calls on women to defend the Child Support Act - other women are not at all sure. This is definitely one to keep an eye on.

Childcare costs recognised in budget

Amongst all the damaging changes, last Autumn's budget brought one measure which will be of real (though small) benefit to some mothers who are in paid employment. Families who are on Family Credit, Disability Working Allowance, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit will be able to offset childcare costs of up to £40 per week against earnings. Of course the taper system means that the most this is worth to anyone is £28 per week, and child care costs far more than this, but it is interesting that in bringing in this measure the Government has recognised the importance of childcare costs in preventing parents and mothers in particular on low incomes from taking on paid work. This was widely reported as a benefit for lone parents, although it actually applies equally to couples.

This sort of measure draws on the side of Tory philosophy which stresses economic self-sufficiency - which in many respects comes into conflict with the 'back to the kitchen' brigade. It is interesting to me that this, which was recommended by groups like the Day Care Trust, can co-exist with the next proposal I will discuss.

The Homelessness Review

The Government's threatened Green Paper reviewing the homelessness legislation came out in January, after much too-ing and fro-ing, to headlines like "Blitz on single mothers" (*Daily Mirror*), "Minister: We'll stop the queue jump mums" (*Daily Mail*), "Single mothers will lose council housing priority" (*Guardian*, 19 Jan '94). I have been amazed by how successfully the Right has persuaded nearly everyone that it is the case that lone parents are given priority for council housing, when this is not so³. The accurate headline in *The Independent* reads "Homeless set to lose housing rights".

The proposals are to remove local authorities' duty to give permanent housing to families with children who are homeless: instead they are to offer them only temporary accommodation. And only if they are "through no fault of their own, without accommodation of any sort in an emergency". Being asked to

leave by friends or relatives will no longer automatically confer entitlement to help, and a person is not entitled to assistance if any sort of accommodation however temporary is available. The Green Paper throughout refers to 'the person', but the vast majority of the 'statutory homeless' are families with children.

The legislation was written to protect children, and these are extremely frightening proposals. Their potential effect on women should also be clear. It is not over-dramatising to anticipate women and children joining the single homeless on the streets if these proposals are not abandoned. Again there is the assertion that women escaping domestic violence will still be housed (temporarily), but there is no sense in which this is made into a real undertaking. Although the Home Office is giving some priority to work on domestic violence, and there is an inter-departmental committee on it, it is clearly no priority here. Equally these moves would jeopardise most existing policy aimed at promoting children's welfare.

These proposals have gained support largely through the whispering campaign which tells working class people that the reason their married sons and daughters can't get council flats is because they are being made to wait unfairly while teenage single mothers get housed. This has the useful effect of diverting attention from the real reasons for the housing shortage: the government's refusal to let councils build or redevelop council accommodation; the council house sales policy; and the accumulated effect of years of a totally negative approach to social housing.

It is the case that in some areas you now have nil chance of being housed off the waiting list, because so little housing is available. However people are being persuaded that whether or not you are seen as homeless by the council is arbitrary, and nothing to do with real life! It is true that indeed there are a disproportionate number of lone parent families in council accommodation. But this is because they have less access to other sectors, and are more often desperate enough to go through what you now have to go through to get housed, not because they are being favoured. The proposed changes will in fact affect *all* homeless families, the majority of whom are couples, but it does have particular implications for women.

The Green Paper is a discussion document, and it is to be hoped that it will be successfully resisted. There is still time to write to Sir George Young at the Department of The Environment.⁴

Who's fighting back?

In the heat of the debate, especially around last autumn's Tory Party conference, the main resistance to the Government line seemed to be a rather feeble response from the liberal establishment which took two forms. The first was to argue that this was Government trying to meddle in private matters. The second argued back to the Right, but within its own terms, defending women's choices, but on the basis that really they had no choice. Both of these arguments needed making, but are limited in feminist terms.

The 'private sphere' is obviously problematic, if we say that the personal is political. In classic liberal tradition, it tends to lead to one law for the rich and another for the poor. It is not really sustainable to argue that Government has no legitimate interest in people's living arrangements when you are precisely defending a welfare state system designed to protect people at the bottom of the heap. You end up in the same camp with Tim Yeo, arguing that he can *afford* to support an illegitimate child, so it's no one's business what he does, whilst those who must depend on the state should have their behaviour scrutinised and controlled.

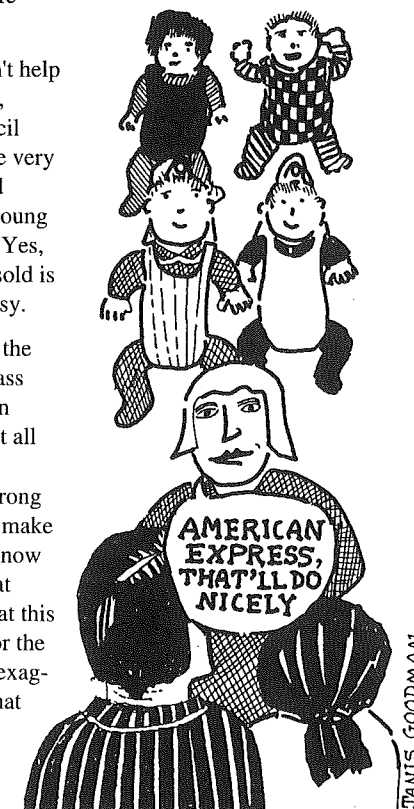
I can't help being rather pleased when ministers are dismissed for lying to and humiliating their wives. I am so sick of those images of the miserable wife being made to publicly 'stand by' her husband.

The other kind of liberal response: 'they can't help it'. Young single mothers are put in the spotlight, allegedly getting pregnant in order to get a council flat. The response repeats endlessly that there are very few of them, and most lone parents are older and divorced, widowed or separated. Also that few young women actually set out to get into this situation. Yes, but... these things are true, and the image being sold is wildly distorted, but somehow it makes me uneasy.

In the hand-wringing over the unfairness of the government's judgmental attitudes the middle class left can sound like it thinks working class women nothing but helpless dupes, exerting no control at all over their lives. Behind the rush to minimise the numbers of young *single* mothers, isn't there a strong suggestion that no woman ever really sets out to make a life with a child independently of a man? We know this is untrue and by refusing to acknowledge that some women do, it fails to challenge the view that this is unacceptable. While it's true that the figures for the increase in lone parent families are misread and exaggerated by the Government, do we really think that nothing has changed?



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HERE



Sun rapped over lesbian

THE SUN is criticised today for using an extract from an interview carried by our sister newspaper Today. Ms Lisa Saffron, Lesbian, to the Press, protested to the Press Complaints Commission about an article on single women having artificial insemination. The PCC's judgment was: 'The complaints against both papers are upheld. Both articles misleadingly reported the complainant's story and were in breach of Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Code of Practice. In a feature labelled 'Great Virgin Birth Debate', Today published comments for and against artificial insemination. It seriously distorted the complainant's account by reporting that she was a lesbian, a fact which she had asked the reporter to include in the article. The article gave a misleading impression of her sexual orientation and of the technique of artificial insemination. The Sun admits copying parts of the Today story, which were unchecked. It repeated, unattributed, quotations which gave a false impression of her, and it misleadingly implied that she had been interviewed by a Sun reporter.'



Feminist silence

So where were the feminist voices? Rights of Women are monitoring developments. The only active campaigning I know about is that Wages for Housework have been running a campaign on the Child Support Act. Their position has always been clear: that the state should pay.

I think perhaps we have been tripped up in our own appreciation of all the complexities. It is very problematic nowadays for any feminist to speak for "women", in the full understanding of the diversity of women's lives, and of the real conflicts of interest which can occur in this area. But we end up back where we started with women only able to speak about their own experience, not confident to theorise about what these things mean for women generally. The attack has focused, apparently, on heterosexual mothers. For some reason, lesbian mothers have not been demonised to any great extent within this debate.

My friend Lisa Saffron had the bizarre experience of giving an interview to *Today* newspaper about her experiences as a lesbian having a child by self-insemination, and finding herself presented as a 'virgin mum.' The *Sun* copied the story reporting how she 'feared she would not meet a man in time to start a family'. She complained to The Press Complaints Commission, which upheld her complaint that she had not been described as a lesbian, but instead had been labelled a virgin to fit their storyline, when she had clearly told them she was a lesbian. Whilst *Today* wrote back to her that it had to be careful of the sensibilities of its readers, we might conclude from this that the principle of lesbian invisibility appears to be a higher one than that of finding an easy target.

This whole area of the links between the different oppressions of women and children seems to me to be incredibly unresolved in feminist thinking. Despite a great deal of work. The recent debate in *Trouble and Strife* following Dena Attar's piece on childcare 'The Demand that Time Forgot' (issue 23 and letters in subsequent issues) left me little the wiser. We can all stand up for reproductive rights: obviously women must be able to determine how they live, and in what conditions they can raise children is part of this. But children have rights too. The issues are very complicated and have very strong personal resonances for all of us.

The vast distance between real life now and what we would like to see in a good society gapes in front of us. At present, we can call it autonomy if we like, but for most women becoming a lone parent grants them the certainty of a life in poverty for themselves

and their children. Living on Income Support for years is, well, living on Income Support for years. I suggest no blame at all in saying this. Clearly for some women this is what they are looking at in any case. Ann Phoenix's research⁵ shows very well how many young mothers resent being seen as failures or as fools, and see their situation as chosen and desirable, or at least as no worse (and in some ways better) than many other women's. Despite this, however, it feels problematic to stand up and argue for a woman's right to be a single mother. Even if you are one of the minority of women with enough earning power to support yourself and a child or children at a reasonable standard of living, the whole way society is organised makes daily life incredibly difficult, and there seems little point in denying it.

Then there is the men question. We *might* want to join Wages for Housework in arguing that women are better off depending on the state than on individual men (and anyway many men haven't any money) but actually we did start out thinking there was injustice in the way in which women are held so much more responsible for their children than men are. Most heterosexual women certainly feel that men should fulfil their responsibilities to their children. However there is a very long distance between the ideal of fully shared responsibility for care and support of children and the Child Support Act's attempt to enforce the deal where men have to pay and women have to be dependent on them.

We know that some women do set out to raise children on their own. (I do keep wondering how much effect on the figures all the invisible lesbian mothers are having). But we also know that very many women do not choose it. They are obliged to occupy the status politely termed 'lone parent' because a man they planned to raise children with ran out on them. Some women become pregnant against their will and some women keep the child against their will.

Perhaps one of the key issues is that of course in the public debate lone parenthood is compared constantly with your normal happy two parent family, where everything is fine. While much of the time we must settle for an acceptance of 'a variety of family forms' as a target, actually it is central to feminism to make visible the oppression of women within the 'normal family'. It is interesting that in relation to housing and child support, Government statements make some recognition of the need to protect women from domestic violence. This represents a major achievement for feminist campaigners. However the downside is that you have a position where being beaten seems to be seen as the only acceptable reason

for not wanting contact with your ex, or for leaving him and needing housing. Short of violence, women who want to keep their children are essentially to be offered no state support to give them the freedom that men already have to leave an unhappy marriage. Women's rights within the 'normal family' are not on the agenda.

Choice and autonomy

It is a bit like the argument about abortion, only different. The issues for women come down to choice and autonomy. So interesting that these terms would also raise a cheer at the Tory Party conference.

Tory philosophy draws on several traditions. The free-enterprise, get-on-your-bike, every-man-for-himself line of thinking tends to think women should be freed up as workers to sell their labour in the marketplace. It is a pragmatic approach which emphasises the rights of individuals, and can conflict with the backward-looking moralising of other elements.

References

1. Karen Clarke, Gary Craig, Caroline Glendinning with Mel Thompson, *Children Come First? The Child Support Act and Lone Parent Families*, (Barnardos, Children's Society, NCH, NSPCC, Save the Children), 1993.
 2. *The Child Support Act - Your Rights and How to Defend Them*, available from King's Cross Women's Centre, PO Box 287, London NW6, at £2 for benefit claimants.
 3. Institute of Housing, *One Parent Families - are they jumping the housing queue?* 6 October 1993.
 4. *Access to Local Authority and Housing Association Tenancies*, consultation paper. Comments should be sent to Alan Edwards, Room N13/02a, Department of the Environment, 2 Marsham Street, London SW1P 3EB. The formal consultation period finishes on 18 March 1994, but later communications may still have some impact.
 5. Ann Phoenix, *Young Mothers?* (Polity Press, 1991).
- See also:
Louie Burghes, *Lone parenthood and family disruption: the outcomes for children*, (Family Policy Studies Centre, 1994).

Children Act and Child support Act Monitoring

Rights of Women has established a project, the object of which is to monitor the workings of the Children Act and Child Support agency. Of particular concern to us is the effect of the Children Act in situations where there has been a breakdown in the relationship and domestic violence has been an issue.

Family Law has a way of affecting people of all classes more or less equally, so that much though they might like to, they can't, for instance, make divorce more difficult for the unemployed without making it more difficult for barristers and newspaper magnates and MPs. Let us hope that the mess they have got into with 'Back to Basics' will give them a fright.

The other point to make is that women will resist. Women always have, and I do believe that some of the basic pro-woman thinking of feminism has filtered into the general population, so that it will be impossible for the Right to persuade women that their own judgements about how they should live are irrelevant.

The most frightening achievement of this government attack on lone parents is its success in dividing people against each other. Feminists need to think out the issues, and act. You don't have to know all the answers to know a serious threat to women when you see one. □

Our intention is to observe and record how and to what extent applications under section 8 of the Act are being used by violent male partners who have been denied contact with their children by the mother due to their behaviour.

At present we are conducting this research with women from other feminist projects, legal practitioners and researchers. We would very much like to hear from you if you are involved or aware of any case where there has been family breakdown, violence and conflict over Children Act applications and difficulties encountered over the Child support Agency. Contact Rights of Women at 52 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8RT Phone: 071 251 6575

CHALLENGING CONCEPTIONS - Planning a Family by Self-Insemination Lisa Saffron

Challenging Conceptions is about the experience of lesbian couples and single women creating their own families independently of a social father. In this authoritative and accessible account, *Lisa Saffron* documents the medical, social, political and legal realities of independent motherhood - including a step by step guide to self-insemination. Out June '94: from Cassell

Wars Against Women

What does war mean for women? Rape and sexual violence in war has always happened, but in recent years women's protests have brought it into public view. Hilary McCollum, Liz Kelly and Jill Radford unravel some of the many strands which bind together male supremacy, militarism and sexual violence within and outside of war.

Like many women, we were disturbed by last year's news coverage of the use of rape and sexual violence as a deliberate strategy of war in former Yugoslavia. While, as Susan Brownmiller noted in the 1970s, men throughout history have targeted women for rape and sexual assault in armed conflicts, this has been an under-reported aspect of war.

One of the troubling features about last year's reporting of the planned, organised and ordered use of sexual violence as a war strategy, is that it was not the subject of much feminist analysis. On the contrary, many discussions were voyeuristic and explicit and implicit distinctions were made between this and other forms of violence against women.

In this paper we suggest that a feminist understanding can be developed if we look at the connections and continuities between forms of men's violence across contexts, rather than focusing on, 'war rape' and forced pregnancy in isolation.

The connections that have not been present in most discussions to date are:

- that the forms of violence are not confined to war contexts;
- that varying forms of permission exist in other contexts;

- that men act as individuals and/or in groups organised by themselves or others;
- that sexual violence occurs in public and private locations;
- the use of violence against women as a form of male bonding, sometimes initiation into a male grouping;
- that women and children are abused in a range of institutional contexts which involve hierarchical authority relations, and uniforms;
- the presumption that men 'need' sexual outlets, whatever the circumstances, including access to prostitution and pornography;
- the gendering of objects by men which both reflects and reproduces the sexual objectification of women, for example, cars, guns, missiles;
- that women and children carry responsibility for the crimes committed against them;
- that men who are violent outside the home go back to women and children and men who are violent inside the home use violence outside it;
- the separation of women from one another through ideological distinctions between wife/whore, ally/enemy with one group being deemed in ideology (although rarely in practice) deserving of protection, the other deserving of abuse.

We look at these connections in more detail, and end with an exploration of what the concepts of war and peace mean for women.

Mapping the connections

All the forms of violence against women which occur in conventionally defined war contexts - individual and group sexual harassment/assault, rape, torture, forced pregnancy, forced prostitution and femicide also occur in 'non-war' periods. Men's violence can be ritualistic in everyday, domestic contexts involving patterned acts, words and symbols. This takes its most obvious form in what has come to be called 'ritual abuse', where many of the forms of torture and mind control used echo those recorded in military contexts. The strong emotions and actual behaviour of men, when combined with playing a role or associated with symbolic elements which are often militaristic, frees perpetrators from individual responsibility.

In the reporting of forced pregnancy in former Yugoslavia a connection seldom made is with slavery, where Black women were repeatedly raped, and forced to bear children by white male slaveowners. This permission which white men afforded themselves did not end when slavery was outlawed. Nor is conception as a result of rape, or forced pregnancy confined to these particular historical circumstances. Recent studies in the US are recording high rates of teenage pregnancies being the result of rape (one estimate put the figure as high as 40%); coerced conception is a possible consequence of rape that has not received the attention it deserves.

What conflict situations foster is action by groups of men together, where all are full participants or some watch and encourage. But these uses of women to facilitate or endorse male bonding are not confined to conflict situations. There are other situations in which sexual violence occurs in planned, organised and relatively public contexts. All forms of gang rape involve the co-operation and participation (even if only as observer) of more than one man. Peggy Reeves Sanday's research revealed the centrality of gang rape to some US male college fraternities; and both clients and pimps have been known to organise group rapes of prostituted women. Recently in

Sweden stories have begun to be told of young people's parties which conclude with a mass rape.

A case which was widely reported in the US last year connects the military, organised sexual violence and 'peace time'. It was referred to as the "Tailhook", and involved organised public sexual harassment and assault of women at a naval social function. The women present were forced to move through a double column of men who took the liberty of touching the women and saying whatever they wanted to them.

Popular convention has it that sex is private, but there are many ways and forms in which it is a public and shared experience between men. Parts of the sex industry are founded on this wish to act in the company of other men who may be strangers or colleagues/friends. Men often enact their allegiances to one another through various forms of sexual activity eg strip shows.

Gang rape is often used as a form of initiation and male bonding. Within some gangs, new gang members are expected to 'give' access to their girlfriends to all of the gang, after which she then 'belongs' to the individual male. Conflicts between gangs are often referred to as 'gang warfare' and tend to be understood as disputes about territory; it is seldom only control of public space or various forms of illegal activity which are at issue, but also access to and control of women within the territorial boundaries.

What is being enacted in each of these situations is reinforcement of the primacy of relationships between men, and the subordination of women. Men affirm one other as men through the exclusion; humiliation, objectification and degradation of women.

What needs to be explored in more depth is whether any ongoing hierarchical grouping of men, organised as men creates conditions in which coercive heterosexuality is promoted and enacted. The groupings would include sports teams, private clubs, gangs, secret societies and military organisations. Examples include prison and immigration officers' use of sexual assault and rape, and what Indian law recognises as 'custodial rape' of women in police or military custody. Exclusively, or



predominantly male institutions which have encoded hierarchies and uniforms seem to offer opportunity and permission for sexual violence.

Forced Prostitution

The presumption that men 'need' sex is another connecting theme. It is a defence of prostitution and pornography and a justification of sexual violence in all contexts. Men's 'need' not just for sex, but for access to porn and prostituted women is explicitly catered for by the military rather than being left to the 'free market' and 'individual choice'. The complicity of the military with the organised sex industry suggests a connection at a fundamental level between militarisation, violation of women and heterosexuality. The connection between the military and prostitution does not require war to be currently fought, as the last thirty years history in South East Asia shows. The most recent example reported in *International Children's Rights Monitor* involves the deployment of UN 'peace-keeping' troops in Cambodia which resulted in a "breath-taking increase in prostitution, in part involving children". One health official estimated the increase in women and girls involved in prostitution in Phnom Penh from 6,000 in 1991 to 20,000 in 1992. As in Bosnia some of the women and girls involved are poverty stricken, others have been raped by men of their own community and are 'unmarriageable'. Eva Arnvig comments that:

The tragedy of Cambodia becoming a part of this sex-market is that it comes just at a time when the country is supposedly on its way to a 'new' society after more than two decades of violence, destruction and repression... Someone might argue: But this is not war; this is peace.

Cambodian women have demanded the appointment of someone in the UN hierarchy to represent women's interests and provide redress. Redress is also being demanded currently by Taiwanese women kidnapped into sexual slavery by the Japanese military during the second world war, and by Filipina women following the withdrawal of US troops which have been based there for three decades.

Pornographic culture

Pornography is an accepted part of western military culture and has been for many decades. The collection and display of pin-ups during the second world war was seen by the

military and represented in films as a way of maintaining 'morale'. This attitude has not changed. What has changed is the availability of pornography and its forms.

Many men put pressure on their partners/wives to pose for pornographic photographs and home produced videos, supposedly as reminders and for personal use. It is likely that there is even greater pressure on women to comply with these demands from men serving in the forces who may be stationed away from home or who are on active service. Ironically this may make the distinctions made between wives and sweethearts and military men's views of prostitutes and 'enemy' women harder to maintain.

Individual use of pornography within the western military is not just accepted but virtually compulsory. In countries where there is National Service, this means that almost all men use pornography for at least part of their lives. During non-conflict times, porn is used as another means of male bonding, both through awareness of each others individual use and in group consumption.

Pornographic songs pervade western military culture, being sung not only when socialising together 'off-duty', but also during training on route marches and before and during missions. Marilyn French notes how many of these 'war' songs explicitly equate the mutilation of women with male prowess. The recreational songbook of the 77th Tactical Squadron of the US Air Force based outside Oxford includes many songs about sadistic sexual violence, particularly about intercourse with dead women. One verse from "The Ballad of Lupe" reads:

Oh Lupe, oh Lupe, dead in her tomb.
While maggots crawl out of her decomposed womb
But the smile on her face is a mute cry for more!!!
She's my Hot fuckin' Cocksuckin' Mexican Whore

Military equipment is often 'decorated' with pornographic imagery and sexualised language used to describe bombs, guns, planes, ships. This is reflected in the words of another US military song.

This is my rifle
This is my gun
One is for killing
The other for fun

The objectification and sexualising of women in songs, whilst taking its most extreme forms within the military, also occurs in other contexts, most obviously in men's sports, especially rugby, and American football.

It's an interesting irony that during non-conflict times the British state maintains that there is no connection between pornography and men's violence, yet ensures that troops going out to fight are provided with large amounts of it. Violent porn involving rape and torture was shown to British troops on their way to the Falklands war and to US air force squadrons prior to bombing missions during the Gulf War.

Whilst we know that the connections between the military and prostitution are neither confined to western nations, nor recent history, we do not know whether the use of pornography and/or the symbolic sexualising of weaponry transcend cultural boundaries and differences. Are they, for example, as common in Muslim countries, or in the Israeli army where women make up almost half of the personnel?

How women carry responsibility

The impacts, meanings and consequences of sexual violence are another area of difference and similarity. Whilst women and children are invariably made to carry responsibility for crimes committed against them by men, the forms this takes vary with context and culture. In 'non-conflict' situations a range of woman (and child) blaming notions hold us responsible for provoking or negligently contributing to male violence. In 'war' situations, where women are targeted not just in terms of their gender but as members of a national/cultural group, it is less likely that personal responsibility is either internalised by women, or presumed by others. It is the pervasiveness of woman blaming ideas that creates much of the guilt that women experience for 'being there', and which results in the repeated reliving of the event in order to work out how they could have avoided it.

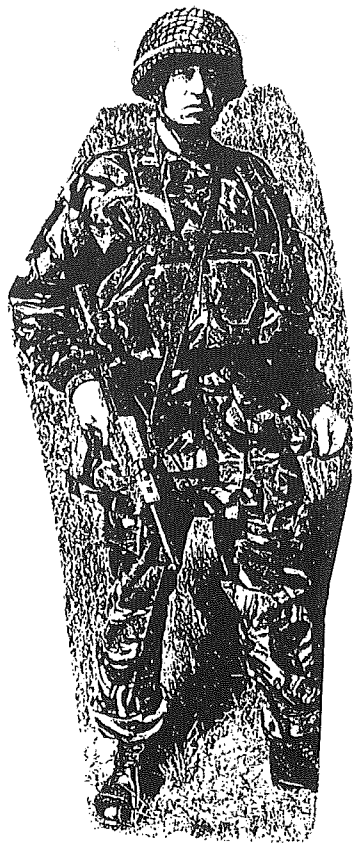
That said, however, women-blaming ideas still exist, and all the other impacts of

sexual violence we are familiar with - a deep sense of violation, shame and anxiety - do not vary with context. Women in most cultures are expected to carry these burdens privately and in silence - it is this tradition which feminism set itself to break. Nonetheless, women who speak openly about sexual war crimes risk ostracism from their community, and in 'honour based' cultures being defined as 'unmarriageable'. Recent reports from former Yugoslavia show that many of the women who have talked about their experiences of rape are now working as prostitutes. That sexual violence carries a stigma for women, both in terms of how they see themselves, and how others see and treat them, is another commonality.

The home front

Men returning from conflicts - or in situations of civil strife - do not leave the frontline behind them. Military men who have been trained to be 'lean, mean killing machines' return to their supposed peaceful homes. Evidence from women in Croatia echoes experience of women in Northern Ireland, that during armed conflict domestic violence involves many more incidents with weapons; the battlefield and home are not as separate as ideology suggests. Nor are these shifts limited to those living in the 'combat zone' - Serbian and Croatian women have coined the term the "post TV news syndrome" to describe men who begin being violent to their partners after watching news coverage of the war.

In both 'conflict' and 'non-conflict' times, women are divided from each other and labelled as 'our women' and 'enemy women', 'respectable' or 'unrespectable' with different rules associated with each group. The combination of racism and/or intense nationalism and defining groups of women as 'the enemy' enables even greater levels of permission for men to be violent. Safety and danger for different groups of women shift and change, for example, women living outside the conflict zones may experience more safety from intimate violence and possibly stranger violence if a high proportion of the male population are 'called up' during conflict times, although relatively little is known about their experiences when men return. This raises questions about which women are relatively more and less safe, in which places and at what times.



What difference does war make?

Having looked at the connections between sexual violence across the contexts of 'war' and 'not war' we nonetheless need to pay attention to the difference which ongoing armed conflict makes.

These include:

- a shift from some level of protection to toleration through to condoning and even outright ordering of violence against women and children;
- an increased frequency of both opportunist and planned assaults in specific areas within or close to the conflict zone;
- a movement from individual self-organised to institutionally structured access to the sex industry;
- a heightened intensity of sexual violence with more of it occurring in public settings and therefore known about within communities; these assaults may be preceded or followed by murder;
- a greater level of actions by groups of men.

The numbers of individual and gang rapes and incidents of femicide which occur during periods of armed conflicts suggest the creation of an 'open season' particularly but not exclusively on 'enemy' women and girls. We suspect that the combination of permission, opportunity and male bonding generated by war provides individual men with a licence to extend their range of violation of women and children.



Even where sexual violence is not explicitly ordered as a military tactic, a tacit permission exists, which is why rape and forced prostitution have never been properly codified, let alone prosecuted, as a war crime. In saying this, however, we are fully aware that having forms of sexual violence codified as crimes does not ensure that they are responded to as such. Patriarchal law frequently trivialises sexual violence, fails to offer protection or effectively prosecute or punish it. But at least there is a base from which to campaign.

The influence of war on sexual violence extends beyond the conflict zones, not only in respect of military men returning home, but whilst the war is being fought. For example, workers in Canadian refuges reported that during the Gulf War women told of their husbands dressing in army uniforms before beating them, frequently after watching TV war coverage. The destabilising effects of wars often result in the breakdown of structures of law and order, thus the minimal policing and protection afforded to women and children consequently recedes, lifting some of the limited controls on all men's behaviour.

When is a war a war

A key question is what the conditions of war and peace are. The 'Vietnam War', for example, was fought for two decades yet was never formally declared as a war. None of the violent colonisation which has frequently involved the genocide of indigenous people has been defined as war, nor has resistance to it, at the time or subsequently. Colonisation leaves a legacy of institutionalised violence, which is gendered. The forms and levels of individual male violence within cultures appear to change as a consequence for example, an Aboriginal woman is thirty-three times more likely to be murdered than a white Australian woman.

Dominant men have the power to define what is and is not to be called war. Even by their limited definition there have been 207 wars in the twentieth century in which 78 million people have died. Many of these have been fought in the period since 1945, considered in the west as 'peace time'.

Most feminists who have addressed international politics have urged us to not

focus only on war and militarism but also on the processes of militarisation, arguing that it is militaristic culture which legitimises violence as the way of resolving conflicts, of establishing and maintaining power hierarchies within and between states, and a particular version of heterosexual masculinity. This avoids glib distinctions between wartime and peacetime, since the power of the military within politics and economics exists whether 'war' is being fought or not, and its influence on the re-creation of gender relations continues. It is women who continue to bear many of the costs of national/civil wars - 70 - 80% of the world's refugees are women and children.

A number of questions are raised about the conditions of war and peace specifically for women; what is a feminist definition of war and does what feminists used to refer to as 'the sex war' merely expand in location, forms and intensity, in periods of international/civil armed conflict? As more and more is uncovered about the extent and nature of male violence against women, the notion of an ongoing sex war is again clearly relevant. One way we have tried to make sense of this is to expand the concept of the continuum of sexual violence to include situations of social disorder and conventionally defined war.



Militarism always costs women

War is not easy to define - when did it start, when did it end, did anyone win and how can we tell? When asked from the position of women these questions become even more complex. Some western historians have argued that periods of national and international conflict are times when women 'gain', sometimes temporary and sometimes permanent, rights, for example, the vote in Britain after World War One, or more general access to a wider variety of paid employment, and the argument that warfare is followed by welfare which provides benefits and social security for women and children. We have two problems with this version of history. First, the focus is on the women of the victorious nation/s with minimal reference made to the consequences of the 'war' and the 'peace' for women of the defeated nation/s. Second, whether this notion of women 'gaining' from success in war is in fact an ideological fiction which parallels the fictions created in war to recruit women into supporting it. The ending of some military conflicts between and within nations have required women to relinquish certain freedoms and/or involved the forcible removal of things which had previously been rights - to employment, abortion, childcare.

Bibliography and further reading

Eva Arnvig 'Child prostitution in Cambodia: Did the UN look away?' (*International Children's Rights Monitor*; 10:3, 1993)

Susan Brownmiller *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (Simon & Schuster, 1975)

Cynthia Enloe, 'Feminist thinking about war, militarism and peace' in *Analysing Gender: A Handbook of Social Science Research* (1987, Sage)

Marilyn French *The War Against Women* (Hamish Hamilton, 1992)

Maggie Helwig, 'We know what war is' (*Peace News*, February 1993)

Robyn Morgan *The Demon Lover: On the Sexuality of Terrorism* (Methuen, 1989)

Saundra Pollock Sturdevat and Brenda Stoltzfus *Let the Good Times Roll: Prostitution and the US Military in Asia* (The New Press, 1992)

Papers from the Women Overcoming Violence Conference, Bangkok, 1992.

Women are conscripted into a 're-building the nation' agenda in which their needs are subordinated to those of repairing the damage to men and 'the society'; one central, but seldom recognised, element of this is that the violations women experience during the conflict are silenced and men can be silent about the violations they have committed.

Any 'peace' involves a re-working of power relations not just between nations or parts of nations but between men and women. One element of this must be the restoration of some sanctions and controls on men's violence.

Maggie Helwig reporting in *Peace News* on an international conference Women overcoming Violence held in 1992 in Bangkok, echoes our concerns in the title of her piece "We know what war is":

Women stand in a relationship to violence and power which is probably unique among oppressed groups. Our primary oppressors are, almost invariably, found among our immediate family or our lovers. Terror for women is quiet, pervasive, ordinary; terror happens at home. We know what war is about because

war is part of any woman's daily experience. Daughters or sisters or wives, we know about 'loving your enemy' in a particularly direct and painful way.

In making connections between violence in 'war' and 'peace' time Maggie Helwig has pointed out that without some form of personal safety it is far harder for women to join movements for economic and political rights.

There is a long feminist tradition of questioning both the attribution of 'peace' to the home/household where male tyranny presides and of anti-militarism. Cynthia Enloe proposes a feminist definition of peace as "women's achievement of control over their lives", and that this peace is fragile and tentative. For it to be otherwise requires that we find ways in which this can be nurtured and maintained. One key element in this has to be resisting the separations of women through patriarchal constructions of wife/whore, ally/enemy, deserving/undeserving. It is this willingness which links feminists networking across the world and accounts for us being defined as 'dangerous women'. □

A Project Looking for a Name

This project has been initiated by some women's groups and individual women in Britain involved in the movement against militarism and war. We have felt the need for some kind of practical pro-active network of women's groups in Europe to stop aggression and war before it happens.

We are beginning by approaching as wide a network of women and women's groups in European countries as possible (1) to identify actual resources, skills and experience among women for non-violent direct action,

imaginative protest, mediation and conflict transformation, (2) to identify a cluster of women's groups in as many countries of Europe as possible who actively wish to develop, share and use such resources in dangerous times and places.

Could we create a strong fabric of autonomous women's groups, capable of making an 'early response' to imminent threat of aggression or war, responding to each others' calls for help? Are there not enough of us to become an irresistible constituency to

erode the appeal of war-mongers and to support non militaristic, non patriarchal politicians?

Recent European history has shown us how racism, ethnic intolerance, religious fundamentalism and nationalism can divide even feminist groups. When danger of aggression and war is imminent many women are aware of what is happening but often feel immobilized. The network we propose would help to make possible a *collective* response by women Europe-wide, in solidarity with each other across ethnic and national boundaries, confronting injustices and looking for creative solutions to oppression and conflict. It would include both direct responses to danger and working through politicians and media. We hope to find funding from the rich countries to enable women of all European countries' to travel, talk to each other face to face, and help in each others' work for peace.

We have done an initial mailing along these lines to 250 addresses in Europe and have had a positive response from ten percent. A few women asked: 'Why Europe?' We have two reasons for limiting the network to Europe. Today women in many European countries are warning of growing and changing dangers to tolerance, cooperation and peace. The consequences of European conflict and injustice have never been confined to Europe. We therefore have a *special* responsibility to act in our own region. It would also be wrong to claim to be worldwide if we don't have the knowledge and resources to make it a reality. We would of course want to co-operate with existing and future networks based elsewhere in the world.

● CAN YOU offer (or do you know of groups that can offer) such resources as: experience in imaginative and effective

protest; skills in non-violent direct action; training in mediation and conflict transformation; research and monitoring; legal and advocacy skills; media-work and lobbying?

● ARE YOU a group, or can you tell us of groups, that would want to be part of the network we propose that would share and deploy these resources across Europe from one country to another?

● COULD YOU undertake translation? What languages can you offer to translate from/to? Can you translate this leaflet into another language?

● WILL YOU please photocopy this leaflet and distribute it through other appropriate women's mailing lists?

● CAN YOU SUGGEST A NAME? The project urgently needs a name! The name needs to be meaningful in all countries, something that doesn't need translating. The ideal would be a woman's name. Can you suggest a woman we might commemorate?

● DO YOU have any other comments or suggestions about the relevance and feasibility of this project?

...PLEASE WRITE TO US...

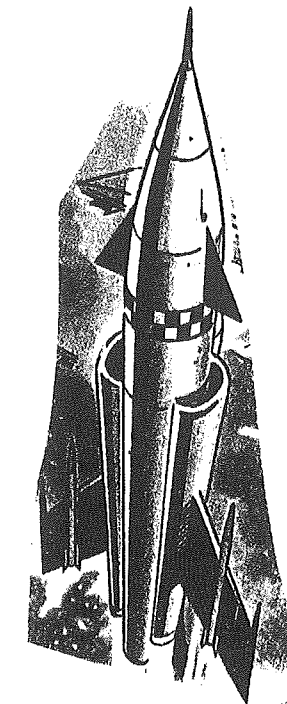
FOR OUR PART:

- (1) We will collate the information you send us, build up a data base and make mailings to everyone who wants to be involved.
- (2) We will try to identify occasions in the near future at which some of us might meet. (We already know of some women's conferences, summer schools and camps being held in centrally-placed countries eg. Berlin, Budapest.)
- (3) And begin the search for funding.

We want to emphasize that we aren't proposing just another network or information newsletter. The idea is for a practical development and sharing of resources. The long-term aim is to prevent the movements that threaten to divide Europe from dividing women - and to empower each other in undermining the will for war in Europe.

Cynthia Cockburn, Di McDonald, Margot Miller, Joan Scanlon. January 23 1994.

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SELLING OUT:

'The Lesbian Sexual Revolution'

What is heretical about lesbian feminism? Rachel Wingfield reviews Sheila Jeffreys' book, 'The Lesbian Heresy'

Last winter Sheila Jeffreys came to London to give a talk about *The Lesbian Heresy*, having just finished writing it. She discussed current developments in the lesbian community and lesbian politics in the light of the backlash against feminism and radical feminism in particular. At the time, I was trying to recover from being attacked on my way home at night a couple of months earlier - an experience which had done a lot to erode my self-confidence and belief in myself. I remember the evening as the beginning of me believing that I could fight back again, and as the first time since the attack that I had felt at all strong.

I've wondered, looking back on it, why the evening was so powerful for me. Reading *The Lesbian Heresy* for this review reminded me. Jeffreys addresses both the personal and political situations in which lesbian feminists currently find themselves, with the kind of clarity, humour and optimism it is almost impossible to find elsewhere in these times of retrenchment. Whilst the ferocity of the backlash in all its forms has eaten its way even into parts of our own community, and has seen some radical/lesbian feminists rushing to desert what they fear may be a sinking ship for

fear of being labelled 'essentialist', 'old fashioned', 'purist' or - even worse - 'anti-sex', Jeffreys has been able to stand back from the melee and present us with a clear and consistent analysis of exactly where the backlash attacks are coming from and why.

Jeffreys declares her project in writing *The Lesbian Heresy* to be 'to help myself and other lesbian feminists understand the backlash against (our) politics which has taken place in the 1980s and nineties'. She reminds us that although the backlash is mostly understood as coming from patriarchal influences outside the WLM, 'It needs to be acknowledged that as forces outside the feminist movement increase their pressures, there will be a breaking of ranks within the movement itself.' Such breaking of ranks in the 1980s included teachers of women's studies defending pornography in their classes. *The Lesbian Heresy* gives us the tools to reject the lies of the backlash, the lies of the 'New Realists' amongst both feminists and socialists and to convince us once more that we haven't lost yet, and there is still a world to be won.

In the *Lesbian Heresy* Jeffreys takes up where *Anti-Climax* left off in analysing the so-

called 'sexual revolution' as a realignment in the forces of patriarchy rather than as 'liberation' for women. Jeffreys' argument is that following the sexual revolution in the 1960s, and its reflection in the gay male community, the 1980s and 90s have seen a backlash against feminism within the lesbian community itself in the guise of a lesbian 'sexual revolution'. Previously, she argues, the influence of second wave feminism had been the dominant political force in the lesbian community. Lesbianism was not seen within the community as simply a minority sexual practice, but as a political act - a commitment to women, to building an ethical community, to resisting and fighting the heteropatriarchy. Any woman could be a lesbian. What Jeffreys calls 'the lesbian sexual revolution,' however, has undermined the fusion between lesbianism and feminism. By the 1980s, lesbian feminists who had worked hard to build a separate lesbian culture, now found themselves alienated and unpopular in a community they had once regarded as home - 'attacked as anti-sex, politically correct, essentialist, idealist'. Such developments have made lesbian feminist philosophy heretical not only to the heteropatriarchy, but amongst many lesbians too.

A backlash within

In taking apart the different strands of the backlash within lesbian culture, and demonstrating the ways in which they interlink, Jeffreys reveals how and why this attack on lesbian feminism has taken place. Jeffreys looks at the influence of the new lesbian sex industry, and its relationship to violence against women as one of these strands, she also looks at the emergence of lesbian sex therapy; the theoretical back-up from post modernism and post-structuralism within the academic world; the influence of gay male culture; and the romanticising of lesbian 'outlaw' status which goes on within our own community.

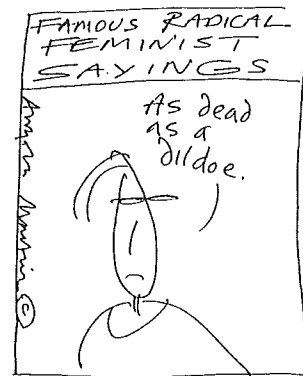
Jeffreys argues that the lesbian sexual revolution has taken hold in a political climate which has seen a fierce move to the right in the western world in the last 15 years, the balance of forces having shifted firmly against the social and political gains made by women, the black community and the working class

during the 1970s and early 80s. It is easy to see why Jeffreys sees the backdrop as significant: Britain specifically saw the rise of Thatcherite politics during the 1980s, a frightening blend of free market liberalism and social individualism which was summed up in Thatcher's statement that 'there is no such thing as society.' In the Thatcherite view of the world, everyone is, or should be, out for themselves. Concern for others, a belief in sharing resources, and - fundamentally - a belief that we collectively have responsibility for one another are seen as misguided weaknesses.

Dominant social ideologies impact on all of us; in a society in which patriarchal values are aggressively reasserting themselves it is not surprising that aspects of this are taken up by subcultures. One of Thatcherism's legacies was its emphasis on equal opps consumerism, which has benefited the sex industry particularly in terms of its public relations. Sexuality has become a range of options in a supermarket, where individuals can 'choose' at will whatever option they prefer. Constraints on 'choice' have never been understood by the right, which continues to present the world as full of equals who can 'choose' whether or not to send their kids to public school, have private health care, go out to work, leave violent relationships, be raped, live on the streets and so on.



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In this context of the backlash against feminism and the rise of right wing politics, Jeffreys argues that in the 1980s lesbianism emerged again as a form of 'sexual difference', rather than as feminist practice. Backed up by lesbians previously associated with a feminist analysis of relationships between women, such as historian Lillian Faderman, this concept of lesbians as one of a number of 'categories' of sexual deviants - along with gay men, transvestites, fetishists and paedophiles - has again become prominent. This mirrors the process, described by Jeffreys in *Anticlimax*, by which these categories were originally constructed by sexologists at the beginning of the century as part of the backlash against the first wave of feminism. At that time, some lesbians chose to adopt the 'sexual invert' label as a pragmatic move in the absence of any alternatives: pleas for tolerance because 'they can't help themselves' seemed to some a better option than intolerance on the grounds of wickedness. But why, asks Jeffreys, should any lesbian now seek to adopt the medical model? *The Lesbian Heresy* sets out to answer this by looking at why some women may not find the feminist model in their interests.

The sexual revolution of the 1960s took the form of the growth of a massive sex industry - pornography, sex toys and sex therapy all became big business. In the 1980s we saw the growth of a sex industry - or the expansion of the old sex industry - specifically for lesbians. As Jeffreys explains, previously:

...lesbian sex was innovative, imaginative, self taught, did not cost money or provide any sex industrialists with an income... In order for a lesbian sex industry to be profitable it was necessary to transform lesbian sexuality so that it would take the objectifying form necessary to construct lesbian sex consumers, consumers not just of mechanical products but of other women in pornography and prostitution.

The result of this, argues Jeffreys, has been the:

partial incorporation of lesbians into the political structures of control of the heteropatriarchy.

Whilst left alone, lesbian sexuality was free to provide an alternative vision to the heterosexual model of dominance and submission, penetration and objectification. The lesbian sexual revolution has brought it into line.

Feminist free culture

In a climate in which feminists are fiercely under attack, the new 'feminist-free' lesbian and gay culture is welcoming the growth of the sex industry for lesbians. Strippers and prostitutes for lesbians are seen as 'fun' - as equal opportunities with straight men. Issues about how the material circumstances of women's lives lead some women to be used as prostitutes and others to become their consumers are not being addressed even by women calling themselves socialists and feminists. Opposition is viewed as being unfashionably 'politically correct' and judgmental. In order to justify this position, we are seeing the re-emergence of the public/private split, and a huge resistance to accepting the old feminist insight 'the personal is political'. Sex, it seems, should be exempted from any political analysis but a liberal one: anything goes. And whilst many of the lesbians claiming this were once prepared to put *men's* sexual behaviour through rigorous political analysis, there seems to be a great deal of outrage when it is suggested that perhaps we as lesbians should examine our own.

One of the dangers of this position, of course, is that it *can't* work one way. Try as they might - and they have tried - the new lesbian sexual liberals are finding it impossible to maintain a position which justifies their own eroticisation of child sexual abuse, for example, whilst accepting a feminist analysis of the seriousness of the issue and its effects on women. So, for example, pro-porn and SM writer Sue O'Sullivan can be found in conversation in *Feminist Review* 'rethinking' the feminist analysis of child sexual abuse: there has been, she tells us:

a misunderstanding of how fantasy can work in the construction of present reality, and, as importantly, in the reconstruction of the past. It has become a feminist heresy to suggest that there may be an element of fantasy that is being claimed as a physical reality, particularly in recollections of child sexual abuse.

Her partner in conversation goes on to tell us that she thinks the effects of child sexual abuse are perhaps taken too seriously by feminists:

A child may be subjected to one instance of abuse but may experience twenty-five

occasions when she can't have her room as she wants it - and that form of disciplinary control is just as much a part of what forms a child's sexuality as are more obviously 'sexual' events.

This is part of a more general move amongst some lesbian and feminist writers to undermine a radical feminist analysis of male violence and sexuality. The recent book *Bad Girls and Dirty Pictures* for example, edited by two members of the pro-porn group Feminists Against Censorship, claims that the extent of sexual violence - and child sexual abuse in particular - has been exaggerated by feminists and that ritual abuse for example does not exist at all. In order to eroticise sexual violence, it seems, it is necessary to tell yourself it does not exist (much) in the real world. However, as Jeffreys describes, whilst those lesbians are minimising the reality of sexual violence, many of those lesbians involved in writing lesbian pornography, working in strip clubs, and getting involved in SM tell us that they are survivors of child sexual abuse or rape. Hence O'Sullivan has also been known to put forward the reverse argument - that SM 'helps' women who are survivors of sexual abuse to 'work through' the effects of their abuse.

Jeffreys argues that the pornography currently being written by lesbians needs to be understood in terms of the context of this real oppression and sexual abuse which has been experienced by many of the women involved in producing it. As other lesbian feminists have noted, the historical collision of women beginning to speak out in the lesbian feminist movement about childhood sexual abuse, and the growth of SM in our community is no accident. SM has been able to take hold precisely because many women value themselves very little, or even hate themselves, and many continue to believe the lies of their abuser - that this is what they deserve, that they are there to service others sexually whatever the cost to themselves. Jeffreys argues that SM needs to be understood in this context, and with an awareness also of the rates of self-mutilation and suicide in the lesbian community and amongst women who have been sexually abused. Jeffreys quotes a story from the lesbian porn magazine *On Our Backs* to illustrate this. The story is about a sadist forcing a woman to prepare to die by being set

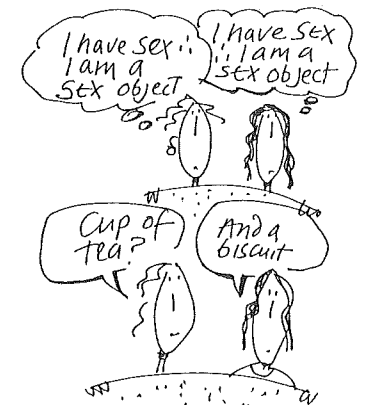
on fire. The sadist pours petrol over the woman's body and the chair she is tied to, and seeks to get the woman to ignite a lighter in her hand; she succeeds in achieving this:

You hesitate again. The gasoline is dripping off the hand holding the lighter. You're shaking with fear, and barely breathing. When you do breathe, you can almost taste the gasoline in the air. "Give it up," I whisper. "Give it to me. Burn for me". Your thumb moves, but not enough to spark the flint. Then you go over. You replace your thumb with the determination on the top of the wheel, and firmly give it the spin needed to light it. The tiny flame grows into a bright orange burst, then races up your arm and towards your face. You scream and scream, and a huge stream of piss sprays the floor beneath the chair.

The writer explains in an afterword that only the woman's head was soaked in petrol, and the rest in water, so the risk was not as great as the woman thought at the time. As Jeffreys writes:

It has to be remembered when proponents of sadomasochism justify their practice with the idea of consent that there are lesbians who are prepared to die as well as submit themselves to brutal mutilation. In a male supremacist culture which hates women and in which women are routinely violently abused, women can lose the capacity to protect their bodies and their lives. They can decide that they are not worth protecting.

Jeffreys then goes on to look at some of the theoretical justifications which are currently being employed to back up the lesbian sexual revolution. One of these justifications has been the sexology propounded by the new profession of lesbian sex therapists, who tell us that lesbians are 'not good enough at sex'. Apparently, lesbians are 'more boring' than gay men, or even straight couples - too 'politically correct' in our sexual practice. Borrowing theory and practice from the world of heterosexual sex therapy, lesbian sex therapists are now employed in telling women that they are not (hetero) sexually liberal enough. Just as sex therapists got heterosexual women to use plastic vaginal dilators in order to make themselves more easily fucked, lesbian sex therapists are now getting lesbians to use the dilators in order to enable themselves to be penetrated with bigger dildoes. No questions are asked about why dildoes are seen as necessary or desirable; the male model of sex is assumed to be the



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acceptable one. Sex therapist Margaret Nicholls, for example bemoans the fact that often in lesbian sex 'two women lie side by side' and 'touch each other gently and sweetly all over their bodies for several hours.'

Another sexual problem lesbians are told we have is (bizarrely) that the intimacy of lesbian relationships prevents us from having good sex, and often enough. 'Good sex' seems to be whatever involves role-playing, SM, and sex toys. It would help, Margaret Nicholls suggests, if we learned to behave a little more like men. It seems that, unlike men, lesbians are unlikely to pressure a reluctant partner to have sex. However, Nicholls tells us, 'contrary to our feminist beliefs, perhaps a little pressure is good for a relationship'.

Jeffreys claims that underlying the views of writers such as Nicholls is the belief that lesbians need to take a lead from gay men. Gay men, it seems, got it right in getting involved in the sex industry much earlier than we did; they are more 'radical' in terms of numbers of sexual partners and being sexually 'adventurous'. In her chapter 'A Paler Version of the Male' Jeffreys illustrates the ways in which gay male culture has influenced lesbian culture in recent years, particularly as a result of closer links between the two communities in terms of working around AIDS and single issues such as Clause 28. The admiration for gay men amongst lesbians has even gone to the extent that in the States lesbian writers such as Gayle Rubin are arguing that lesbians must provide a safe place for lesbians who are going through female to male sex change operations in order to become gay men.

A gay plot?

This admiration for gay male culture has also become evident in Lesbian and Gay Studies departments, where lesbian academics are devoting their energies to writing about and teaching gay male culture almost to the exclusion of lesbian culture and promoting it as the way forward for lesbians. This is helped by the fact that many of the gurus of the most fashionable intellectual school at the moment - post structuralism - are gay men. Jeffreys' discussion of post-structuralism is a particularly important one: she demonstrates the way in which high theory has been employed to provide a framework for the impressive

mental and verbal gymnastics necessary to convince anyone that SM and porn are 'feminist' or that butch/femme has nothing to do with imitating heterosexuality. Post-structuralism has had a particular role in the backlash, made all the more powerful by virtue of the fact that it is not always recognised when it crops up. Because it is highly esoteric and full of complicated jargon it is not always easy to know where an idea is coming from if you haven't had access to these ideas before. For example the idea that wearing DMs with miniskirts is a political act draws on post-structuralist and post-modernist thinking that playing around with symbols which 'signify' gender is a way of undermining male power. Jeffreys illustrates how these ideas have been used to argue that lesbians wearing traditionally feminine clothes can be radical if it is attempting to 'parody' gender roles. Jeffreys quite rightly asks how anyone could tell whether one particular woman was parodying femininity or whether another one was adopting it.

Post-structuralism has played a major part in the backlash, as it has contributed to the widespread rubbishing of radical feminism in academia (including in women's studies departments), but has also led to a situation whereby any materialist analysis is viewed with suspicion. It has become extremely unfashionable for anyone to claim that material oppression, injustice and inequality exist in the world as structures, without being accused of essentialism, reactionary and all manner of harsh words. Those remaining feminists in these departments are under even more pressure to hunker down in order to survive.

In other words, what has happened in recent years is a process by which some excellent radical feminist theorists and academics have been drawn into post-structuralism to varying degrees and into reneging on their previous feminist positions to one extent or another.

I don't think this has always been a conscious process. Post-structuralism is partly so effective because it offers what appears to be a more 'sophisticated' analysis, a more 'complex' perspective, whilst in reality being a dressed up version of liberalism adding

nothing but further uncertainty to women who have already found it hard to persuade themselves to come out and take a stand when it matters. Post-structuralism offers a seductive way of not having to do that.

Back to feminist basics

All of which brings Jeffreys back to her original insight: the fact that what we once could assume to be shared ideals and values within lesbian feminism have now been largely eroded by the backlash both in and outside of our community. But what were these values? Jeffreys summarises them as :

those of woman-loving, the need to eliminate abusive hierarchies of power whether based on sex, race or class, about the need to change the world dramatically, and not just in details, to realise the feminist vision.

Non-feminist versions of this history talk of the inevitable failure of lesbian feminist idealism, political correctness and dogmatism. As with the new realists on the left, there is little mention of the forces of reaction ranged against what Julia Penelope describes as the 'first ever' attempt to build a lesbian feminist community.

Jeffreys does not accept that failure is inevitable. Unlike many feminists theorists, she never leaves readers in despair at the situations she so clearly and consistently describes. She firmly believes that change is possible. She reminds us that backlash is inevitable and predictable - wherever it is coming from. She insists that we do not have to accept the jaded, demoralised views of those lesbians who believe that there is no alternative to the dominance/submission model of sexuality, so we should either give up on sex or 'lie back and enjoy it'. She acknowledges the fact that in a patriarchal society it may be impossible for any of us to know what sexuality constructed in a context of equality may be like: however, she also states that:

...the struggle to transform sexuality... by emphasising the areas of our sexual experience we feel comfortable with and limiting those which seem in conflict with our vision of a lesbian sexual future is worthwhile. A lesbian sexual future which is in concert with our project of changing the world is one in which our sexual lives are incorporated into our love and respect for ourselves and other women.

The way forward for Jeffreys lies in the rebuilding of a separate lesbian feminist community - a community which will provide an ethical and supportive base from which to fight the heteropatriarchy. Central to this is the question of lesbian friendship. Jeffreys feels that during the backlash in the 1980s many lesbians retreated into their homes and careers (the 1980s also saw, she argues, the growth of a lesbian bourgeoisie) and that the idea of community now needs to be rethought.

Clearly, the influence of the backlash does not stop at the door of the lesbian radical feminist community, and there is no doubt that we too in recent years have privatised our relationships and gone in on ourselves. How do we create an ethical lesbian feminist community, one in which we take collective responsibility for one another's well-being, one in which we subject our own relationships to the rigorous political analysis which is so integral to our politics - which we surely, as radical feminists are bound to attempt, if not to totally achieve? Discussing the ethics of lesbian feminist relationships within our community can even now be like entering a minefield - although the discussion on relationships in T & S - 'Getting Personal' - did again open up some of the questions of how we treat our friends and lovers which have been quite absent publicly from the radical feminist community of late. There is still a great deal of reluctance on the part of most of us in the lesbian feminist community to face up to harmful, manipulative or controlling behaviour when it is evident in relationships between women in our networks, and to challenge women on that behaviour. There are many senses in which the depoliticising of lesbianism has hit our community too, and on our capacities to be self critical.

The Lesbian Heresy reminds us not to forget who we are and where we came from, and that we musn't leave behind the ideals we started with because the world and life got and still is tough on us, and that we must at least try and live according to what we believe in. Jeffreys' writing never allows us to compromise or make excuses, and she knows that we do have it in us to go on fighting. □

Sheila Jeffreys *The Lesbian Heresy* The Women's Press 1994



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A LESBIAN HERETIC

Sheila Jeffreys has been on a British tour promoting her new book. Patricia Duncker caught up with her in Liverpool.

Patricia Duncker: I want to ask you about the benefits that come from fighting so bitterly about sexuality now. I suppose that what I found so heartening about 'The Lesbian Heresy' was your insistence on a political analysis of sexuality rather than shopping-list sexuality, where you choose what you like and anything goes.

Sheila Jeffreys: Somebody at the talk which I gave last night in Manchester actually asked the question, wasn't it terribly divisive of me to keep talking about what was feminist and what wasn't feminist? And I responded to her by pointing out that socialists have always attacked feminists by accusing us of being divisive of class and so those who have wanted to attack feminism have always attacked it as divisive, but also it is absolutely crucial to talk about what is feminism and what isn't, otherwise we have absolutely no feminism at all. Feminism is not simple exclusivity; but it is not just including everybody in great long shopping lists. I was astonished when I first went to Australia and there was a lesbian conference taking place in Sydney and there was a great long list of the sort of dykes they wanted to have there including SM dykes. And last on the list —

last on the list — were lesbian feminists. So that the lesbian feminists were just a variety of dyke, along with SM dykes and everybody else. So that your strange political perversion of having these ideas is just a variety of lesbianism, like other sexual deviations within lesbianism. Whereas once upon a time lesbian feminists would have been organising these conferences so that there would have been a feminist perspective to what was going on. Now we simply have shopping lists and lesbian feminists are very lucky to be included in the list and they certainly mustn't make a fuss. And if they make a fuss they're being divisive and they're spoiling the harmony of all the other varieties who are getting together.

PD: So we're being seen as very intolerant and exclusive — as the sexual police. Any comments on that?

SJ: (laughs) Well, obviously I think feminism and lesbian feminism starts from the idea that the personal is political. It is the very basis of our politics. We had to explain why women were second class citizens and subordinate. Why we were not doing terribly well in business, trade unions, in industry — having wonderful freedom and independence, and we sought to explain that by looking at the

politics of personal life. How we were being trained to look, sit, stand. What was happening in the bedroom and the kitchen. All of those areas of personal life from which politics had been removed by the boys who hadn't recognised that personal life was in any way political. It was fundamental to lesbian feminism also to recognise that personal life was political. We were about trying to live the revolution now, trying to behave in an egalitarian way in our personal relationships and as I say in *The Lesbian Heresy* we were concerned with 'lookism', with how wrong it was to fancy women, as that would make someone superior to someone else.

We were enormously serious about these politics, about non-monogamy. And it doesn't mean that lesbians agreed. Because there were huge differences about these issues. But at least we were concerned with them. And we were committed to discussing them. All of that has gone because there's been a tremendous re-privatising of the personal. In the last ten or fifteen years there's been a deliberate removal of politics from more and more areas of life. And it's not just from sexuality.

I talk a little in the book about feminists being accused of being politically correct. In the States 'politically correct' is hurled at anyone who is anti-racist or anti-sexist, and at university courses which no longer want to include only dead, white men. The accusation of political correctness is a very important tool used by the Right to hit any progressive movements for change, but the libertarians are also attacking feminism for political correctness, for having any concern with the politics of personal life... And they're all attacking the same thing, which is any kind of seriousness about social change. It's very important to tie together where those different attacks are coming from.

Making common cause

PD: You point out in the book that lesbians have common cause with all women. You say that lesbians are women too. A lot of lesbians at the moment are trying to put themselves in the category 'lesbian and gay'.

SJ: That's what I was trying to explain in the chapter about sexology and the creation of lesbian identity. Because really there are only two ways for lesbians to go. Either they can identify with women. And that seems to me to

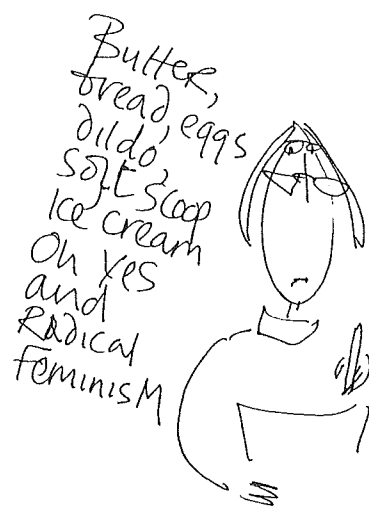
be the most progressive position, because lesbians are women and always suffer the oppressions of women, whatever other oppressions they may suffer as lesbians. There is no way that lesbians can manage to escape the institution of heterosexuality. They can escape doing the domestic labour for nothing and those fairly obvious forms of oppression. The institution of heterosexuality constructs all the relationships of dominance and submission between the sexes in the social and political world we inhabit. So lesbians



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have had to choose either to identify with the sex class of women and work to end the oppression of women, and that hasn't always been an easy thing to do as lesbians have often been left out by heterosexual feminists and have been understandably very angry, — but I think that we have absolutely no choice because the other possibility is that lesbians work in struggle with gay men and identify with gay men, which is enormously dangerous politically... Lesbians inevitably come off second best.

Gay men have the money to be an important cultural presence, they appear to be glamorous to lesbians; lesbians feel that they haven't got the cultural forms, they haven't got the camp, they haven't got the drag. Lesbians have this enormous inferiority complex in working with gay men because they are abandoning feminism. It's feminism that gives



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us pride. The pride in being women will also give us the pride in being lesbians. If feminism is abandoned then we can only be an inferior version of gay men. Or men of smaller growth as one of the sexologists called women.

PD: *I hope this hasn't busted the tape - the suggestion that lesbians are gay men of smaller growth. It's like the whole myth of the giant clitoris.*

SJ: We've supposedly got smaller growth in our culture and our history. We haven't got the exciting cultural forms of gay men. Or the exciting sex lives. And one of the things that's interesting and that is happening politically now is that it's becoming very difficult for women to organise. Economic rationalism has been extraordinarily dangerous for women. And yet gay men have been organising in remarkable strength, particularly in America, around queer politics, ACT-UP, gays in the military, — getting hundreds of thousands out on the streets in a way you cannot imagine feminism being able to do. It's because they still have the money. The pink dollar seems to be doing well. So gay men have got more and more of an important profile. And so if lesbians have not got a strong feminism to identify with what can they do? They can at least attach themselves to something that appears to be politically powerful, but to do that they have to accept all the woman-hating that is in gay male culture.



It's particularly clear in Australia - the glamour of gay male culture,— where Mardi Gras is now going to be supported by the state, because it's such a tourist attraction. It's worth hundreds and thousands of dollars... This culture of imitating gross conceptions of what is the feminine which goes on in gay culture, it's just fairly horrifying to women rather than a cause of celebration. Yet a lesbian organised it this year. That is the public face of what is supposedly lesbian and gay and yet for women it's deeply and desperately problematic. But I can see why lesbians get drawn in because it is powerful; it's getting government money

PD: *Gay men have a higher profile everywhere; both in the academy and in public life. But I can see that if you feel more and more under attack as a woman you begin to try to leave the category woman behind you and to try to invest the category lesbian with some of the glamour and loot you see outside you.*

SJ: But gay men are in positions of power because they are men. They can then come out as gay and use that position, as in academia, to build a whole discipline of sexuality, which is deeply hostile to the interests of women and feminism. Whereas women were never there in the first place, so that they're not in a position to start creating positions of influence in the media, in academia. The gay men are there. So you can see why lesbians in the media feel that they must attach themselves to these gay men's programmes...

Sex, sexuality and lesbian identity

PD: *'The Lesbian Heresy' addresses the question of the lesbian sexual revolution. May I ask about the centrality of sex and sexuality to lesbian identity?*

SJ: Feminists have always questioned the idea that women are specifically about sex. And that sex is their liberation. I can remember quite a famous marxist-feminist standing up at a conference and saying that sexual liberation was the same as women's liberation. I think that in the '60s this wave of feminism actually emerged from the realisation that they were absolutely not the same thing. But I think that within women's liberation there's always been that confusing strand which sees the creation of women's sexual pleasure, — in any form, — simply having bigger and better orgasms, as being

something to do with the liberation of women. Now it's sexologists, it's men, it's the porn industry, who are telling us that. But this is not a feminist understanding. Feminists have been saying for more than one hundred years that women are not simply sex. If women are seen as sex and that is their only value and the only way in which women can make money or have influence and status, then we have prostitution, what we have is the sex industry. We have women locked into marriage where they are only there to be used sexually. Now I think for lesbians the problem is compounded. For lesbianism was created by the sexologists as a sexual identity based upon sexual practice. Sex is seen as central to the construction of lesbian identity and therefore it's possible for lesbians to fall into the trap that is already there in women's liberation — this false message that women are sex. The sexual liberation of the '60s was actually about asserting more control over women. I'm not suggesting that there was absolutely nothing for women in it, for at least the possibility that women could have some sexual pleasure was better than nothing, but the revolution was created by men in their interests. I think that lesbians who have not had a feminist understanding of sexuality and sexual revolution, in the 1980s, again because sex has been so important to lesbian identity, just took on the message that yes, sexual liberation and lesbian liberation were the same thing.

The sexual revolution was about commercialising sex. So that it leads to a huge increase in the diversity of the sex industry based on objectification, dominance and submission and so on. I think many lesbians felt left out in the '80s. They hadn't got pornography. They hadn't got sex toys. But also some lesbians decided that this was a way to make a profit. It's so difficult to make money, to start a business. So they felt that this was a way forward, selling sex services to women... I think the clearest evidence is going to women's bookstores. The lesbian shelves are almost all erotica. That's certainly true in Melbourne. There are three shelves of erotica. There isn't anything else really. There isn't any lesbian theory... It's a diversion of lesbian energy into teaching them that all they should really be worried about are better orgasms in their bedrooms and learning different ways of doing it, rather than

challenging anything or getting politically organised. It's all an extraordinary way of making lesbians totally harmless.



Life down under

PD: *You're Senior Lecturer in Political Science at the University of Melbourne. Do you teach many young lesbians?*

SJ: Yes. I do teach a lot of young lesbians. I teach a course entitled 'The Politics of Sexual Reform Movements'. It was going to have the words lesbian and gay in the title, but the students advised me that this would then come out on their student records and it wouldn't be in their interests to have the words lesbian and gay there. But it's about lesbian and gay politics from the turn of the century onwards. I do have quite a number of young lesbians on that course.

PD: *How do they fit into the analysis that you've just given of the 1980s?*

SJ: Well, when I first got there I was quite worried about the extent to which the need for dental dams was being accepted and the amount of lipstick that was being worn, and what I saw as a very different kind of young lesbian experience. But recently I have been impressed by the number of young lesbians who have what is to me an extraordinarily recognisable form of radical feminist politics.



Great questions of
 What's the point
 of rejecting
 hetero-
 Suburbia
 for
 Lesbian
 Suburbia?

the Nineties in post industrial VC

Angela Martin

Now, for them life is bleak. They haven't got feminism as we once knew it. They have a very expensive lesbian culture. They can't afford to drink and they have to have the very expensive clothes and hair cuts. There isn't anything like there was for us, the alternative women's venues where you could wear a T shirt and jeans. I think life is very difficult for these young women, particularly around drugs. And a lot of these young women are very depressed. It's a difficult world in which to be a young lesbian. I'm amazed by the strength of so many. Particularly among those of my ex-students who are organising around sexual abuse. And they're setting up 24 hour phone lines to help each other through crises. Their situation is so different from ours and they are fighting such different forces.

PD: May I ask why you went to Melbourne in the first place?

SJ: I was getting quite fed up with being in London before I left. I saw an advert in *The Guardian* which was in feminist/gender/sexual politics. I was teaching in Hammersmith College of Further Education. I liked my students and I liked my teaching. But the effects of the political change on education, were enormously stressful to work in. I was teaching some things I liked, Black history, a tiny bit of women's history but it was mostly Mussolini and Hitler and things that were nothing to do with my work. I don't know if it's because of my reputation but it seemed unlikely that I would get an academic job here. Also the political scene in London around lesbian feminism was getting more and more difficult to operate in. A lesbian sex toys magazine named a dildo after me. So sexual harassment because of the political positions I was taking was getting to be a worry.

PD: Could you say a little more about this?

SJ: In London what was tending to happen was that women would come up maybe at a dance - and whisper something in my ear about what they'd like to do with me. That was something that was particularly surprising at the time, but more of it has happened in Melbourne. If you oppose certain sexual practices you are turned into pornography yourself. The idea of doing things to you becomes something that's sexually exciting for other women. In a review of *The Lesbian Heresy* in the *Australian Book Review*,

because I was critical of Gayle Rubin and Pat Califia on sadomasochism I was accused of 'butch sad top bullying'. There were other insinuations about what my sexual practice might be and what I might be trying to conceal because of the stand I was taking. So I rang the editor, and asked why she had allowed this through and she said that if you write about sexuality this is something that you must expect. And I said that this was not acceptable. Why can't you politically analyse sexuality without being told that it's a free-for-all? If you talk about it at all you're assumed to be in some sort of pornographic context... and it tends to be other lesbians who are doing the speculating and that one might not have expected. But one of the things that is happening in this sexual revolution is that lesbians are being objectified for other lesbians. As if it is all fair game.

Never mind
 Radical
 Lesbian
 bed death
 what about
 Radical Lesbian
 brain death?

... The gay male media in Melbourne is deeply hostile to me, because they survive on ads for the sex industry, so obviously if you are politically criticising the sex industry you are in big trouble. There are four Hellfire clubs. Ms Wicked is the female equivalent. There are women performing sex acts on the stage for free. It's just for women but men come to watch. So it's prostitution. But what I find fascinating about the late twentieth century is that once upon a time women were paid for prostitution, but now they do it for free. So that's what's extraordinary about lesbian liberation is that it's about women

being prostitutes for free. At least we once demanded the money. So much are we meant to love our subordination now that prostitution is done for free.

Future projects

PD: May I ask about your future projects?

SJ: I'm embarking upon a book tentatively called *The Idea of Prostitution* about how the idea of prostitution has developed over the last 100 years, through the work of sexologists, pornographers, feminist campaigns, to the point where in the 1980s and '90s we've got supposedly two quite different feminist perspectives on prostitution. One, that it's a job like any other and that it's potentially quite a progressive area for women, self-determining sexually and so on. And the other, which is of course the perspective I favour, which is that it's a crime against women. I think that it's important to start from that analysis in order to understand what's wrong with the construction of sexuality.

One of the problems with the twentieth century is that what is sexuality has been constructed for everybody on a model of female servicing and objectification. Which is about inequality. And that's been seen as fundamentally what sex is, based upon commercialised sex and prostitution. Now in order to overturn that I'm afraid that we've got to be very critical of prostitution and the sex industry even though many of our sisters may be working in it... In the lesbian sex industry there are many lesbians involved who have felt that it's a better bet working for women than for men. And you can understand that. But unfortunately, ...the values of that industry get expanded outwards as what sex is for lesbians. And those values are utterly in conflict with the understanding of sexuality that comes from lesbian feminism. A non-objectifying, egalitarian sexuality. A lot of lesbians can't see the difference now. I've had a lot of lesbians telling me that Ms Wicked is about positive lesbian sex, because it's being done on stages out there, where people can see. They think it's lesbian visibility. ...But it's the sex industry. And it represents lesbians in exactly the ways they're represented in men's pornography. They're dominatrixes, involved in sadomasochism; it's about cruelty and so on. And that's what we should expect because that's what we've been for hundreds of years in men's pornography.

PD: Yes, somehow there's this link between lesbianism and SM. Which is in *De Sade*.

SJ: The Ms Wicked organisers were interviewed in a gay paper in London. They said that a lesbian sexual revolution was happening. I loved that. They hadn't read my book, but we used the same phrase. And they said that it would break the bounds of feminism, that it would blow feminism apart because feminism was supposedly so restrictive of women's sexuality and lesbian sexuality. They had recognised it and were saying the same things as I was saying.

PD: So that the analysis was the same; it was just that you were standing on different sides. ... At the end of *'Lesbian Heresy'* you argue for a deeper separation from men, an intellectual and ethical separatism. Could you say something further about this?

SJ: I had a letter from woman in the States saying that she was a separatist and a sadomasochist. And she was very angry with my feminist analysis. ...I felt that it was important to say that separatism is not sufficient if women are following men's ethical system, if they are totally assimilated into male ideology and into the male sexual system, ...so it's necessary to have an intellectual and ethical separatism where all of the ideological practices and understandings of male supremacy are rigorously taken apart — and that we are critical of all of them □

The Good o'days
 when women were
 women and politics
 was women.....



Angela Martin

Degrees of Consent

In the recent furore about date rape the policy produced by Antioch College in the US has been ridiculed. Debbie Cameron went to Antioch to find out what women there think about it now.

One of the most active feminist campaigns in the United States at the moment is a campaign to expose the extent of rape and sexual abuse on university campuses. Activists are particularly angry about the weak or nonexistent response of college authorities. In the US higher education is a competitive business, and negative publicity can damage recruitment.

One college, however, decided a while ago that something drastic had to be done. Antioch College is a small college in small-town Ohio, known for its 'progressive' educational ideology. Students have a lot of input into the college governmental structures, and they can design their own courses, including periods of work experience or community service. At the height of the furore over 'date rape' on campus (an issue which has since come up in Britain, most notably when London student Austen Donellan was acquitted of rape charges in a blaze of publicity), Antioch introduced a sexual offences policy stating that every sexual act must be prefaced by asking for, and receiving, explicit consent. Antioch students are required to attend a workshop on the code, and if they violate it they can be suspended or expelled.

Consent: anything less than 'yes' means 'no'

The part of the code that has attracted most attention says: 'Asking "Do you want to have sex with me?" is not enough. The request for consent must be specific for each act'. A spokeswoman was quoted in the press explaining:

If you want to take her blouse off, you have to ask. If you want to touch her breast, you have to ask. If you want to move your hand down to her genitals, you have to ask. If you want to put your finger inside her, you have to ask.

Not only does no mean no under this policy, anything less than a clear 'yes' means no as well — a much higher standard for consent than either the law or public opinion would endorse. In addition, the code undermines the common idea that in sex, one thing 'naturally' leads to another. Because someone said yes to a kiss does not mean they are implicitly saying yes to anything else. And if either partner is under the influence of drugs or alcohol (as in the Donellan case) the whole question of consent is null and void — the code says this is rape, period. If someone brings a complaint, none of the usual excuses — she led me on, I didn't understand her

signals. I was too drunk to know what I was doing, she didn't say no so I thought it was OK — will work.

The mainstream media responded with predictable outrage, by ridiculing the policy as puritanical extremism. Some feminists were also concerned. The policy is written in gender-neutral terms and permits complaints against women, lesbians and gay men. Does this gloss over who is responsible for sexual abuse? It has also been suggested that the policy is based on a model in which date rape occurs because of 'miscommunication'. This currently popular explanation is open to criticism from radical feminists because it seems to suggest men who rape do not know their behaviour is abusive; if there were 'better communication' they would understand this and stop the behaviour. In addition, the 'miscommunication' model seems to deny that women may be coerced into saying yes. In other words, it could be argued that the policy oversimplifies the issues of power and consent.

In December 1993 I went to Antioch College and talked to people involved in the policy, including the Dean of Students (the administrator responsible for overseeing it), women students involved as 'peer advocates' (responsible for talking about the issues with other students and dealing with the early stages of the complaints procedure) and campus feminists. I wanted to know how these women defined the policy's aims and what difference they thought it was making.

A student-led initiative

The first point women I talked to wanted to stress was that the policy had originally been initiated by students because of their dissatisfaction with the way the college had handled particular incidents. A group of about 30 students had gone to the college's governing body and demanded change. The group that drafted the policy included students, teaching faculty and administrators. All were irritated by media coverage suggesting that 'politically correct' authorities were high-handedly interfering in students' sex lives.

They also pointed out that the policy is largely self-imposed: no-one is going into student residences and spying on couples' behaviour. People can choose not to follow the code, but they must understand they are taking

a risk. If a complaint is made and they cannot say consent was both explicitly asked for and explicitly given, they will be found to be in breach of the policy and treated accordingly.

I was surprised how many students told me that even if some people were not following the code, others (including themselves) were following it to the letter. A lot of media coverage focussed on how ridiculous it was to expect young people — or anyone for that matter — to engage in the kind of conversations the code prescribed during sexual encounters. Yet the students I spoke to did not find it ridiculous. Fourth year student Kate Bates was typical in commenting, 'when I first came to Antioch I thought "this is stupid", but by my third year I supported the policy completely, I could really see the benefits'. Kate thought the policy made it easier to say no to unwanted sex, and to speak up and be heard if your wishes were ignored.

But the benefits students see in the policy go beyond just making it easier to avoid or complain about abusive behaviour. Sierra Levy, a lesbian feminist in her final year, observed that the policy validates people who want to interact in a sexually egalitarian way. As she put it, having to negotiate everything makes sex 'subject to subject, instead of subject to object'. Sierra pointed out the particular importance of this to women survivors of sexual abuse, an issue also raised, without prompting, by the Dean of Students Marian Jensen. One of the aims of the policy, in her view, is to give students both the space and the concepts to talk about abusive experiences they might have had before they came to college. Antioch has a very active survivors' group; it is recognised the policy may cause students to reinterpret past as well as present experience, and support structures have been set up to cope with this.

Dean Jensen emphasises the policy is an 'educational tool' rather than just a disciplinary procedure, even though it originated in demands for quicker and tougher action on rape complaints. She told me it was meant to raise the level of discussion about sexuality generally, and in the three years it has been in force the results can already be seen. Antioch students cannot help but be aware of the issues, and although there is some resistance to the policy, it provokes serious and

thoughtful discussion. 'You see these kids walking out of their orientation session and saying "gosh, I'm 18 years old and I've never thought about this stuff before"'. The Dean feels strongly that students want to discuss the issues, and they want to be given guidelines. Asked about the media coverage, which scoffed at the idea that college students need 'lessons in having sex', she replied: 'Americans are in a state of denial about the need young people have for guidance about sexuality'.

Kate Bates, who is a peer advocate involved in educating other students, agrees. She finds many students feel unable to talk explicitly about sex: in workshops they ask to have terms like 'fellatio' and 'cunnilingus' explained to them, and often they have given no thought at all to communicating what they do and don't want. Kate remarked on the stereotypical ideas both men and women students often subscribe to: that men should want sex all the time, and that women have no right to refuse. The code is intended to challenge these stereotypes, making both sexes feel able to say no, but also making them think more carefully about what they really want to say yes to.

Everyone I spoke to at Antioch was enthusiastic about the policy and felt it was better to have it than not to; most people also felt it had made a difference to the campus climate — though as Marian Jensen noted, Antioch was not a typical campus to begin with. But women I spoke to had criticisms too — particularly those students who defined themselves as radical feminists. Like them, I feel there is something paradoxical about the Antioch policy. Its radical definition of consent seems strangely detached from any radical analysis of what causes sexual violence, and what (or whose) interests such violence ultimately serves. In consequence there are certain problems the policy cannot address.

'Feminist' or 'Humanist'?

When I asked Sierra Levy if she thought the policy was a feminist one, she reflected on the question for a few moments, and finally answered: 'it's more of a humanist policy'. Essentially, the code aims to ensure respectful and responsible behaviour between individuals. The assumption behind it is that

anyone — man or woman, straight or lesbian/gay — can behave sexually in an abusive way, and every case of abusive behaviour is in principle the same as every other.

My reservations about this are not because I think lesbians, for instance, are incapable of abusive behaviour or that such behaviour should be treated more leniently. They are because it seems to overlook the structures of power built into heterosexual relationships, and the way these structures can blur the line between consent and coercion, make even a strong definition of consent less effective in practice than in theory. Since 1990, the ultimate sanction of expulsion has been used only once: it is difficult to believe that in a community of several hundred people over three years there has only been one rape.

Kate Bates believes that many women are still having sex they do not want, and that they are not coming forward with complaints. The policy makes clear they have a right to say no, and that complaints are taken seriously (the complaints procedure is also unusually sensitive to the anxieties that deter complaints: for instance, the accused person can be excluded from the campus while the procedure is going on). The trouble is, refusing and complaining go against peer group norms which ultimately have to do with compulsory heterosexuality. There is still enormous pressure on women to go on dates with men, and to have sex with the men they date. Refusing isn't 'cool', it isn't compatible with being attractive to men or popular with other women. Thus women may consent for reasons other than actively wanting to have sex with a particular man in a particular situation. They are not under duress, the individual man is not necessarily coercing them; but the norms of the culture are coercive for these women.

The relatively high number of complaints that have been made by men against women, and by lesbians, may ironically reflect the fact that these groups experience less routine coercion, so that they are more likely to notice and be outraged when it happens. But this deflects attention from the much greater incidence of men abusing women, and the way such abuse reinforces pre-existing power relations between men and women. Whatever

else may be said about it, abusive behaviour by women does not have the same function.

The people I spoke to at Antioch did recognise there was a problem here, but few had any analysis of that problem, because sexual violence was rarely connected directly with power. Instead it was connected with a situation in which large numbers of young and inexperienced people, unused to independence and confused about sex, experiment with adult ways of living for the first time, and sometimes make mistakes. It was also connected with a 'socialisation' model in which both sexes are oppressed by stereotypical expectations about their sexual behaviour, and communication between them is fraught with misunderstanding. According to third year student Ingrid Ordal, radical feminism is not a significant presence on campus, and alternative analyses have little currency.

I asked Kate Bates if she thought some men were not just unclear about whether women were consenting to sex, but *indifferent* to whether they consented or not. She took the point, and replied: 'I don't know what you do about that'. If a woman complains, Antioch does have the means to punish a rapist. Tackling the root problem, however, is far more difficult.

Backlash on campus: the 'Boneyard'

Recently there has been a backlash against the perceived 'anti-male' campus culture at Antioch in the shape of an organisation called the 'Boneyard', a men's group dedicated to 'the preservation of machismo'. Boneyard activities include drinking beer, partying and using pornography; there is a 'sister' organisation for women called the Bushwhackers, and both groups proclaim their defiance of the sexual consent policy.

By the standards of many US campuses this is fairly mild, but at Antioch it is more worrying, because it shows up the underlying tensions between men and women that supporters of the policy are in general keen to minimise. The authorities may find themselves in a difficult position — unable to act because no-one is complaining, but unwilling to see the policy brought into disrepute by widespread and flagrant non-compliance. At present, Dean Marian Jensen is most

concerned with educating the 'middle ground folks', neither militantly feminist nor anti-feminist. This, she remarked, was where real change could be achieved — even if only very gradually.

A Realist Response

The Antioch policy is not perfect from a radical feminist viewpoint, and the reluctance women feel about filing complaints is a particular problem. But the people involved with it are realists: they know that to have any effect, a policy of this kind must command broad-based support. Even to a female-dominated student body like Antioch's, a 'humanist' policy is more acceptable than a radical feminist one, and it is also in keeping with the values of the institution, which has to be concerned with the personal development of each individual student.

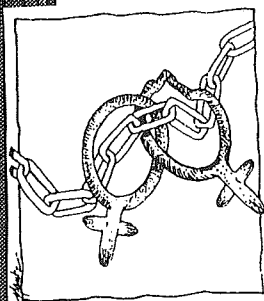
The Antioch policy is certainly better than anything I have seen in operation during my years as a university teacher, either in internal disciplinary proceedings or in the courts. My most common experience has been the 'denial' Marian Jensen talked about: horrific incidents being swept under the rug, or colleges responding, as Austen Donellan alleged, by making procedures up as they go along.

Considering the struggle feminists have had, and are still having, to make people accept that 'no means no', Antioch's insistence that consent depends on saying 'yes' is genuinely radical. Even if other institutions cannot follow the Antioch policy all the way, the fact that such a code now exists in reality is a challenge to colleges elsewhere, and a starting point for feminists elsewhere. (When I asked Marian Jensen if Antioch's definition of consent would stand up to being challenged in court, she pointed out that private religious colleges in the US have no difficulty enforcing standards of behaviour far above those accepted in society at large or mandated by law, and Antioch similarly has the right to make rules for its students, so long as the procedures are fair.) We do not have to treat rape as a fact of college life. Something can be done. □

Note: I would like to thank all those quoted here for their assistance, and Gwyn Kirk for setting up interviews. Women who would like to read the Antioch policy document in full can contact me at the Department of English, Strathclyde University, Glasgow G1 1XH.

Lies, Lesbians and Statistics

In reviewing Clare Renzetti's 'Violent Betrayal', - a research study of violence in lesbian relationships, Sara Scott raises important questions about feminist research practice, and how we should study and respond to this issue.



As a lesbian I think what happens in lesbian relationships is important and I think it matters if one lesbian batters or otherwise abuses another. As a feminist who believes that men's control of women's sexuality and their use of sexual and domestic violence is at the heart of women's oppression I think we can learn useful things about how power operates by looking at the similarities and differences between heterosexual and lesbian relationships. Unfortunately I can't see how this research project contributes anything to the health and happiness of lesbians or to the politics and practice of feminism.

The author of this study, Claire Renzetti, has ten years experience of research on violence against women but had not come across lesbian battering until a student handed her a newspaper advertising a community forum on the subject. By contacting Women Against Abuse in Philadelphia she met a group of women, some of whom were survivors of abuse by their lesbian partners, who had formed a Working Group on Lesbian Battering. This group supported and advised on the research. Renzetti claims that her study utilizes a feminist participatory research model and supports this with references to the working group's questions about how she, as a heterosexual sociologist, might use the research, and the fact that the questionnaire went through six drafts over a period of nine months. However I believe this study falls short of a model of feminist

participatory research in which the political import of the work is central and the political context within which the work takes place is carefully analysed.

By contrast with Claire Renzetti I have ten years experience of feminist activism around violence against women and first came across violence between lesbians when I 'came out' as a teenager in the North-East. The gulf between the bar dykes and the lesbian feminists was fairly wide, in the clubs butch and femme roles were apparent and you still asked a girlfriend's permission before asking her 'affair' to dance. Feminism seemed to offer quite as radical a critique of lesbian relationships as it did of heterosexual ones (albeit with considerable sympathy and admiration for the women who had refused to conform to compulsory heterosexuality prior to feminists discovering that that was what they were doing.) So this researcher and I are coming to the topic of battered lesbians from rather different places.

This project was concerned with the incidence and forms of abuse, its connections to other factors in women's lives and the business of seeking help from friends and outside agencies. I was pleased to hear about the publication of this research. The fact that it had been undertaken by a declared feminist who had previously undertaken research on domestic violence and that she intended the work to be in the tradition of previous feminist participatory

research all boded well. This article is an attempt to explain my disappointment.

Whatever one thinks about questionnaire surveys in general their appropriateness to a particular topic has to be assessed. There are numerous problems with the use of the survey for investigating abuse by lesbians. The most obvious is perhaps the inevitable prior assumptions which an instrument as blunt as a survey has to make in order to produce its questions and scales. With a 'new' problem in a relatively little researched 'population' such assumptions and categorisations can severely distort the knowledge produced. For example, are self definitions in response to questions about dependency, jealousy and concern for others, the most effective way of gaining insight into violence in lesbian relationships? The inevitable brevity of the questionnaire reinforced an impression of superficiality and it reminded me of the self-analysis quizzes frequently published by women's magazines

Russell and Rebecca Dobash have questioned the appropriateness of the survey to the investigation of issues of violence in general:

(In the USA) There is a widespread belief that information must be gathered through the use of a survey regardless of the nature of the issue and/or the research question under investigation. Indeed commitment to the survey shapes researchers' perceptions of social issues and the formulation of research questions... The survey is particularly poor at investigating complex behaviours, emotions and social processes such as those associated with violence, and its necessary brevity means it can rarely be used to explore the contexts associated with social behaviour.¹

From the Dobashes' position the entire methodology selected by Renzetti is inappropriate to her subject matter. I am inclined to agree, but *how* she used the method raises further questions.

Renzetti's sample was collected via advertisements in lesbian and gay publications and the distribution of leaflets about 'lesbian battering' and the research in bars and through lesbian organisations and women's bookstores. It sounds as though this research was originally planned as a local piece of work as the recruitment strategy appears to have been Philadelphia based:

First, brochures about the problem of lesbian battering were printed and distributed to Philadelphia-area women's organizations and agencies as well as women's bookstores and bars... In addition posters were printed... Third, advertisements... were placed in Philadelphia-area newspapers and in the national publication *Off Our Backs*. Finally, an announcement

of the study... was mailed to more than 200 lesbian and gay newspapers and over 1,000 lesbian and gay organizations throughout the United States and Canada.²

It seems reasonable to assume that the catchment area was widened from single state to the United States and Canada in order to attract a sample 'of reasonable size'. The problem of how many respondents constitutes a 'reasonable' non-random sample is a concern of convention and common sense rather than of statistical validity. Approximately 200 requests for questionnaires were received, 102 questionnaires were returned, of which 100 were useable and comprise the final sample. In addition 40 of these women were also interviewed by telephone. The unstructured interviews - which might have been a more appropriate methodology for this research - appear to have been scarcely analysed and are used to provide illustrative quotes and little else. Certainly they give no sense of real live lesbians struggling with real lives.

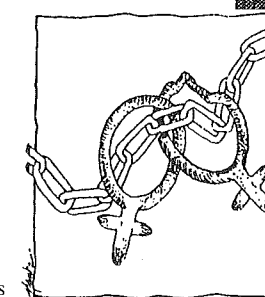
As Renzetti recognises, the most commonly noted weakness of non-random samples is that they cannot be generalised from because one has no way of claiming them as representative of the whole. Some specific biases in this sample are that 95% of respondents are white and 89% have a college education (half of these to post-graduate level). Given this it is somewhat disturbing to find that in her summing up Renzetti claims:

It appears that violence in lesbian relationships occurs at about the same frequency as violence in heterosexual relationships.

No evidence is produced to back up this claim. And given the very wide publicity aimed at attracting participants the fact that only a 100 women completed the questionnaire could be used to argue the opposite.

Looking a bit deeper

I think it's worth looking quite closely at how the results of a piece of research like this get produced through the questions and methods of analysis involved. Some of the questions and introductions in the survey are off-putting and over-wordy, for example: 'All intimate relationships are characterized by many different feelings and patterns of interaction. Lesbian relationships are no different in this regard.' It would also seem more honest if the sentence was completed 'no different in this regard to heterosexual relationships'. As this formulation appears in the introduction to every question it rather implicitly exposes the basis of the survey without making an explicit statement. In other words the underlying premise of the research is that



lesbian relationships are just like heterosexual ones and the assumed truth of this assumption is reflected in the questions that are asked and the way in which they are asked. I suspect that the language used in questions would be significant in affecting the class bias in the women participants.

Here and there in the questionnaire there are some quirks which may or may not have affected the final outcome of the data, for example, in a list of 15 relationships characteristics only one is phrased in the negative:

"My partner would not be upset if I had a sexual relationship with someone else."

One mistake that could have cost the project some highly relevant data is the statement:

"My partner and I divide household chores equally between us"

for if this is not true there is no way of knowing which of the two does more or less housework. It also presumes that 'partners' always live together and indeed that 'partners' is the appropriate terminology to describe women having a relationship.

What struck me reading the questionnaire was how morally loaded all the statements were about relationships. Terms such as 'forgiveness', 'responsibility', 'duty', 'dependency', 'possessiveness', are used in most. Without knowing what such concepts mean to individual women - whether they are positively or negatively valued for example - it is impossible to make much sense of the replies. What these questions reveal is an underlying assumption that questions and modes of measurement can be taken directly from research on women battered by male partners and applied to relationships between women without any critical assessment of their appropriateness.

Renzetti utilizes the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) as a key research tool. The CTS is a highly contentious instrument developed by Murray Straus and Richard Gelles in the context of family violence research which Renzetti adopts with only a perfunctory acknowledgement of the problems associated with it. It seems odd that a feminist would use methods associated with such a key debate around the gendered nature of domestic violence in such a cavalier fashion.

Briefly the problems which have been identified with the CTS include the underlying assumption that violence is a tactic used in 'resolving' conflicts of personal interest. The CTS is usually introduced to participants with the comment that all couples have disagreements which they try

to settle in different ways. Renzetti introduces it as follows:

Just as all intimate relationships experience a variety of problems and strains, couples tend to resolve their conflicts in a wide variety of ways.

Questions about violent acts are at the end of a continuum of items such as 'discussed an issue calmly' or 'stomped out of the room' about which husbands and wives are normally asked in parallel fashion. (In this research women were required to answer first for themselves and then in relation of the partner that abused her.) The CTS does not assess the meanings, contexts or consequences of these individual acts.

Using the CTS, family violence researchers have found similar percentages of husbands and wives using 'violent tactics'. Feminists believe that the validity of the CTS is undermined because the continuum of violence used is so broad as to be meaningless. For example, the CTS contains the item 'bit, kicked or hit with a fist'. So a woman who bites once is equated with a man who kicks or punches many times. 'Hit, or tried to hit with an object' is similarly ambiguous. Other criticisms of the CTS include its failure to distinguish between violence and self defence and its narrow focus on acts of violence decontextualised from patterns of control, sexual and psychological abuse and other forms of intimidation and domination. By contrast Renzetti pays serious attention to psychological violence and uses a 17 point scale including items such as 'verbally demeaned you in front of friends or relatives' and 'abused your pets'. However problems of ambiguity and breadth of category similar to those of the CTS appear throughout. 'Scratched or hit you in the face, breast or genitals' is one, as is 'accused you of being politically incorrect'.

Renzetti uses concepts from the (mostly therapeutic) literature on sources of strain and conflict in lesbian relationships and points to the emphasis on the issues of autonomy versus dependency, jealousy and imbalances of power between partners. She analyses her questionnaires in terms of these concepts and also looks at the possibility of a connection between alcohol abuse and the violence reported.

After carrying out a series of complex statistical exercises on her data Renzetti concludes that six variables explained about 53% of the differences in abuse severity but most of the effect came from just two: jealousy and dependency.

The greater the batterer's dependency and jealousy, the more frequent and more potentially injurious was

the abuse she inflicted on her partner ($t=3.782, p<.01$ and $t=2.451, p<.01$ respectively). Differences in social class, differences in intelligence, victim's economic dependence on her batterer, and victim earning more than her batterer explained little of the variation in abuse severity; none yielded significant t values.³

Put like that it sounds convincing, impressive even, which is one of the dangers with this kind of analysis. It is less convincing if you look underneath the numbers at what actually underpins this claim which actually comprises the major 'finding' of the research. (Renzetti claims to demonstrate an imbalance of power in these relationships - apart from the obvious one of batterer/victim - but I found her evidence weak or contradictory. For example: initiation of sexual activity correlates with battering but victims economic dependency correlates negatively. Respondents easily polarise themselves and their batterers into 'givers/takers', 'yielding'/'decisive' but whether these are causes or effects of the abuse is not known). Looking at how this has in fact been measured we find that apart from direct questions about whether the respondent and her batterer were dependent/independent there are merely three indicators of it in the rest of the survey.

My partner and I have separate sets of friends
I feel responsible for my partners well-being
We have different interests

It is such a leap from these indicators to a causal explanation in terms of somewhat nebulous emotional concepts such as dependency that it is hard not to feel sceptical about the appropriateness of the entire process to the business of finding out anything useful about violence in lesbian relationships; since we neither know how dependency is defined and understood by any of the lesbians in this sample, or whether and how this is different from lesbians in non-abusive relationships.

Out of Renzetti's sample of 100 battered lesbians 69 sought help from friends, 58 saw a counsellor, 19 approached the police while 13 sought out a battered women's shelter. They reported that responses from these sources were largely unhelpful. The police were predictably anti-lesbian and disinterested and the label of 'mutual battering' was frequently applied by friends and counsellors. Shelters (refuges) were reported as unwelcoming, homophobic and unsafe, in addition the batterers of three of the women were workers in shelters. This is depressing. But so are Renzetti's recommendations that literature about domestic violence de-centers itself and ceases to refer to

batterers as 'he' and victims as 'she' because 'lesbians do it too'. The other principle recommendation is anti-homophobia training for police, shelter workers and counsellors. I find this depressing not because I have any desire to pretend that lesbians are always nice to each other but that in order to make battered women's services accessible to a fraction of lesbians (lesbians as a whole constituting less than 1% of women if the 'Sexual Behaviour in Britain' research is to be believed) we have to cease to describe domestic violence as a problem of sexual politics. What is being confused here is whether lesbian violence is a problem the very existence of which disproves the existence of patriarchy, or a subcultural one within which heterosexuality still provides the dominant model.

Dangerous liaisons

Any research on interpersonal violence takes place these days within a war zone. Renzetti's work fails to place itself within this political context. In the US in particular, intense debate and conflict has occurred in the research 'community', with 'family violence' researchers claiming their results prove that, for example:

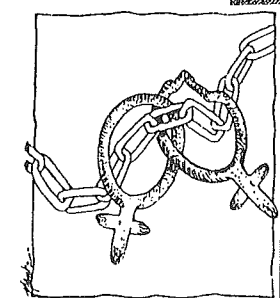
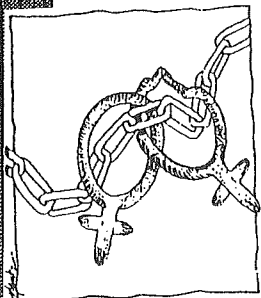
Clearly, violence against men is much more destructive than is violence against women... Male victims are injured more often and more seriously than are female victims.⁴
When all severely violent acts were examined, the data indicated that women as a group were more violent to their male partners, and more men than women were victimised.⁵

These findings, from studies using methods similar to Renzetti's have been used to provide testimony against battered women in court cases and to minimise the need for refuges. Over the years a variety of defences have been produced to defend the methods, the findings and their consequences. The most recent, by the man who calls himself the 'godfather' of 'family violence' research, Murray Strauss, refers explicitly to violence in lesbian relationships.

My view of recognising violence by wives is parallel to Hart's view on lesbian battering. It is painful, but to do otherwise obstructs a potentially important means of reducing assaults by husbands - raising the consciousness of women about the implicit norms they are reinforcing by a ritualized slap for outrageous behaviour on the part of their partners.⁶

Of course feminists have roundly criticised such work as methodologically unsound and motivated by misogyny. But it is within this context of a battle over the political import of male violence that Renzetti's research is inevitably read.

But this is only one aspect of the political context inhabited by Renzetti's research for it also



speaks to current feminist debates. Feminists treatment of each other has been a strong - although to some rather navel gazing - aspect of contemporary feminism. Prior to the 1970's lesbian subculture had a somewhat violent, jealous, hard drinking image in which butch-femme relationships were frequently modelled on extreme sex role distinctions borrowed from heterosexuality. Part of developing feminist consciousness was the recognition that relationships between women - including lesbian ones - were frequently pretty dire, but that division, distrust and competition between women were products of patriarchy not natural bitchiness. Lesbian lives were understood as taking place within a context of compulsory heterosexuality - where romance for women has a strongly masochistic bent.

The connection between humiliation and love is deeply embedded in our sexuality... I have found myself courting humiliation in relationships - deliberately placing myself in situations where I feel emotionally powerless and sexually vulnerable, unsafe. And the more powerless and tormented I feel, the more romantically 'in love' I feel. I believe sadomasochism can be emotional as well as sexual. I am certain I would not be acting in ways that jeopardize my self respect were it not for the legacy of sadomasochism embedded in the culture that shapes my sexuality.⁷

Lesbianism and feminism are not biological twins. Lesbianism is for many feminists an option for living that has more potential for feminist transformation than heterosexuality currently offers. As Adrienne Rich puts it:

We are now for the first time at a point of fusing lesbianism and feminism. And this is precisely the thing that patriarchy has most to dread, and will do all in its power to keep us from grasping.⁸

Whilst Renzetti's work never explores this explicitly, she appears to assume that the 'fusing' to which Adrienne Rich refers is something that has at some point occurred and therefore the existence of violence between lesbians points to a failure in feminism. Renzetti identifies herself as a feminist but she makes no attempt to construct a feminist understanding of lesbian violence. She combines in one paragraph political lesbianism and the lesbian equivalent of the 'gay is good', 'Black is beautiful' identity politics as the source of the lack of attention to the problem of lesbian violence by feminists:

...in the context of feminist movement - indeed, often in response to it - many lesbians have produced a new literature of their own that celebrates lesbianism as a conscious political choice rather than simply an alternative life-style... This literature provides an analysis of lesbianism in terms of rebellion against

male domination and oppression, and rejection of heterosexual privilege... Not infrequently, lesbian relationships were idealized as egalitarian, noncompetitive, and free of the power struggles that plague heterosexual relationships.

This paragraph represents the sum total of political context setting for the book.

Renzetti's research contributes to a war - but one she ignores. Frequently characterised as a backlash against feminism it has various key characteristics:

- * maintaining that women are just as nasty, violent and sexual as men
- * claiming that feminists maintain the opposite
- * claiming to be unmasking the feminist lie/deception in the interests of a deeper and more radical understanding of power/sex/violence

It doesn't much matter whether the position is that violence is a really bad thing, or with the lesbian s/m lobby that power, pain and penetration are jolly good fun, the fundamental strands are the same. It is the existence of this agenda which has to be considered as part of the context for any work in this area. I am so tired of the production of 'violent women' as evidence that feminism is either outmoded or a complete con. A couple of years ago we were being told that women were now post-feminists because equality had been achieved and we'd never had it so good; the latest is the uncovering of feminism wickedly deceiving the world about women's superior moral nature and the revelation that women are just as 'bad' as men. I don't think it's any accident that this backlash is taking place around child sexual abuse and domestic violence where feminism has created and controlled a significant amount of the agenda and practice for the last two decades, (Lynn Alderson's article in *Trouble & Strife 27* illustrates this point).

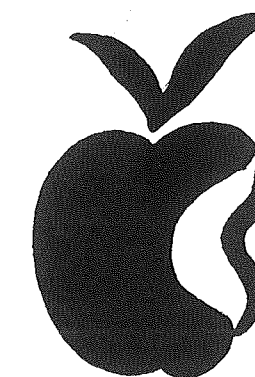
The following statement could have provided a different starting point and therefore inspired a different piece of research; the kind of feminist research we desperately need.

Lesbians have relationships with other lesbians, and those relationships are conditioned by the atmosphere of the surrounding culture, especially in this climate of assimilation. If we would rather not be exploited and objectified by other lesbians it is in our interest to challenge and attack the objectification of women everywhere.¹⁰ □



1. R Emerson Dobash and RP Dobash, *Women, Violence and Social Change*, Routledge, 1992 p276.
2. Clare Renzetti *Violent Betrayal: Partner Abuse in Lesbian Relationships*, Sage, 1992.
3. Ibid.
4. M McCleod 'Women Against Men: An examination of domestic violence based on an analysis of official data and national victimization data', *Justice Quarterly* Vol 1, 1984 p191.
5. R L McNeely and G Robinson-Simpson, 'The Truth about Domestic Violence: a falsely framed issue', *Social Work*, Nov-Dec 1987, p486.
6. Murray Straus, 'Physical Assaults by Wives: A Major Social Problem' in R Gelles and D Loseke (eds) *Current Controversies on Family Violence*, Sage 1993.
7. Irene Reti 'Remember the Fire: Lesbian Sadomasochism in a Post Nazi Holocaust World' in Irene Reti (ed) *Unleashing Feminism: Critiquing Lesbian Sadomasochism in the Gay Nineties*, Herbooks, 1993.
8. 'The Meaning of Our Love for Women is What We have Constantly to Expand', *On Lies Secrets and Silences: Selected Prose 1966 - 1978*, Norton 1979, p226.
10. D A Clarke 'Consuming Passions: Some Thoughts on History, Sex and Free Enterprise', Irene Reti (ed) *Unleashing Feminism: Critiquing Sadomasochism in the Gay Nineties*, Herbooks, 1993.

Bad Apple

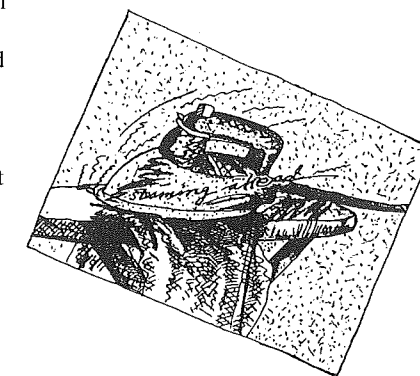


Impudent shrews or literary ladies? What is the Virago success story really all about? Joan Scanlon and Julia Swindells investigate.

Virago, Britain's most publicly successful women's publishing house, was twenty years' old last year. This anniversary was marked not only by a star-studded celebration but by the publication of *Virago Keepsake*, which they were giving away. The cover of the keepsake presented a Busby Berkeley style tableau of women in glittering frocks, with one holding a large surreal apple (intact) - the Virago logo without the teeth marks. In 1988 there was also much excitement about the fifteenth birthday. At that time it was reported that, whatever the beleaguered state of feminism as the politics of the women's liberation movement, women's publishing houses, then numbering 11 in Britain and Eire, were alive and growing. Last year, London's Women's Research and Resources Centre listed 21 women's publishing houses and an article in the TES commented on the 'rise of feminist publishing' in the context of the increasingly 'dire straits' of publishing generally. What, then, does this story of birthday parties and triumphalism mean to a feminist press; what, in other words, are we meant to be celebrating?

It is easy to overlook just how politically radical the feminist presses were in their initial

project, how oppositional and unpopular they promised to be in the world of mainstream publishing. As Ursula Owen, arguably the most radical of Virago's founding directors, put it during the celebrations for the fifteenth birthday: 'one forgets how disturbing and unmarketable feminism was in the early seventies'. Similarly, The Women's Press, on celebrating its tenth birthday, recalled the sniggers which greeted its debut. That political radicalism, that capacity to trouble the mainstream publishers and the public, was captured in the term 'virago' and in the controversial logo of The Women's Press, an iron steaming ahead. It was the very capacity of the Women's Press logo to provoke a debate about the nature and status of women's work which marked that radicalism, and marked the compatibility of the press with the broader political movement. With hindsight one might question whether the term 'virago' had the same capacity to register dissent in its allusions to 'a bold, impudent or shrewish woman, amazon or female warrior' (how many of us actually recognised these references?); or whether the witty and pointed Virago logo (an apple with a bite out of it) served more as a sophisticated cultural joke about Old Testament mythology than as a firm statement



about Virago's political commitments. There is no doubt though, that even if some of us missed the point, in the early days the literary establishment were needed.

A man like maiden

When Virago published Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* in 1989, Anthony Burgess prefaced his unqualified appreciation of the novel with a characteristically disagreeable and vitriolic attack on the sectional motives of the publishers.

By no stretch of usage can *Virago* be made not to signify a shrew, a scold, an ill-tempered woman, unless we go back to the etymology - a man-like maiden (cognate with *virile*) - and the antique meaning - amazon, female warrior - that is close to it. It is an unlovely and aggressive name, even for a militant feminist organisation, and it presides awkwardly over the reissue of a great *roman fleuve* which is too important to be associated with chauvinist sows.

However even as long ago as 1978, Fay Weldon was saying in the *Times Literary Supplement*, that Virago had changed the connotations of the word 'virago', and that it now conjured up the image of 'an industrious and intelligent lady'. That Ursula Owen should quote this on Virago's fifteenth birthday is perhaps significant. She did so as a testimony to Virago's capacity for shifting and broadening the perspective on women's writing. But it is possible to see Fay Weldon's observation in a less celebratory light. What had been potentially disturbing and provocative - 'impudent and shrewish woman' - has already been accommodated to the idea of 'and industrious and intelligent lady'. What had been undeniably connected to a movement, a group, a group-consciousness of women, is moved to the individual writer, 'industrious and intelligent', and 'a lady' at that.

In the *Virago Keepsake* a further shift has taken place; a move from the individual author to the Virago author, a celebration not of the women's movement, or of women's writing, but the survival of the press itself - a recognition of what it stands for, not so much in terms of political achievement, but brand loyalty and quality writing.

Marketing and radicalism

Carmen Callil, one of the founders of Virago (and now managing director of Chatto and Windus) says:

'Virago was founded with two main aims. One was ideological, the other a marketing belief. The idea for a feminist house grew out of the feminist movement which was reborn in this country at the end of the '60s. Virago was set up to publish books which were part of that movement, but its marketing aim was quite specific: we aimed to reach a general audience of women and men who had not heard of, or who disliked and even detested, the idea of feminism' (*The Bookseller*, March 1st, 1986).

Perhaps this model underestimated what would happen to that 'feminism' in the process of moving from those for whom it was part of their political lives and commitment to those who might even detest it. In other words, what the model underestimates or denies is the power of marketing as an ideological process. We could appreciate that it would be good and democratic to have to reckon with it, if we could be sure that in the process, feminism was not being neutralised, not being deprived of its ability to issue a challenge, and yes, to cause some sectors of the community to detest it. The bleakest version of the Virago story, and the consequences of marketability for radicalism, is that it is now the feminist movement, rather than the general public, with whom Virago are at odds.

In the autumn of 1985 Carmen Callil, now chairwoman of Virago, gave a rather odd account of the history of the women's movement in a paper for a Women in Publishing conference in London, in which she explains why women were 'peripheral to the dominant history of the human race'.

They did not run businesses; they did not control the centre of power in any sphere except the home. This now has changed — for women in the Western world — and I believe that it has changed forever. I believe it to be a central fact for women of our time that there will be no return to the powerlessness of previous generations.

And in 1990, Harriet Spicer, managing director of Virago, assured *The Bookseller* that, while the press might be perceived as publishing less 'right-on' fiction than formerly, its commitments remained unchanged: 'We've remained true to our ideals, of being entertaining and interesting to women'.

This is a far cry from the carefully stated politics of the press as it was repeatedly articulated by Ursula Owen, who left Virago in December 1990 to work for the then Shadow

Arts Minister Mark Fisher, and is now on the editorial team of the newly resurrected *Index on Censorship* due to reappear in May 1994. Not only did she insist that the reprint list was an important acknowledgement that the women's liberation movement had not begun with the Ruskin conference in 1969; she was also clear that the need for feminist publishing was inextricably linked to the need for feminism as a political movement, and that women's lives had not yet 'changed that dramatically, except for a few very privileged women who are in the professions':

What I'd like is a world where you don't need women's publishing companies or women's pages, but I don't see it in my lifetime or my daughter's lifetime or my grandchildren's lifetime. We are playing a small part in what is a very long and difficult process.

The meaning of greatness

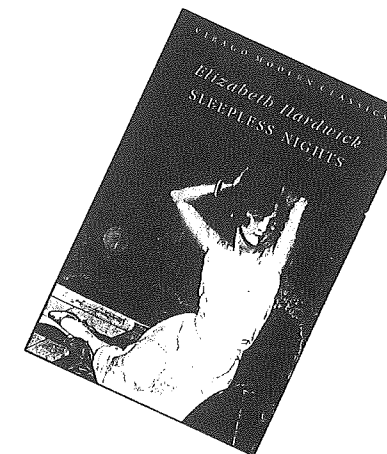
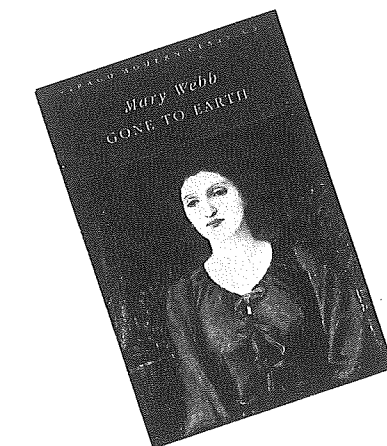
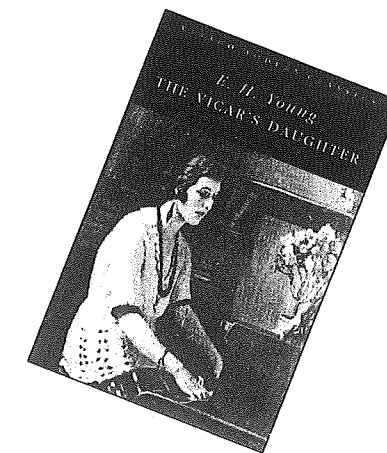
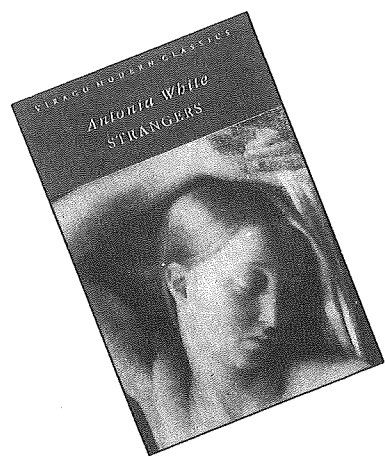
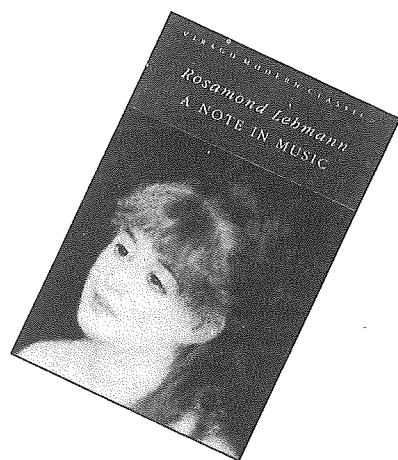
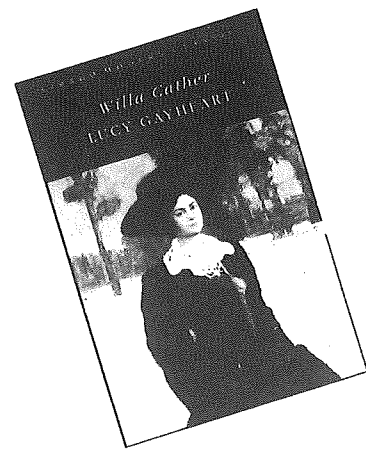
What is interesting, however, is not just the difference of emphasis manifest amongst the key agents in Virago's inception and development, but the common ground between them. A recurring theme in Virago's own publicity material, and in interviews with the directors, is the need to succeed in the battle for inclusion in school and university curricula. Another commonly articulated belief is in a detectable and significant shift in feminist thinking away from socialist feminism as the 'the central strand of thinking' in the 70s towards a preoccupation with race as a central concern in the present. While it is true that Virago's emphasis on socialist feminism ensured that earlier feminist history was broadened from the story of the Pankhursts to include the stories of suffragists in the mills and factories of the north of England, this breadth of documentation has been less than true of their coverage of the contemporary women's movement. This is not to disparage the contribution which Virago has made to the rewriting of women's history and culture. While it is also true that Virago has sustained a commitment to publishing Black and Asian women's writing, both fiction and non-fiction (including important books such as Amrit Wilson's *Finding a Voice* and *Heart of the Race*, edited by Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie and Suzanne Scafe during the 80s) their bias towards another common theme - 'first class writing' - has posed a number of problems, not least in relation to this particular commitment.

Nowhere is it apparent what Virago means by 'great literature', 'quality writing' or 'first class prose'. Is this gauged by editorial intuition and sound literary taste - as the critical establishment would have us believe? Or is 'great literature' also subject to the scrutiny which feminism has focussed on other forms of cultural production? The impression one gets from the collective directorial voice of Virago is that the establishment criteria remain the touchstone of aesthetic judgement, but that - some of the time - political criteria prevail instead. So, when Ursula Owen insisted that Virago was not interested in 'the great tradition' as it had been taught in British universities, she proceeded, in the same breath, to endorse its judgements:

We also wanted to show what women have been writing about in novels over a long period, whether they are considered in "the great tradition" or not. Some of our Virago Modern Classics are great novels: Christina Stead, Willa Cather, and Edith Wharton are great novelists. Some of them are not...

This seems to be the central (and shared) confusion at the heart of Virago's editorial policy. Then and now, there appears to be undisputed common ground about what constitutes 'good writing', whereas the agreement about what constitutes politically important writing is likely to be dictated by a different set of criteria, those which are determined by an in-house perception of what is central to feminism at any moment in time, whether it be psychoanalysis, postmodernism - or race. The illusion that feminism of a certain kind is still unmarketable is now articulated, not in terms of the increasingly racist and nationalist climate of the 80s and 90s, but by the apparent refusal of the academy to embrace Virago publications into the curriculum.

Ursula Owen's observation that feminism was not marketable in the '70s, although produced of course with hindsight, nevertheless gives a sort of explanation of how the launching of Virago could be seen as relatively unproblematic in political terms at that time, and certainly courageous in terms of the market. At that stage it appeared that the political project of recovering and discovering women could mesh with Virago's more mainstream commitment (present from the beginning) to publishing works of 'literary merit'.





So much so that when Burgess commented on the significances of recovering *Pilgrimage* for the literary canon, he was forced to rant about the 'reductive' political motives of the press. The literary establishment therefore had to acknowledge Virago's role in publishing works that it could not help but recognise as literature, and was rattled enough to complain about the 'appropriation' of these texts for feminism.

It seems that the simplicity which characterised attitudes to the market married well with the *historical* project in those early days. The Women's Press began by reprinting neglected books by women, and when Virago started its own 'classic' reprint list, it became quickly identified with this list. Indeed, it is a common misconception that Virago also began as a reprint publisher, although the first 'Virago Modern Classic', Antonia White's *Frost in May*, did not appear until 1978, five years after the press was launched.

Moving into the mainstream

It is in the domain of contemporary women's writing and commissioning contemporary writers that this distancing from feminism becomes apparent. Virago's stress on 'women's lives' and embattled positions had suggested a strong commitment to taking risks with new projects. However the need for Virago to create an identity for its original fiction, distinct from that of the Modern Classics, was defined by their marketing director Lennie Goodings, as an attempt to vie with the mainstream paperback publishers: 'We're aiming at the Black Swan, Picador, Faber department. We're saying "trust our editorial judgement." If, as Harriet Spicer insists, Virago's conscious strategy, was to be 'specialist and mainstream, and to widen the definition of what is perceived to be mainstream', then they can certainly be said to have succeeded in the latter aim. The question remains, though, what do they mean now in the '90s by 'specialist', and what readership are they referring to when they speak of 'brand loyalty'?

The new-format Virago hard-back fiction, while clearly designed to move away from the historical associations of the elegant green spines, is scarcely a radical departure, but a further bid for recognition as a publisher of

literary excellence. These little hardbacks, not dissimilar to the Bodley Head fiction list, urge you to recognise their craftsmanship (sic), and come with the hallmark of liberal male academic approval, with quotes from Oxford literary professors such as John Bayley to reassure us that we are all sophisticated enough in the 1990s to know that women write novels in The Great Tradition too.

The very marketability that 'women's ideas' and 'women's lives' of a certain kind have achieved through the women's presses should lead us at least to enquire about the relationship now between a successful publishing house such as Virago and a generally beleaguered women's movement. In Britain at least, throughout the 80s and early 90s, the women's movement has been struggling against wave against wave of state opposition, implicit and explicit, and a media which has for the most part insisted that we have moved beyond the need for feminism. And yet, women's lists in mainstream publishing and women's studies courses in the academy appear to have boomed. It is also significant that Virago's list is difficult to distinguish from many of the women's (or gender) studies lists of mainstream publishers, such as Routledge or Blackwell. One reason for this may well be that, from the beginning, Virago's non-fiction list has on the whole been dictated by the concerns of academic feminism, rather than activist feminism, and the split between academic feminism and the women's movement has widened enormously over the last fifteen years. Moreover, unlike The Women's Press, Virago has almost exclusively published work by socialist feminists, and has consequently found itself with a large number of post-feminist (not to mention post-socialist) writers on their hands - in spite of the fact that many of these same women were active in the women's movement in the 70s.

In the early seventies, those feminist presses which inserted themselves into 'the market' were doing so out of political and cultural motives which appeared to operate independently of the marketing process. The media-friendly version of feminism had not been invented; the likes of Naomi Woolf were not in evidence in the 70s. Feminism and marketing were in tension, even perceived as potentially incompatible at that time.

Virago appear to have traversed the 80s clutching the fallacy that radicalism persists independently of contexts; that, whatever the political climate, the 'simple' project of representing women's ideas and women's lives remains a politicized one, even when that project has lost its capacity for generating or reflecting an oppositional position. But writing cannot be separated from the conditions of readership and reception in which it occurs. Virago marked those same fifteenth birthday celebrations with the publication of *Writing Lives*. Their initial manifesto, which they are ostensibly committed to continuing, stated a concern with 'women's lives'. That move from 'women's lives' to 'writing lives' may be indicative; the general move into writing about writing, and the autobiographies of writers, is disturbingly self-referential. The *Virago Keepsake* marked the latest shift from women writers' lives to Virago writers' lives, and consists of pieces either by Virago writers about each other, or about the experience of writing for Virago.

Writing Lives consists of recorded conversations between women writers. The Virago publicity for the volume asks what Maya Angelou, Molly Keane, Rosamond Lehmann, Rebecca West, Eudora Welty, Paule Marshall, Mary Lavin, Rosa Guy and Grace Paley have in common, and answers: 'writing lives' — not feminism, not a relationship to the women's movement, not politics, but writing. Those interested in the lives of women writers, in writing, in 'the literary' (and indeed in the lives of the newly famous) may have been pleased. But some of us were not.

What's a feminist book

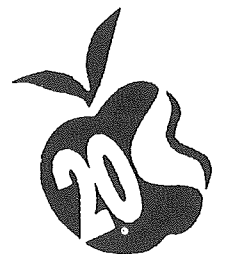
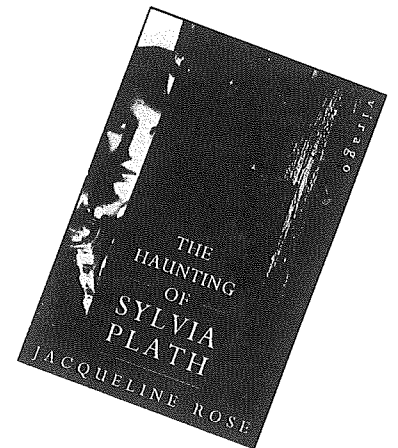
It is perhaps just as well then that the presses have, from time to time, been called upon to address the question of what a 'feminist' book is. Carole Spedding, who organised the first feminist book fortnight in 1984, proposed that 'it's a book on any subject written by a woman which is informed by a critical analysis of her position in society as a woman', and this seems a fairly uncontentious place from which to start defining the widest remit for feminist publishing without glossing over the necessary relationship between the women's presses and feminist politics. We are rightly under pressure to continue producing such definitions, to clarify and reassess the purpose and point of

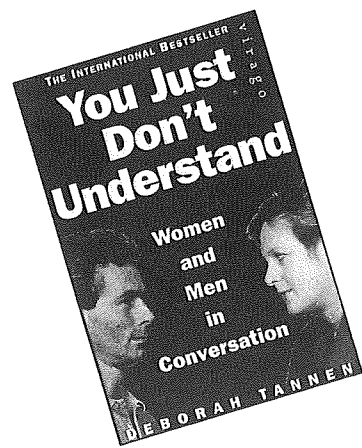
the feminist presses, and their role within the struggle for women's liberation. In that key phrase: 'informed by a critical analysis of her position in society as a woman', we see highlighted the need to place the woman writer back in the political context..

Back in 1988, Virago was given an uncomfortable opportunity to debate these issues more publicly, occasioned by 'the case of the upstart vicar and the feminist publishing house', as Ros Coward dubbed it in her essay, 'Looking for the Real Thing' (NS 1st April, but no joke):

For the literary establishment, the revelation that Rahila Khan's *Down the Road Worlds Away* was in fact written by the Rev. Toby Forward was a glorious humiliation of political publishing and a triumph of the timeless literary values. As far as the popular press was concerned, it was about the punishment of a bunch of intolerant harridans. Even a vicar who supported CND, the Labour Party, and took an active interest in multi-cultural education (usually a prime target to be hounded himself) was to be congratulated for pulling a fast one on the harpies.

Toby came out as a white middle-class vicar three weeks after the book was published, and Virago immediately withdrew it from sale. The simple premise that a substantial plank in their policy was 'to publish the stories and thoughts of women who haven't had a voice in literature before', should have been firm enough ground from which to defend this decision. However Virago was vulnerable on two grounds: Firstly they had no firm policy of *not* publishing work by men; prior to publishing the vicar, they had already published (posthumously) H.G. Well's *Ann Veronica*, George Gissing's *The Odd Women* and George Meredith's *Diana of the Crossways*; nor has the vicar deterred them from publishing men who are not dead (yet), for, more recently, Sean French has edited two books on fatherhood for Virago, Richard Dalby has edited two books of ghost stories, and John Forrester has co-authored *Freud's Women* with Lisa Appignanesi. Secondly, they were too easily drawn into the liberal snake-pit of arguments about great art, imaginative experience and 'authentic' writing. They were thus caught in the trap of having to uphold their literary judgement of the book, consistent with their commitment to publishing quality writing while at the same time denouncing it





in moral terms as a 'cruel hoax'. Traditional judgements about literary merit usually involve a recognition that the author has succeeded in imaginatively participating in and representing experiences different from his own. Because Virago had adopted these criteria of 'aesthetic' judgement, and even perhaps mistakenly sought to exploit them for legitimate political ends, they were unable to answer the charge levelled at them by the literary establishment that they were, at best, inconsistent in disputing the ability (or right) of a white male vicar to represent the lives of men and women in the Asian community in Britain.

A classic imposture

Ros Coward wrote:

Many of the Asian writers to whom I spoke about this affair felt that in some extremely complex ways the vicar's deception had been effective because of flaws and weaknesses in attitudes prevalent amongst publishers towards writers from ethnic minorities.

The case against the vicar is clear (there is, anyway, something of a history of a certain type of bored vicar who likes to perpetrate fraud and meddle with women). And yet Virago's main charge against him seemed to be merely that of 'deception', accompanied by much soul-searching about whether or not they were in part responsible for not detecting the fraud at an earlier stage. And indeed Ros Coward devotes much space to the intriguing subject of whether or not the writing did reveal "clues" as to the identity of the author in terms of race and gender. (One such example is the fact that the experiences of the young Asian men are written in the first person singular and are far more 'dynamic and lively', whereas the young Asian women's experiences are written in the third person and often occupy 'secondary or passive roles'.) And yet this pursuit of 'authentic writing', even where it is linked to social experience rather than biology, takes us further down 'the death of the author' route, and towards valuing the writing more than the lives of the women whose experience is represented.

Actually Toby's imposture was an example of a rather classic kind, of the ways in which white middle-class men, such as the guardians of the literary establishment, can exploit and appropriate with impunity. *Of course* a man who is part of dominant culture

can appropriate the voices of oppressed groups. Of course he has the political and cultural tools to do this. Indeed, the market mechanism even relies on this imposture, the male author appropriating the voices and perspectives of women and isolating them from consideration of the conditions of oppression which exist outside of texts. The vicar's attempt at disguise - and his alacrity at 'coming out' to demonstrate its success - just showed us one flagrantly obvious form of this. The reactions of women in the Asian community to Virago over the case of the vicar showed up the problem very clearly - showed what happens when a publisher isolates the text from its conditions of production, gives too much significance to the text alone, and not enough significance to the relationship between text and author, or to the author's political placing in relation to the conditions of oppression. In other words, the case highlighted Virago's failure to preserve a space for 'the real woman' and the particular conditions of powerlessness from which she demands to speak; as women in the Asian community saw, Virago has no means of recognising 'the real thing'.

In the early 90s it has become all the more necessary for women's presses to recover their political context, and to distinguish what they are doing from everyman's 'women's list'. That 'the woman's perspective', far from proving unmarketable, might have become a highly marketable commodity, might lead us to recognise that we had underestimated the market's rapaciousness for consuming women. The economic recession of the '90s might well be the factor that Virago and other women's presses would raise as to why they cannot maintain the triumphalist spirit of earlier birthday celebrations, but it is arguable (and this is the optimist version) that if they are to remain viable *as* women's presses they need, now more than ever, to differentiate their project from that of the mainstream - not in terms of content or quality but in terms of a materialist feminist politics of publishing. Only when the force of the political paradox is demolished — that women are selling well, but the women's movement has its back to the wall — only then, will the women's presses have something to celebrate. □

Campaigns:

We have obviously not been able to contact all campaigns of interest to radical feminists. If you know of any you would like to see listed, please write to us at the subscription address. We would like to continue this listing in future issues, if we have the space.

Palestine Solidarity Campaign Women's Network:

The Women's Network for Palestine is a group of women who have a broad set of aims based around information and solidarity work with Palestinian women.

The main aims are:

- The establishment of direct links with the Palestinian women's groups, committees and organisations inside and outside of Palestine, including the General Union of Palestinian women here in the UK.
- To disseminate information about the condition of Palestinian women
- To establish links with Palestinian women political prisoners and to work to improve their conditions

PSC Women's Network, BM, PSA, London, WC1N 3XX

New Disabled Women's Project, started by GLAD (Greater London Association of Disabled People):

A new women's project has been started by GLAD. This came about in response to a women's conference hosted by GLAD last year where 200 disabled women met together for the first time.

The conference enabled women to discuss issues which were of particular concern to them such as sexuality, parenting, independent living, sexual abuse. Funding for a women's project was secured from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation for a period of 18 months and a women's officer, Brenda Ellis, has been appointed.

The project aims to put women's particular issues on the agenda. For some time now, disabled women have felt excluded, first by the feminist movement and then by the disability movement.

The women's project aims to bring together all disabled women to share our common needs and support. This will take place at a series of

conferences and meetings being held across London for disabled women. In particular, the project aims to target black and ethnic minority women, older women, lesbians and women who may not have had contact with the disability movement before.

There is also a newsletter by disabled women called Boadicea which comes out bi-monthly. This gives us a chance to share our ideas and information and to communicate with each other. Some of the topics covered in Boadicea include disability, and loss, relationships, abortion, etc.

A free copy of Boadicea, also available in large print and on tape, can be obtained by sending a stamp to:

Brenda Ellis, Women's Officer, GLAD, 336 Brixton Road, London, SW9 7AA, 071-274 0107 voice/minicom.

Equality Now – The Death of Maricris Sioson:

Equality Now is an organisation along the lines of Amnesty International, which takes up particular campaigns and issues and asks women to write letters as part of an international pressure group.

Maricris Sioson was a 22 year old dancer from the Philippines, who went to work in Japan as an entertainer. She died a few months after arriving in Japan, and the cause of death was listed as hepatitis. When her family opened her coffin, they found that she had been beaten and stabbed. The National Bureau of Investigation in the Philippines performed an autopsy and found: a subdural hemorrhage in the cerebral cortex, presumably caused by blows to the head, and two stab wounds, one in the thigh, indicating that a double-edged blade had been twisted upward, downward and diagonally in the flesh, and one in the genital area, indicating that a blade had been inserted vertically. The cause of death was traumatic head injuries.

On the request of an investigation into her death, the Department of Justice in Japan responded that it was unable to conduct an official inquiry because the Japanese government would not allow investigation by foreigners of crimes committed in Japan. Medical records and police documents have been denied Maricris' family.

Equality Now emphasise that Maricris Sioson's story is not unique; in 1991, the year Maricris was murdered, 80,000 Filipinos went to work in Japan, 95% of whom were women

and the vast majority of whom were employed as entertainers. Commonly these women's passports are confiscated and their salaries withheld by their employers until the end of their contracts. According to Mizuho Matsuda, director of the only shelter in Tokyo for migrant women workers who suffer abuse, women who come to Japan to work are often forced by circumstances into prostitution. It has been alleged that the Yakuza, an organised crime network in Japan, is heavily involved in the trafficking of women for the sex and entertainment industry in Japan. At Senate hearings held in the Philippines after Maricris Sioson's death, Philippines embassy officials testified that 33 Filipino workers had already died in Japan that year and that 12 of these deaths took place under "suspicious circumstances"

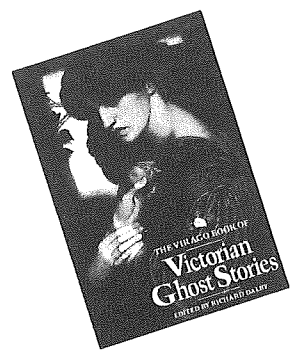
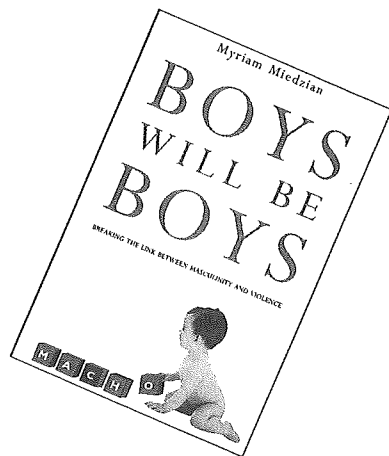
Recommended actions:

Please bring this case to the attention of the media and the general public. Contact the following Japanese authorities, and the Japanese embassy in your country, expressing your concern over the death of Maricris Sioson and the failure of the Japanese government to investigate the clear evidence that she died of unnatural causes. Call for an investigation of Maricris Sioson's death, and prosecution of those responsible, to demonstrate the commitment of the Japanese government to uphold the rule of law and ensure that justice is done for Maricris Sioson and her family. Letters and petitions should be sent to the following authorities:

- Mr Morihiro Hosokawa, Prime Minister, 1-6-1 Nagata-cho, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo, Japan
- Mr Tsutomu Hata, Minister of Foreign Affairs, 2-2-1 Kasumigaseki, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo, Japan
- Mr Isao Shimizu, Chief Prosecutor, Fukushima Local Prosecutors Office, (Chiho kensatuscho), 17 Kitsunozuka, 960 Fukushima, Japan
- Mr Yasumitsu Kiuchi, Commissioner General, The National Police Agency, 2-1-2 Kasumigaseki, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo, Japan

Please keep Equality Now posted on your efforts and send updates to:

Equality Now, PO Box 20646, Columbus Circle Station, New York, New York 10023, USA □



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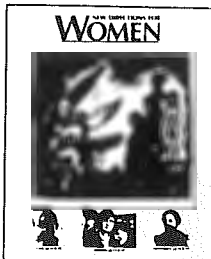
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