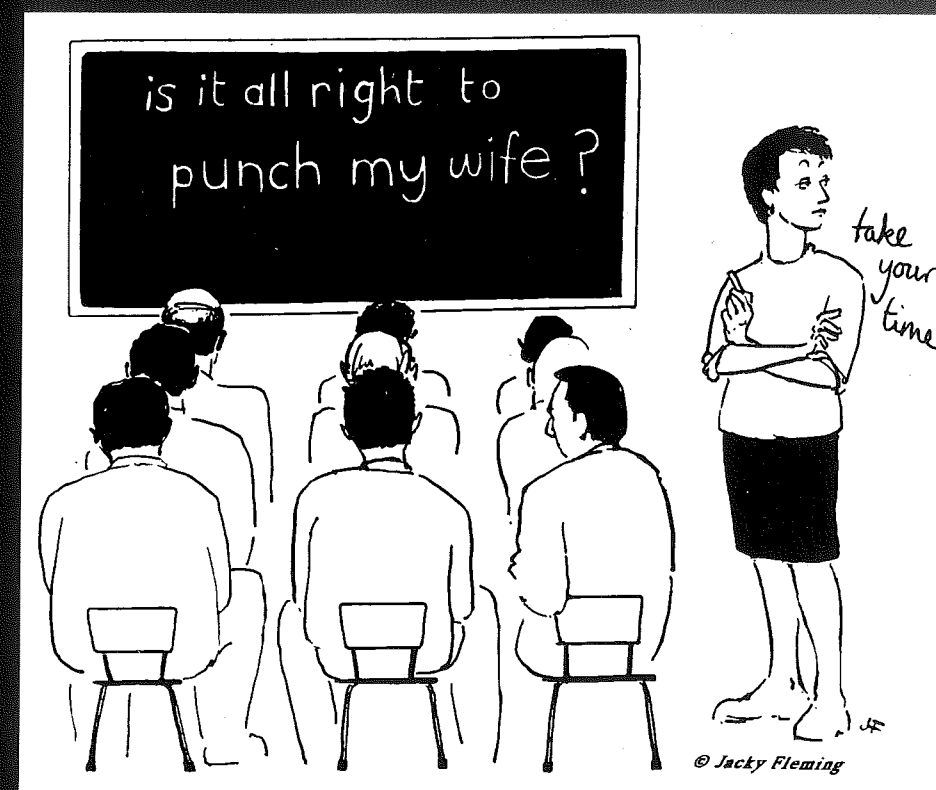


Trouble & Strife

The radical feminist magazine

Men Getting Away with Murder



Violence, Abuse & Women's Citizenship: Conference preview

Beauty queens and teen magazines

Feminism and the Internet

Making sense of Rose West

Lesbians take on the UN

No. 33
£4.50

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 Dianne Butterworth, Debbie Cameron, Marian Foley, Stevi Jackson, Liz Kelly and Joan Scanlon.

Front cover illustration: Jacky Fleming, from *Hello Boys* (Penguin, forthcoming) — A collection of new cartoons

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Letters

Legalising assault

Dear T&S,

I am writing to ask T&S readers to contact the Law Commission in response to their 'Consultation Paper on Consent in the Criminal Law'. This document has been produced in response to the 'spanner' case and, if the proposals in it were made law, it would mean that in most assault/sexual assault cases the defendant would be not guilty of the offence if he could show his victim 'consented'. I believe that this would be a major setback for women, and it is important that feminists contribute to the consultation process.

The current legal position in relation to consent was established in the Spanner case (R v Brown [1993] 2 All ER 75) which concerned the sado-masochistic sexual practices of a group of gay men. The House of Lords decided that the fact that a victim consented to an assault was *not* a defence in any situation where the injuries inflicted were 'neither transient nor trifling'. So, if the assault in question is more serious than a common assault (ABH, GBH etc.) then the question of whether or not the victim consented is not (legally) relevant — an offence has been committed.

From a feminist standpoint, this offers a good level of protection to women subjected to violence. Violent husbands, boyfriends etc., cannot simply claim the 'she wanted it' if charged with assault or sexual assault.

However, from a libertarian standpoint, this is an incursion into the civil liberties of those who want to practice S&M. So, the Law Commission is proposing a complex series of changes to the law, to effectively legalise S&M, presumably in response to the 'gay' outrage at the Spanner verdicts (there, the injuries were more than trivial, so the men's convictions were upheld).

The central risk for women in these proposals is that consent will become a major issue in all (intimate) assault cases between adults (the Law Commission does recognise that it is *not* generally appropriate to suggest that children could consent to assault). This raises the possibility (or even likelihood) of (say) a man who is charged with GBH against (say) his girlfriend being able to claim that this was merely in the course of 'rough sex' and that that is 'how she likes it'. Issues of consent already make rape trials into a terrible ordeal for many women — it is because of the consent issue that

evidence of past sexual encounters and so on, are often introduced by the defence, in rape cases. It is already all too difficult to successfully prosecute a domestic assault and these changes are likely to make it even harder.

The Law Commission is calling for responses to its suggestions and it is important that the debate is broadened out, so that they are aware that this is not simply a matter which affects the (relatively few) who practice (physically dangerous) S&M, but that it also affects the civil liberties of the thousands of women who experience domestic assaults and/or sexual assaults.

Copies of the Law Commission's Consultation. The paper can be obtained from them, and the deadline for contributions is the end of June, but women should still send in their contributions after that.

Their address is: The Law Commission, 37 John St., London, WC1N 2BQ, Tel: (0171) 411-1220.

Kate Cook

Justice for Women

Public Meeting

24th June 7-9 pm

Justice for Women has always worked towards changing the homicide laws in relation to men getting away with killing women known to them. In 1995 over 100 men killed their partners or ex-partners. Most of these men pleaded provocation or diminished responsibility. Many of these men walked free from court or were given extremely light sentences. Following our success in campaigning against the injustice of cases where women have been convicted of murder for killing their abusers, we need your support to highlight this huge problem. The failure of the law to respond appropriately to the murder of women by men is not unique in Britain and we are making links with feminists who have campaigned on this issue in France, Brazil and Australia.

Please come to our public meeting to add your protest against this licence to kill.

Conway Hall
Red Lion Square, London
Bar and snacks available.

Getting Away with Murder

In this country, a significant proportion of homicides are 'domestic'—most are cases of men killing women. Feminists have consistently drawn attention to the striking discrepancy in the treatment of men who kill their wives and partners, and women who kill abusive men. The women whose cases have been taken up by Justice for Women are typically serving long sentences, having been convicted of murder. The men, by contrast, are overwhelmingly likely to succeed in getting the charge reduced to manslaughter. Some do not serve prison sentences at all.

Here Sandra McNeill scrutinises a sample of cases from the last two years to reveal the shocking facts about how often men literally get away with murder. She challenges those liberal pressure groups which campaign for the abolition of mandatory life sentences for murder, arguing that for feminists the real issue is why any conviction for murder in these cases is the exception rather than the rule. Why, she asks, are men who kill women not considered a danger to the public?

The time has come to state publicly that in this country men can kill their wives or girlfriends and get away with it. The time has come to challenge it.

We are not alone

In the recent Palestinian elections Dr Hanan Ashrawi — former leader of the Palestinian delegation to the Middle East Peace talks — was one of five women elected. She now plans to improve women's status. Her priorities are: compulsory education for women up to secondary level; banning of marriage under 18; and banning of 'honour killings', where men can kill a wife or female relative though guilty of infidelity.¹

For 20 years Brazilian feminists have been campaigning against 'the honour defence to murder and the proprietary attitudes towards women on which it is based.' In 1988 they

organised protests around the case of Joao Lopez who was acquitted of killing his wife and her lover. The jury accepted the argument that he had acted in defence of his honour. Protests led to the case going all the way to the highest Appeal Court which overturned the verdict and declared 'murder cannot be seen as a legitimate response to adultery'.

This was a victory. However at his retrial, he was again acquitted, by a jury. Brazilian feminists know that the changes they are seeking 'require more than a change in the legal framework. It requires a whole change in attitude: a man should not be able to beat or kill his wife with impunity'.²

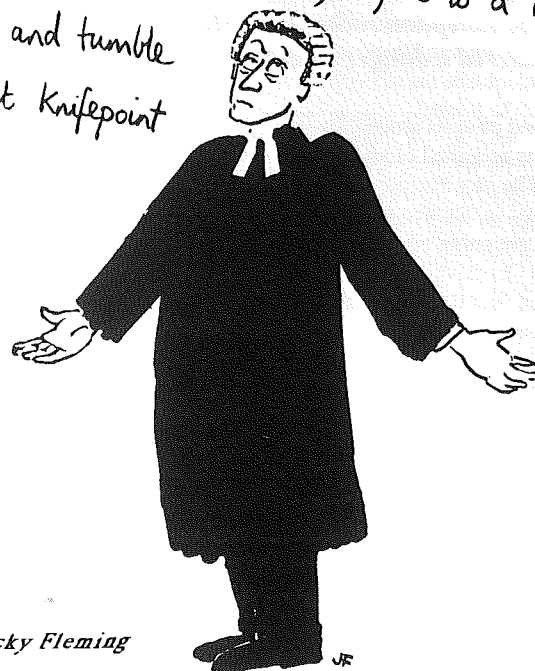
But that doesn't happen here — Oh Yes it Does

In England the defence of provocation, reducing murder to manslaughter was first introduced to

protect aristocratic young men who got into sword fights. (Think about Romeo and Juliet. Apart from being a heterosexual love story the plot consists of a series of encounters and fights to death between such young men.) Later the defence was extended to men who killed their wives' lovers — as long as this was in hot blood. In the 1920s the original reason why the defence was introduced was removed from the law (as by now young men stabbing each other to death were more likely to be working class youths — who should not have been carrying knives). In these histories there is simply no mention of men killing their wives. So either it was totally forbidden... or so commonplace it was not worth including. After all if a man in the eighteenth century accidentally killed his child or servant by an 'unlucky blow' while punishing him, this was not a crime in law. What do we think the situation was for wife killing?

The killing of women by men is not mentioned until feminist campaigns in the last

women are forever changing their minds — ONE minute they agree to a cup of coffee, and the NEXT minute they object to a bit of rough and tumble at knifepoint



© Jacky Fleming

from *Hello Boys* (Penguin, forthcoming) — A collection of new cartoons

century began to heighten the issue. The research into the history of women-killing remains to be done. I recently undertook some research for Justice for Women as background to discussions of the Mandatory Life Sentence.³ Men in UK are getting away with murder. While infidelity remains the most frequent excuse for killing of wives and girlfriends, in fact any excuse will do. We were aware that many men get away with murder. Whenever we have been campaigning about a particular woman sentenced to life for murder we have had no problem finding a recent case of a man successfully pleading manslaughter in similar circumstances and getting a short sentence or walking free; usually pleading diminished responsibility.⁴ These are not exceptional cases. They are the rule. The exceptions are the men who get life for murder.

Men who do get life for murder

Men who kill their wives or girlfriends or ex-wives and ex-girlfriends and plead diminished responsibility or provocation nearly always walk free or get short sentences for manslaughter. This becomes clear when you look at the exceptions, the men who do get life for murder of their wives or girlfriends. In the last two years they have been few and all have got some factor which makes them extraordinary...

- The man who killed his wife, a Building Society Manager. He robbed the Society, tied himself up and blamed a gang of robbers.⁵
- The vet who killed his wife by giving her immobiline — something that dopes horses — for weeks. He cashed an £180,000 insurance policy on her death and arranged to marry his mistress. When forensic and medical evidence was found he said his wife must have taken the drugs herself to commit suicide.⁶
- The ex-butcher turned prison warden who killed his wife and cut her body into joints of meat. He put them in the freezer and flushed the organs and hair down the loo. Reported her missing. Appealed for her. Joined police search. The police search was thorough. They found traces of blood in an outflow pipe and then her body hidden in a freezer in the loft — under peas. He then tried to run provocation. The jury did not buy it.⁷
- The man previously convicted of attempted murder of his wife (sentenced to four and a half years). Got parole after 2 years. Ambushes his ex-wife and her new man in their

Is there perhaps something which the victims of domestic violence have in common — some CLUE as to WHY they are abused?



Yes. The one element CONSISTENTLY present in ALL the cases we studied, was a violent partner



© Jacky Fleming

garden. Almost kills man. Kills her with sawn off shotgun. Had told mates he would do it.⁸

When sentencing the vet to life the judge said he was the 'most evil selfish criminally callous man' he had ever had to sentence.

So, men who devise fiendish plots, men who are trapped by forensic evidence, men who try to kill once and if they don't succeed try and try again — get life for murder. All the rest get off with manslaughter.

Any excuse will do

Justice for Women have flagged up the most common excuses: she was unfaithful or she nagged. These are winners every time. But in fact any old excuse will do.

'Ambulance driver who kills lover blames work stress'. An ambulance driver killed the woman with whom he had lived for 10 years. They were splitting up. They had been to marriage guidance counselling but she still planned to leave. He killed her with a sawn off shot gun. His defence (diminished responsibility) was that five months earlier he had attended the scene of the Baltic Exchange Bombing. One victim had died in his arms. So he had been suffering from stress. This excuse was accepted by judge and prosecution (no need for a jury). He got four years for manslaughter.⁹

Many people have stressful jobs. Ambulance drivers, like police officers, firefighters, physiotherapists, nurses, doctors and many more

attend the aftermath of accidents and disaster and bombings. Should that excuse any murder they commit? Of course not. So why did it succeed in this case? I would suggest that it is in fact because he killed his girlfriend who was leaving him. Others would not perceive him to be guilty of much. Not a heinous crime. Not a danger to the public (see below).

Most cases, however are marked by their ordinariness:

- she was having an affair
- she taunted him about his sexual prowess
- they were divorcing
- she had walked out on him
- she nagged

The list goes on and on. Some walk free, some get three years. The unlucky ones get five years. And men know this. One man jailed for a year for killing his wife, was shocked to receive a prison sentence. He had bashed her brains out on a concrete path during 'an argument'. He told the judge he was concerned about who would look after the child when he was in jail.¹⁰

Men expect to get away with murder. This is dangerous to the public. It means women who live with them or leave them are at risk. Women must be very careful. One woman in 1994 was not careful. When she discovered her husband was having an affair she punched him on the nose. (It required hospital treatment.) He told her he had had two other affairs. She kicked him. He strangled her. A jury found him not

guilty of murder. He walked free. The judge (giving him 18 months suspended) said, 'He had been outrageously provoked'.¹¹ Yes, I think the double standard is alive and well here.

Change the law

Justice for Women has for years been seeking to establish that domestic violence should be grounds for manslaughter. That is in the case of violence from men to women. There was no need to establish that violence — any at all — from a woman to a man was grounds for manslaughter as the above case shows. Yet at Sara Thornton's first appeal in 1991 Justice Beldam had said 'Domestic violence is no excuse for murder'.

Thanks to campaigns by Southall Black Sisters and Justice for Women, not only has domestic violence finally been accepted as a defence which can reduce murder to manslaughter but juries are no longer required to consider only the events immediately before the death. Cumulative provocation in a defence of diminished responsibility was accepted at the appeal of Kiranjit Ahluwalia in 1992. In the case of Emma Humphreys (1995) cumulative provocation was allowed to be included in the defence of provocation. Both those cases involved repeated violence from the men.

Sue Bandali in an article about men getting away with murder, worries that these gains will be used by men to help them get away with more murder.¹² But men are already using cumulative provocation — not in cases of them being regularly beaten by their wives — but in relation to nagging. When men plead provocation on the grounds that their wives nagged, they are palpably not talking about one occasion. Yet they have been successfully pleading it for years.

Oliver Kellett, one of many men using this defense, stabbed his wife Lucy as she was preparing to leave him after years of violence from him. His GP gave evidence that Kellett had been severely provoked by Lucy's nagging. He walked free. Three years probation. His plea was accepted by the judge and prosecution so there was no jury trial.¹³ If instead of him killing Lucy, Lucy had killed him at that time, then then a jury would have been told to discount his years of violence and only consider any threat on the last occasion. Yet then as now he can plead 'she nagged'.

Justice for Women were right to insist

cumulative violence should count as a defence within the definition of provocation. Justice for Women have been aware that changing the law is itself not enough and have also campaigned widely to change public attitudes. However we have been wary of general attempts to reform provocation for example by removing the need to prove sudden and temporary loss of control, without such safeguards as adding that neither words alone nor actual or alleged infidelity should count as defences. We have supported the creation of a different defence of Self Preservation (see article by Jill Radford and Liz Kelly in *T&S* 22).

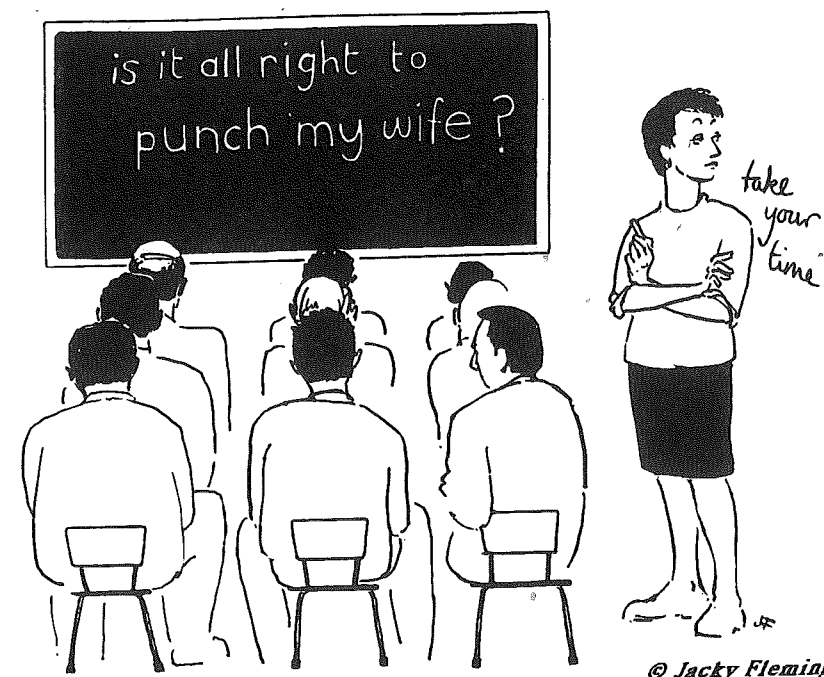
These demands have not so far been taken seriously or attracted many supporters beyond feminist groups and women's committees. Instead Justice for Women have been urged to support quite a different campaign: for the abolition of the mandatory life sentence for murder.

The life sentence debate

Since 1991, *The Guardian* has repeatedly argued that Justice for Women should simply join the campaign for the abolition of the mandatory life sentence, on the grounds that if it is successful women who kill will have no more problems as judges will be able to take into account their 'tragic circumstances'. Justice for Women has disagreed for two reasons.

Firstly, judges are not known for being sympathetic to women. In the case of women who have killed violent men this is evident in the lengthy tariffs given. (The tariff is the amount of time someone sentenced to life must serve before being considered for parole. Josephine Smith and other women we have supported have tariffs of 12 and 15 years). One cannot rely on the mercy of judges. Secondly, convicted women like Emma Humphreys have said themselves that the most important thing for them was being free — of the label murderer. To these reasons I would now add a third. Those men currently getting life should carry on getting life. So should many of those getting away with murder.

What are the arguments for abolishing the Mandatory Life Sentence? The position of Liberty (formerly National Council for Civil Liberties) is that it wants rid of all life sentences. They argue that prisoners do not benefit from them! They also argue that no one should be detained for crimes they might commit as



© Jacky Fleming

opposed to crimes they have committed. 'If a prisoner is considered dangerous there should be a "medical disposal" to a place where they can get treatment'.¹⁴ They nowhere take on board the fact that someone who is not mad (whatever that means) could still be a danger to us, the public.

The Prison Reform Trust do support the retention of the life sentence but maintain that it should not be mandatory. Instead it should be reserved for the 'most heinous' of crimes and for perpetrators who are 'a danger to the public'. They do not consider men who kill their wives and girlfriends to come in that category.¹⁵

Other arguments from Liberty and the Prison Reform Trust concern abuses of the system. For example someone due for release who commits a minor infringement of prison rules and is set back years; or someone released on licence who commits a very minor offence (e.g. stealing a packet of fags) and has his licence revoked and goes back to serving life. These abuses could be removed by having, as Liberty also suggest, 'stringent procedural safeguards about the granting of parole and revocation of licence'.

The major abuse the Prison Reform Trust are concerned about is the abuse of the Home Secretary's powers. This could also be reformed by taking the power away from politicians and

giving it to a senior parole board. Just because there are abuses of a system does not mean that system should be scrapped.

Once the abuses are addressed all we are left with is the point made at length by the Prison Reform Trust: that most lifers are not members of the 'criminal classes' — so they are therefore no danger to the public. Are not wives and girlfriends the public? They say life should only be the punishment for the most heinous crimes. They do not consider men who kill their wives and girlfriends to be in that category. For such men they argue for mercy.

I would argue they are getting too much mercy already. Already in most cases they are not even convicted of murder. Rather than abolishing the mandatory life sentence we should be looking at why it so seldom applies. How do we go about making it apply in cases where men kill women because they leave, say they are leaving, have affairs or are alleged to have affairs, or nag? Women are no longer chattel who must be cheerfully subservient.

Like our sisters in Brazil we must ensure there is a change both in the law and in public attitudes. Yes even in the attitudes of *The Guardian*, Liberty and the Prison Reform Trust. With our sisters around the globe, we must say it is time to stop men getting away with murder. □

References

- ¹ *The Guardian* February 8th 1996
- ² Miranda Davies (ed) *Women and Violence — Realities and Responses World Wide* (Zed Press, 1994)
- ³ Times Index 1994/95 for list of cases of men who did get life for murder in a domestic homicide.
- ⁴ In 1991 just after Sara Thornton's appeal against her conviction for murder for stabbing her drunken violent husband was turned down, Joseph McGrail was freed by the same court which had sentenced Sara. McGrail had kicked to death his common law wife Marion Kennedy. His excuse was he had come home to find her drunk again. The judge said 'that woman would have tried the patience of a saint'.
- ⁵ Carol Wardell killed by Gordon Wardell *The Times* November 15 1995
- ⁶ Sandra Ryan killed by James Ryan *The Times* May 4 and 26 1995
- ⁷ Myrtle Allen killed by Michael Allen *The Times* July 7 1995
- ⁸ Margaret Whitcombe killed by Philip Manning *The Times* July 25 1995
- ⁹ Susan Oliver killed by Trevor Thomas *The Times* June 23 1993
- ¹⁰ Donna Swaton Killed by Simon Swaton *The Times* February 25 1995
- ¹¹ Diane Hunt killed by Alan Hunt *The Times* October 29 1994
- ¹² Sue Bandali 'Provocation — A Cautionary Note' (*Law and Society*, September 1995)
- ¹³ Oliver Kellett pre trial review — plea accepted. 13th April 1992, Chesterfield.
- ¹⁴ Liberty *Submission to the House of Lords Select Committee on Murder and Life Imprisonment* (1989)
- ¹⁵ Prison Reform Trust *Committee on the Penalty for Homicide Report* (1993)

International Conference on Violence, Abuse and Women's Citizenship

One of the most important international conferences on violence against women to be held in recent years will take place in Brighton in November 1996. We urge our T&S readers to take advantage of this rare opportunity to network with activists from around the world.

About the Event

This international event will focus on the causes and consequences of all forms of violence and abuse against women and children around the world. Violence and abuse take many forms — but they all have something in common: the denial of women's human rights and *full citizenship*. Throughout the world women are taking action to challenge this oppression in courageous, innovative and empowering ways.

The purpose of this conference

1. To promote understanding of the ways in which violence, abuse and gendered power relations affect women's citizenship and human rights.
2. To build on United Nations, European and other international initiatives on the elimination of violence and discrimination against women and children.
3. To take forward what was achieved at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing, September 1995.
4. To promote government action on violence and abuse as human rights and social justice issues for women.
5. To provide an opportunity to develop and strengthen alliances within the international women's movement in a meaningful way and specifically to draw together and develop activity at international, national, regional and local levels.
6. To develop Action Plans in the following areas:
 - Social/public policy and legislation
 - Research and education
 - Intervention and prevention

Who will be involved?

- Survivors of violence and abuse
- Women and their organisations
- Practitioners
- Social workers/Social Care Advocates
- Activists
- Academics
- Educationalists
- Public sector and welfare workers
- Politicians
- Policy makers
- Health care professionals
- Counsellors/therapists
- Civil and criminal justice
- Students

General information

Each day will consist of opening speakers in the main hall followed by panel discussions, workshops, action planning, seminars and time to network. **The conference is open to women and men.** It is expected that men attending will consider effective ways to challenge male violence in all its forms and support women's strategies that emerge from the conference. Sessions outside the main hall will be structured as mixed, women only and men only sessions. Each day will end with further keynote speakers in the main hall. The week is structured so that you can attend the whole week or selected days.

The working language will be English. This is a self-funded conference without Government or other major sponsorship. However, it is our intention to provide as extensive an interpretation service as possible.

Contribution to the week/participation

A key aim of the conference is to share information within an international context. To enable us to plan and structure full and balanced representation on a global scale, we would like you to contact us if you have contributions to make in the following areas: policy making, legislation, campaigns, lobbying, research, service delivery, individual and social support, self help initiatives, publicity on issues that concern you and your community.

We would like you to ask your Government representatives what their plans are for implementing the UN International Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. Please send this information to us.

To be considered as a speaker at the conference, send a maximum of one page outlining your project or activity. Please attach this to your Registration Form. We would also appreciate being sent information that could be included in the workshops, seminars and action planning. Please note that this needs to be sent to us by the end of August.

Confirmed keynote speakers contributing to the event:

Reem Abdelhadi, Palestine and UK: General Union of Palestine Women
Farida Akter, Bangladesh: UBINIG
Louise Armstrong, USA and UK: Incest survivor

Kathleen Barry, USA: Coalition Against Trafficking in Women

Charlotte Bunch, USA: Global Campaign for Women's Human Rights and Center for Women's Global Leadership

Belinda Calaguas, Philippines and UK
Beatrix Campbell, UK: Child protection
The Bombay Women's Centre, India
Phyllis Chesler, USA: Women and mental health

Radhika Coomaraswamy, Sri Lanka: United National Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women

Neli Van Dijk, Netherlands: Chair of Women's Rights Committee of European Parliament
Efua Dorkenoo, UK: Founder of FORWARD
Andrea Dworkin, USA: Women and pornography

Raquel Edralin-Tiglao, Philippines: Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, Asia Pacific
Eveline Giobbe, USA: WHISPER (Women Hurt in Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt)

Sheila Jeffreys, UK and Australia: Lesbian feminist activist

Tessa Jowell, UK: Shadow Minister for Women, Labour Party

Eva Lundgren, Sweden and Norway: Child protection

Linda MacLeod, Canada: Consultant to Canadian Government on Domestic Violence and writer

Mmatshilo Motsei, South Africa: Domestic abuse prevention and training

Ellen Pence, USA: Duluth Project, Minnesota
Mimi Ramsey, Ethiopia and USA: Survivor of female genital mutilation

Janice Raymond, USA: Reproductive technologies

Beth Richie, USA: Violence against Black women

Diana Russell, USA: An organiser of the 1975 International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women

If you are a singer, musician, theatre group, poet or artist and would like to participate in the social events, please send one page maximum on your work. There will also be space for stalls and exhibitions. If you wish to be considered for a space, contact us.

For all of the above, you must make contact in writing before the end of August. You can fax, email or post your written request. Please do not leave messages on the answerphone.

STRUCTURE OF THE WEEK

Sunday 10 November	Times	Monday 11 November	Tuesday 12 November	Wednesday 13 November	Thursday 14 November	Friday 15 November
Civic Reception in the evening with opening speeches 7.00 pm - 10.00 pm No charge to delegates		Rape, Sexual Assault, Sexual Harassment and Domestic Violence		Harmful Cultural Practices including (FGM and female infanticide)	Trafficking of women including prostitution and pornography	Child Abuse and Child Protection
	9.00 - 9.45	Registration	Registration	Registration	Registration	Registration
	10.00 - 11.15	Keynote Speakers	Keynote Speakers	Keynote Speakers	Keynote Speakers	Keynote Speakers
	11.45 - 1.00	Networking/Seminars, Panels, Workshops				
	1.00 - 2.00	Lunch				
	2.00 - 3.15	Networking/Seminars, Panels, Workshops, Action Planning				
	3.30 - 4.30	Keynote Speakers	Keynote Speakers	Keynote Speakers	Keynote Speakers	Keynote Speakers
	7.00 pm onwards	Cultural and Social Activities				

The Co-ordinator, The Violence, Abuse and Women's Citizenship Conference, PO Box MT7, Leeds, LS17 5XJ, England, UK

Phone:

From within the UK, tel: (01274) 385 234

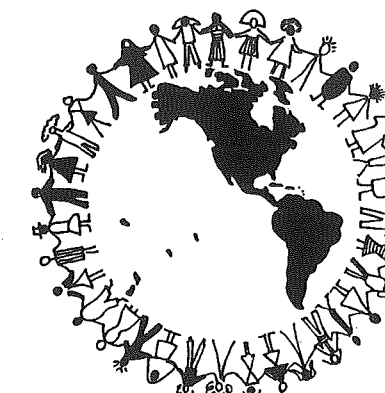
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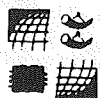


ChAnGE

CHANGe's main aim is to promote recognition of the inalienable human rights and dignity of women and to publicise their abuse, whether by state, commercial interest or individual



Promoting Awareness to Counter Traditional Practices Prejudicial to the health of Women and Children



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NAWO

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Floundering in the Net

Dale Spender is a convert to computer technology. In her new book *Nattering on the Net: Women, Power and Cyberspace*, she predicts that the new world order will be unrecognisable and that those whose lives and work are based on print technology will be left behind. But what do these changes mean for women? Dianne Butterworth reviews her book and takes issue with some of her conclusions. For readers unfamiliar with the workings of the Net, we offer a 'Beginner's Guide' immediately after the review.

Dale Spender is a founding member of Women, Information Technology and Scholarship (WITS) and is clearly enthusiastic about the educational opportunities that information technology offers. Throughout *Nattering on the Net*, she compares the electronic media revolution with the changes that occurred when another media shift took place: when knowledge based on manuscripts became knowledge based on printed books.

The development of the printing press created a revolution. According to Dale Spender, until then, the Church had a monopoly on information in Europe and therefore controlled people's minds. It trained the monks, priests and scholars who read and copied manuscripts, and any deviation from the set text and set interpretation was forbidden. Faced with the prospect of mass distribution of books, she says, the Church reacted with panic, desperate to preserve its power base. It did not take kindly to the possible diffusion of unauthorised ideas. Those who had a stake in keeping their position also reacted against books, fearing that their skills would no longer be necessary. They claimed that true scholarship would be destroyed because no-one

could possibly know and understand so many books. Family conversation would be destroyed and society would be corrupted.

Democratising and standardising

Dale Spender argues that print meant that knowledge was democratised, the Church lost its grip on ideology and new information was more easily circulated. However, she says, the print era brought problems of its own. She argues that it was due to the development of the printing press that language became standardised. (In fact, well before the printing press was invented the standardisation of language was already underway for political reasons, i.e. as a result of the development of nation states. Print made the standardisation *easier*.) Spelling, grammar, dictionaries and so on were developed, all based on a white, professional, male standard. For example, grammatical rules against ending a sentence with an infinitive were based on the fact that in Latin it was impossible to do so, and therefore scholars, educated in Latin and Greek, encoded this rule into English. Generations of grammarians have

Dale Spender *Nattering on the Net: Women, Power and Cyberspace* (Spinifex Press 1995)

insisted that since 'everyone' is singular, it should accord with 'he', as in 'Everyone is entitled to his opinion', because 'man' includes 'woman' and 'he' includes 'she', in the male-centric view of the world. And dictionaries included what men thought important and encoded male definitions, for example woman=weak in the *Macquarie Dictionary* and *Thesaurus*.

'PHALLOCENTRIC'
OFTEN FOUND IN
DICK- TIONARIES



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As the 'public domain' texts such as the Bible and collections of fairy tales were exhausted by the publishers, a demand was created for new texts. The issues of the ownership of texts became problematic, Dale Spender argues; originally the author would sell their work for a one-off fee and the publisher became the owner. Eventually the system of 'intellectual property' and copyright evolved, with royalties paid to the author for each copy sold. New concepts such as plagiarism had to be invented; it is now considered a horrendous intellectual crime to plagiarise someone else's work.

The wide availability of books and the valorisation of the creative 'talent' of an author also led to literature being taken seriously. Dale Spender claims that, despite resistance to the idea, the study of literature became acceptable within universities by mimicking other types of more 'scientific' study, which meant that universities had to be able to test students. This is the reason, in her view, why subjects such as Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon were included on the literature syllabus, and why every student had to be able to judge whether or not a book was 'good' or 'bad', according to whichever

texts were at the time included in the canon. Naturally, the 'good' literature is written by white men and nothing else is worth reading. She points out that *The Great Books of the Western World*, the substance of the canon, only included women in the 1990 edition (Jane Austen, Willa Cather, George Eliot and Virginia Woolf, in case you wanted to know), but no Black authors were represented at all. Needless to say, feminists and Blacks have been blamed for the 'declining standards' in literature, for having the audacity to question the value judgments of those who decide the canon.

The medium is the mindset?

One of the other effects of the print era, according to Dale Spender, is that the print medium has in itself an effect on the way people think. Those readers familiar with her theories of language will already know that she believes that language determines the way we think: 'According to Dale Spender, it is through their control over meaning that men are able to impose on everyone their own view of the world; women, without the ability to symbolise their experience in the male language, either internalise male reality (alienation) or find themselves unable to speak at all (silence).'¹

Similarly, she makes the rather contentious claim that the medium of communication also determines how we think. She argues that, along with the (male-normed) standardisation of language that resulted from the printing process, came the imposition of a standardising 'mind-set': 'Partly because print itself doesn't change, the medium has helped to promote a mindset in which we want other aspects of life — and language — to remain fixed and unalterable'. (p 9) Therefore 'with its ability to fix the language, and the ideas, over the centuries print has limited and skewed the active process of thinking and talking'. (p10)

End of an era

All of the above developments due to the print era will be overthrown, according to Dale Spender — 'authors' will be a thing of the past, because anyone who wants to will be able to publish on the Net; books themselves will no longer exist, but will be replaced by multimedia experiences, including video clips, sound, text and graphics; the role of the 'author' will become more closely akin to a film director, perhaps co-ordinating a team effort.

In Dale Spender's view, without publishers and editors as gatekeepers, standardisation will be abolished. Computer-based tools such as spellcheckers and electronic thesauruses will provide the editing tools, which people can either employ or disregard. 'People spelt creatively before print, and no doubt they will again after the values and mindset of standardisation have begun to recede.' (p 14)

Other inventions of the print era will also be transformed, she argues. Plagiarism, she says, depends on two concepts: first 'it demands that someone know that particular passages have been plagiarised'. (p 74) With the amount of material that will be published on the Net, how can anyone be conversant with all the material on a given subject? Secondly, 'it depends on the concept of originality. This concept is being

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seriously questioned in the new literary theories'. (p75) Concepts such as copyright will therefore have to be re-thought.

In addition, she argues, literary canons, with their hierarchies of the great and the good will also become irrelevant, when anyone with a computer can publish what they like, without being vetted by publishers. 'Because there is no place for a single, exclusive standard in the new global networks, the canon and much of the justification for literature now have little credibility.' (p 43)

Education will change beyond all recognition. Dale Spender insists that computers are

much more suited than human brains for the storing of information. 'Teaching students to store information in their heads — and to recall it on demand, on certain days of the year, with pen and paper (which is still the way that education is conducted in many places), and then to label them correct or incorrect, is neither a valid nor a useful activity in the computer era.' (p 106) Breaking down learning into distinct subjects and set hours will not be appropriate in the new computer era, nor will learning require a physical classroom, when students can access schools and universities on the Net.

The role of academics will also change. Dale Spender contends that academics will have to 'perform or perish' rather than 'publish or perish', and they will become more facilitators than authoritative sources. 'The trend towards the democratisation of research and scholarship (which parallels the democratisation of authorship) is already discernible. Research is no longer confined to the university. Market researchers, television researchers, etc. are making a significant contribution to the information industry (and often displacing the university researchers in the process).' (p 141)

Libraries, too, will no longer focus on books, but will maintain electronic copies of texts. Librarians will have to invent new methods of indexing the vast amount of information on the Net. Dale Spender points out that the keywords used to catalogue Net information will be crucial. Librarians will be the navigators through the seas of the Net.

These are not bad things, she says, but exciting new developments. However, she is not oblivious to the potential hazards of the new technology. The main point she makes throughout the book is that all this information must be available to everyone, which it is not at the moment. 'The recognition of the increasing gap between the information-rich and the information-poor has led to a growing appreciation that access to information — for all — needs to be enshrined as a human right.' (p 148)

Woman-friendly Net (not!)

Dale Spender also warns that we cannot assume that women's needs and perspectives will be incorporated into the evolving Internet. She quotes from a study on Internet users — 56% were between the ages of 21 and 30; 94% were male; 45% professionals; 22% graduate students. In addition, women tend to have less

money than men, and less leisure time, which means fewer women have computers or the time to access the Net. She notes that women historically have had less training in science and technology and that girls traditionally are encouraged to relate to people, not machines.

I LAUNCHED
MY BOOK
INTO
CYBERSPACE



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BUT I'D
HAVE
PREFERRED
WATERSTONES

She quotes from a UK study of teachers in which 49% of teachers sampled (across all subjects) believed that technology subjects were very important to a boy's general education compared with 24% saying they were important to a girl's general education. 60% said that technical subjects were important for a boy's future, but only 25.7% for a girl's. (p 179) She also points out that computer science labs tend to be hostile environments for women, with macho posturing and widespread use of computer pornography.

The Internet is far from being an inviting environment for women. Not only is it a mostly male environment, there are a number of users who can react very aggressively towards women. Dale Spender relates what happened when a group of researchers monitored the conversation on Megabyte University for a period of five

weeks, where there was, apparently, a small friendly list with a slight feminist influence. Men dominated the postings at 70%. At one point in the period:

a feminist topic was raised, and for two consecutive days, women posted more messages than men. Despite the fact that, on the 33 other days for which records were kept, it was men who took up most of the space, there was an angry response on the part of some men when women took a two-day turn. Accusations came from the men that they were being silenced. Some even threatened to 'unsubscribe' from the list. One man wrote the lengthiest message of all — 1098 words — protesting that the women were 'shutting up' the men with their vituperation and insults. (p 194)

She quotes from the researchers' report: 'In [his message], he accuses women on the list of "posting without thinking their contribution through carefully first", of levelling charges (rather than questions) at the men and in general of "bashing", "guilt tripping" and "bullying" men who don't toe a strict feminist line. A man who overtly sided with the women also comes under attack; he is accused of betraying his brothers out of feminist-induced guilt.' (p 194)

This tallies with my own experience on CompuServe (not part of the Internet, although it offers access to it separately, but a commercial bulletin board with various areas of discussion). One of the CompuServe forums is called 'Issues' and is subdivided into various sections, such as Women's Issues, Men's Issues, Gay and Lesbian Issues, etc. The topics of conversation on the Men's Issues section are political — and mostly anti-feminist. Here's part of an exchange from one of the messages on the topic 'Preventing batterers' (the topic is determined by the person who first posts a message. Subsequent messages replying to replies to messages can stray far off the original topic):

Jerry: OTOH [on the other hand], I observe that there are plenty of young men who have been 'gender-whipped' into *assuming*, without proof, that men *typically* treat women badly, abuse them physically and emotionally, and pretty much deserve whatever shrill abuse comes back at them. Quite sad. [The asterisks are the electronic equivalent of underlining.]

Bob: Those would be the men on our college campuses, who must deal with the most rabid among the gender feminists on a daily basis. But these men are starting to rebel against the constant assaults; they're starting to organize. It's the best hope for the men's movement, especially at a time when the academic hate-mongers are turning off the college-age women (my daughter and her friends referred to their women's studies class as 'feminaziclass').

Even the Women's Issues section is not exempt from aggressive messages from men on a political topic. And, as Dale Spender notes, it is impossible to restrict men's access to supposedly women-only Internet services.

She also points out that sexual harassment is a risk women run on the Net, if they post messages under an identifiably female name. She cites, amongst others, a case of a woman who received a Valentine's Day message saying that she would have her throat cut and be gangbanged, 'fucked to death'. (p 203) She draws parallels with other forms of sexual harassment — behaviour which is designed to stake out territory and exclude women. And yet, many Internet users claim that no action should be taken, because freedom of speech is paramount. The Internet is also being used to transmit huge amounts of computer pornography. (In a recent case in the United States, a male student was prosecuted for posting a 'fantasy' on the Internet about raping one of his classmates.)

Dale Spender argues that women's realities can also be distorted through the method by which information is categorised. For instance, she notes that 'there is more than one such place that I could name which has no entry for violence against women, and where "rape" is to be found under "life cycle".' (p 158)

A sceptical view

I will admit to being a techno-nerd. I will admit to wanting the latest, most powerful computer packed with RAM and a CD-ROM drive (an unlikely prospect, so I will have to make do at the moment with my 4 year old 386sx with 4MB RAM). I will admit to reading computer magazines and to wanting all my friends to understand computers. However, I am less optimistic about the global benefits of the Internet than Dale Spender.

It is because of all the hazards she points out that I believe the vast majority of people will never see the benefits she describes. As she herself says, 'In countries where children are dying of starvation, where there is little or no health care and no clean water, it borders on the obscene to talk about the pressing need for information infrastructure.' (p 250) Even if access to electronic information were enshrined as a human right, a human rights declaration signed by a government isn't worth the paper it's written on: the British government has

signed an international convention on the rights of refugees but still deprives refugees of the right to benefit; it has signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, but still does not fund refugees even to the extent recommended by its own commissions.

In addition, her arguments about the imposition of a 'standardising mindset' as a result of the invention of print amounts to a form of technological determinism. I do not subscribe to the notion that the way you think is determined by the medium through which you receive information; many of the things she attributes to the print revolution existed before books did, for example structured argumentation and people's resistance to change. Therefore I do not think that a shift in mindset will necessarily result from the electronic revolution.

Widespread use of electronic media will not of itself bring about a more egalitarian, pluralist, non-standardised world view. Dale Spender says that 'the dismay and distress at the passing of the print era has more to do with bringing to an end a patriarchal presence that has been encoded in communication than it has to do with the loss of print'. (p10) But I have great faith (if that's the word I'm looking for) in the self-interested survival of patriarchy. As she herself points out in the chapter 'Women, Power and Cyberspace', patriarchy seems rather entrenched already in the Internet.

Nor do I agree that mass authorship equates to mass empowerment as she does: "super-personal-computer-TV-fax-modem-sound-recording-desktop-video-publishing-playback-studio". This would be the ultimate in empowerment; everyone who had such a box could be a fully multimedia author, able to publish their own productions for everyone else in the world who was wired up.' (p 90) As a materialist feminist, I believe that change comes from collective political action, not from individual postings on the Internet. This is why radical feminists have always insisted that academic feminism be combined with activism.

Information revolution — or is it overload?

The proliferation of data will not necessarily lead to better informed Net users. Data is not the same as information. Despite Dale Spender's postmodernist enthusiasm about mass authorship, gigabytes of undifferentiated

Science fiction novels:

Mary Rosenblum *Chimera*
(Ballantine Books, 1993)

Jewel Martina is a medical aide, tending to the bodies of the extremely wealthy aged who spend their time in virtual reality. In her spare time, she scours the Net looking for information to put together 'data packages' to sell to corporations which will enable her to pay for her expensive Net time. This novel looks at what bodies mean in a world where the virtual is more real to some people than 'the flesh', where the huge population of dispossessed cannot afford Net access and are condemned to low paid factory and service industry jobs in an all-too-depressing reality. She also touches on what virtual reality art might be.

Neal Stephenson *Snow Crash* (Roc, 1993)

The Mafia control the pizza delivery business and people, if they can afford it, live in independent suburb/nations. There are no laws any more. Hiro Protagonist is one of the programmers who wrote the code for the virtual reality version of the Internet. He sells information to the Central Library, where, if people access it, he gets paid. He and YT, a courier who delivers packages on a skateboard by harpooning passing cars, investigate a new drug/virus called Snow Crash which is transmitted electronically, which causes the human brain to 'crash'.

Marge Piercy *Body of Glass*
(Penguin, 1992)

Tikva, a free town, exists precariously amidst multi-national corporation-controlled domes. The earth has been ravaged by environmental disasters—global warming, pollution, disease and famine. Now someone or something is attacking the town and its databases. Shira and her grandmother Malkah, a programmer, help to defend it.

¹ Deborah Cameron *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* (MacMillan Press 1988, p 108)

information are more overwhelming than informative. If, let's say, *Trouble & Strife* were published on the World Wide Web, one of the keywords it could be categorised under would be 'feminism', but it would be listed along with other materials such as misogynistic rantings by fundamentalists in America, Joe Bloggs' opinions about affirmative action in France, and reviews of the latest Camille Paglia book.

I also have 'faith' in capitalism: where there's a potential profit, a way will be found of exploiting it. Copyright will probably be a lot more enduring than Dale Spender thinks. Even now, various groups are investigating the possibility of electronically embedding in all digital information a 'copyright' stamp. Recently the *Sunday Observer* (3 March 1996) reported that the US government is trying to pass through Congress the National Information Infrastructure Copyright Protection Bill under which a Net user will pay royalties for accessing an item on the Internet, even if they're just looking at it to see if they're interested in downloading it.

The issue of leisure time is also crucial. Most people, when they first get access to the Internet (the World Wide Web, in particular), spend hours and hours looking at and downloading material, enthralled by the amount of data available. Usually they realise that the amount of time they are using is unsustainable. For many people, especially women, this time is just not available. There is a danger, too, in replacing all forms of face-to-face social contact with Internet interfacing. For many women, part of the attraction of universities and schools is it affords them the opportunity to get out of the house.

Oppressive forces: new technology, old misogyny

Dale Spender says that, 'Nattering on the net is a satisfying, affirming and delightful pastime. Or it will be when women are full participants in shaping the system and the rules... Women are needed even at this stage to rewrite the road rules on the superhighway.' (p xxiv) However, the women involved must also have a feminist perspective. Women's representation in decision-making bodies or consultative committees is not enough; there have been plenty of women Tory MPs who disprove the notion that just because a woman is involved she has the interests of women in mind (or she may believe

that women's interests are only in the kitchen and nursery).

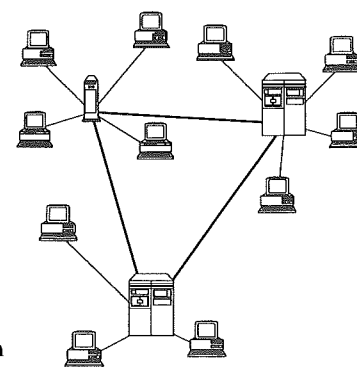
Nattering on the Net raises a lot of interesting and important questions about the uses and potential of the Internet. However, I would recommend that anyone who is wondering what the shape of the future might be also read some science fiction, for alternative visions of what global information networks and virtual reality will bring. Even in these books, though, the protagonists often are computer hackers, with an inside knowledge about the Net, and not the average Net user (which most of us will be).

For those who have access to it, the Internet can be a powerful tool. However, the forces which oppress us in the print age will also oppress us in the electronic age. Technology may change the prevailing forms of misogyny, but without organised political activism it cannot defeat them. □

I WAS GOING
TO BE A
NAVIGATOR
SURFING THROUGH
THE NET
BUT I GOT
SEA-SICK



A Beginner's Guide to the Internet



'What are the origins of "the Net"?'

It's hardly surprising that the Internet is so male-dominated. Its roots were first in the military, then academia. The Internet arose out of experimentation in the 1960s funded by the US Defense Department on link-ups between computers. Up until then, connections between computers were made by a single physical link between two computers. The US government realised that their computers were vulnerable in the case of a nuclear attack, since if the link between the two computers was destroyed, then communications would cease.

They therefore decided to try to invent a system in which it didn't matter if the physical linkage between two individual computers was destroyed. If a computer were linked, not to a single computer but to a whole network of computers, then the links would be less vulnerable. The way the communications in the Internet works is that each packet of information being sent down the phone line has an address attached. The packet will find its way to its destination regardless of the route. Usually the fastest and most direct method will be followed. Therefore a message from London to Manchester would usually go directly between the two computers, but could conceivably be routed via Winnipeg before arriving at its destination.

Gradually more and more academics came to use the Internet. University employees could send mail to colleagues at other universities, or load their research or theses onto their own computer and allow all other academics to have access to it. A few years ago, commercial interests were allowed on the Net, and this has led to many more non-academic users.

'What is the Internet?'

The Internet links up many computers and/or computer networks in corporations, universities, schools and government offices. Each network might have many individual computers, each of

which may have a repository of information on it, although most computers 'linked' to the 'Net' are accessing information only.

As of 1995, it is estimated that the Internet is composed of over 12,000 computer networks connecting 4 million computers, with at least 20 million Internet users, the majority of whom are white male professionals. The Internet is growing at a phenomenal rate; some estimates are that the volume of email messages transferred through the Net grows at 20% per month.

Because no one person or organisation 'owns' the Internet, it tends to be somewhat anarchic. Some agreement has been reached in terms of standards for Internet connections and so on, but there is no regulatory body governing the Net.

'Let me rephrase the question: What the heck is the Internet?'

What people mean when they say 'the Internet' may vary, since most people use only one or possibly two of the services provided on the Net. Those services are:

- Email and mailing lists,
- FTP,
- Telnet,
- Usenet,
- WorldWideWeb,
- IRC

'What is email (electronic mail)?'

Many people will already be familiar with email. It is like writing a letter to someone on screen, but instead of printing it out, putting it in an envelope, putting a stamp on it and posting it via the local postal service ('snail mail'), email allows you to send the 'letter' via the phone line directly to someone else's computer. Clearly, email tends to reach its destination much more quickly.

It is also possible to FTP via email (see below).

'What are mailing lists?'

Mailing lists are exactly what they say (also called listserves). You can subscribe to a mailing list devoted to a particular topic such as the representation of 'Third World Women' (majordomo@jefferson.village.virginia.edu), and email will be forwarded to you automatically. *off our backs* now publishes addresses of listserves on relevant topics.

Mailing lists are good for people who don't have full Internet access, but who do have email access.

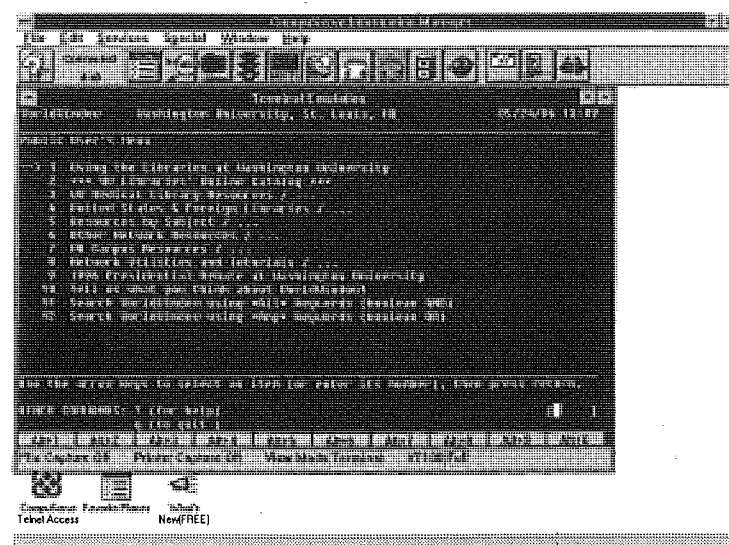
'What is FTP (File Transfer Protocol)?'

FTP (also called anonymous FTP, when it is accessible to the general public) is a way of transferring a file from one 'site' (ie computer) to your own. Many of the 4 million computers that make up the Internet are 'repositories' of information. The files on these repositories can be looked at and 'downloaded' (retrieved) to your own computer.

Amongst the 2.5 million files available for FTP on the Net are the CIA World Factbook, the text of the Magna Carta and pop song lyrics.

'What is Telnet?'

Telnet allows you to sit at your own computer, dial into another computer and use that computer as if you were sitting at a terminal at that far away location. You would, of course, have to know the passwords (if any) to access the system.

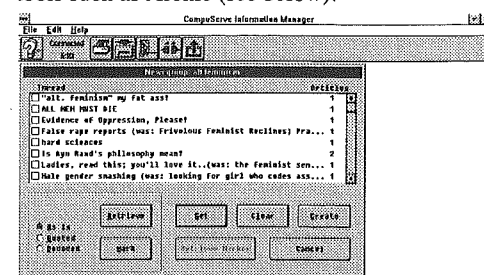


Telnetting into Washington University's computer system

Amongst the many Telnet sites on the Internet are:

- The European Commission Host Organization, which offers scientific, language, business and research databases in any of 8 languages;
- Carl System, a computerised network of library systems;
- The Sexual Assault and Sexual Abuse Recovery site, which offers documents and discussions to help deal with traumatic experiences and recover from sexual assault.

You can also telnet to get access to Internet tools such as Archie (see below).



alt.feminism Usenet newsgroup

'What is Usenet?'

Usenet (USER's NETWORK) refers to a collection of 'bulletin boards', called newsgroups, each dedicated to a particular topic, where anyone can post a message. When someone places a message, another person can reply to that message, and so on. Each message has a one-line 'topic', which you read to see if you might be interested in the contents of the message.

Let's imagine a Usenet group about radical feminism (you'll have to imagine it—it doesn't exist). What you see when you go into that Usenet group might be something like this (depending on the kind of software):

- * Domestic violence — new statistics (2 messages)
- * Radical feminism v. postmodernism (4 messages)
- * Looking for activists in Birmingham (1 message)

Each of these one-line topics will have one or more messages attached to it, so you can see that a sort of on-going discussion can take place, with users replying to another user's posting.

Usenet groups can be moderated (there is one person who monitors the group and decides what messages get posted or who edits messages), but the vast majority are unmoderated.

Usenet groups are divided into categories, depending on the general subject matter. The major categories are:

- comp (computer-related)
- sci (scientific)
- soc (social and cultural)
- news (discussion about Usenet itself)
- rec (recreational topics, eg music or sports)
- alt (alternative)
- k12 (education)
- bionet (biology)
- misc (miscellaneous)

Each category is subdivided into further sub-categories, each of which is set off by a full stop (.). Some examples:

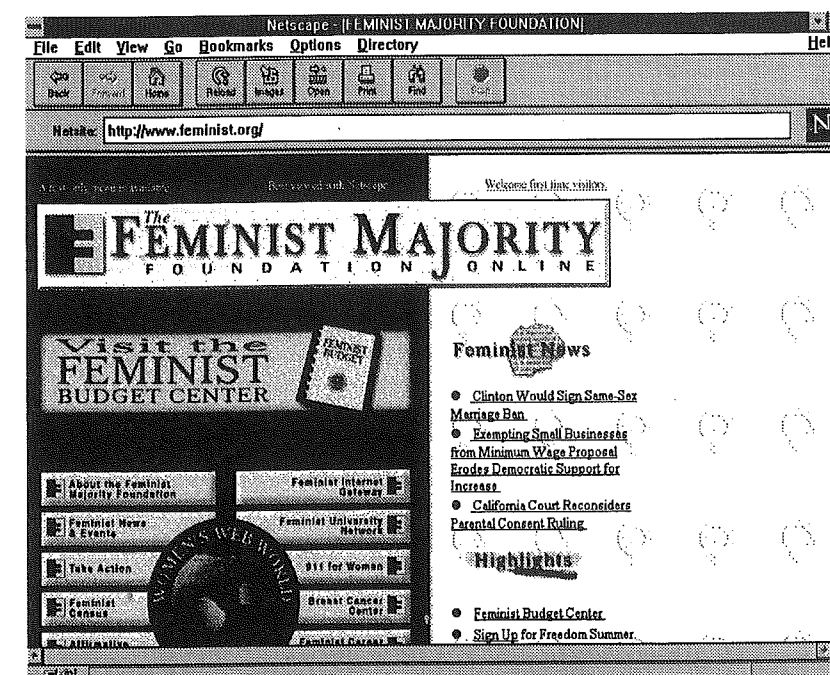
- soc.feminism (moderated)
- alt.feminism (unmoderated)
- alt.abuse-recovery
- alt.british.comedy.blackadder — Blackadder television series
- alt.skinheads
- alt.politics.white-power
- alt.politics.nationalism.white
- alt.binaries.pictures.erotica (images can be downloaded)
- alt.binaries.pictures.tasteless (images can be downloaded)

There are over 6,000 Usenet groups currently. It is estimated that over 100 million characters per day are posted on Usenet groups.

'What is the World Wide Web (WWW)?'

The World Wide Web is the current media obsession. Many people are referring to WWW when they talk about 'the Internet'. Think about the WWW as thousands of 'magazines' which can be one or more pages long. They are graphically based, not text-based, so a page can contain formatted text, graphics, sound and even digital video.

Usually any 'page' of the magazine will have hyperlinks—text or graphics that will take you to other pages either at the same site or a different site (in someone else's 'magazine') if you click on them. So, for instance, if you link up to a Web site about feminism, you might click on a hyperlink to another site about violence against women, which might have a link to a site about strategies to combat sexual



The Feminist Majority Web site. Note that the underlined phrases and the 'buttons' on the left hand side (around the globe) can be clicked to take you to a relevant Web page.

harassment, which might have a link to a site about legal advice about sexual harassment cases, which might have a link to legal cases about battered women, and so on. You can literally spend hours diverted from the Web site you initially looked at.

Web addresses are usually preceded by <http://> followed by the address of the site.

Some Web sites are:

- a site about feminist science fiction (<http://www.cs.wisc.edu/wiscon/html>)
- a site about midwifery (<http://www.csv.warwick.ac.uk:8000/midwifery>)

'What is Internet Relay Chat (IRC)?'

IRC is often compared to a 'CB radio'. With IRC, you can 'talk' to other users in real time. If you know what discussion you want to join, you connect directly, and there you will find other people wanting to discuss the same topic. You sit at your computer, type your message, and when you hit enter, the other users logged into the same chat read what you've written. It is different from Usenet in that it occurs 'live'; if someone wants to read your message, they have to be currently logged into the chat and looking at their screen. It is like a telephone conference call. The chat can have 2 or more participants.

Glossary

Acronyms are often used as shorthand in newsgroup postings and email.

AFAIK As far as I know

BTW By the way

emoticon Characters which are meant to replace body language in suggesting the 'emotion' of a message. Tilt your head to the left — :-) smile :-) wink :- (frown :- o surprise

F2F Face to face

FAQ Frequently asked questions. In a newsgroup you can usually find a .FAQ file. This is the first thing to get and read.

flame A nasty personal attack on someone in a Usenet newsgroup

freeware Software that is free

GIF Graphic Interchange Format. The format used for most graphic image files

HTH Hope that helps

IMHO In my humble opinion

IYSWIM If you see what I mean

lurk To read the contents of a Usenet newsgroup, but without ever posting a message, also 'lurker'

modem A piece of equipment that translates the digital-based information of a computer to

analogue form, which allows it to be sent over the telephone lines.

netiquette Basic rules governing behaviour on the Net, particularly in email and Usenet, where you are interacting with others

newbie A new Internet user

OTOH On the other hand

PITA Pain in the ass

post To compose and place a message in a Usenet newsgroup

ROTFL Rolling on the floor laughing

RTFM Read the fucking manual

shareware Software that you can try, and if you like it, you pay for it, usually at low cost

signal-to-noise Ratio of useful information in a Usenet newsgroup, for example, 'alt.fooobar has a low signal-to-noise ratio'

spam To post a message to numerous Usenet newsgroups to which it has no relevance. Used as noun and verb. From the Monty Python sketch.

TIA Thanks in advance

UYSMF Up yours, my friend

Here's a sample (rather pointless) message:

IMHO, this newsgroup has a very high signal-to-noise ratio. BTW, I usually just lurk here, but have come out of hiding. :-) Janet's response to the flame had me ROTFL. Flamers are a PITA.

How to find FTP files

Telnet to an archie site, where you can search for the file name. In the UK, the archie site is archie.doc.ic.ac.uk

Other sites with search capacity are:

<http://129.241.190.13/ftpsearch>

To search for software:

<http://www.shareware.com>

http://www.jumbo.com/Home_Page.html

How to find information on the WWW

There are some Web sites where you can search the Web for occurrences of particular words, for example 'feminism'

<http://altavista.digital.com>

<http://guide.infoseek.com>

<http://www.yahoo.com>

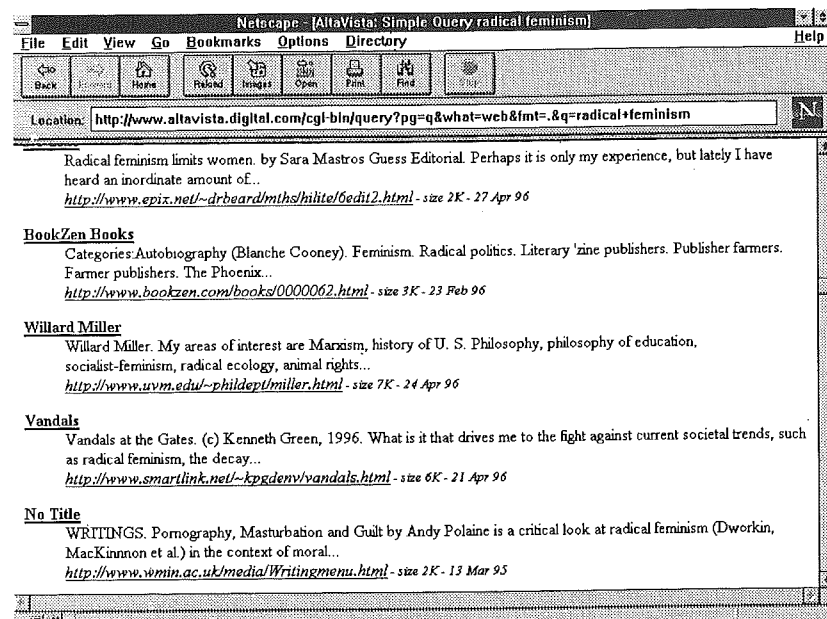
How to find email addresses

<http://www.four11.com>

<http://www.lookup.com/lookup/search.html>

How to find a Usenet newsgroup

<http://www.dejanews.com> □



Above is just a small fraction of the hundreds of Web sites listed as a result of searching on the words 'radical' and 'feminism' at the <http://www.altavista.digital.com> site. Not all sites are about radical feminism, but rather have the words 'radical' and 'feminism' in the site. For example, the site could contain the phrase 'a radical critique of feminism'.

You need only click on the underlined phrases to go directly to those Web sites. You can spend hours going from site to site.

Wanted: The Female Serial Killer

The West case offered an opportunity for intense media focus on and speculation about 'the female serial killer'. Debbie Cameron argues that whilst Rose West should be understood and categorised as a female sex murderer, most of the commentary to date has re-worked old ideas, and offers little to those of us wishing to develop a feminist analysis.

Almost exactly ten years ago, Liz Frazer and I were finishing *The Lust To Kill*, a feminist study of sexual murder¹. Our starting point was that any satisfactory explanation of sex killing must account for the fact that it is gender-specific: only men do it. The experts whose works we read had remarkably little to say about that. Assuming they mentioned it (which many did not), they either explained it in biological terms or else treated it as incidental, needing no explanation at all.

We, by contrast, wanted to make explicit the connection between this most extreme form of sexual violence and a particular way of constructing identity and sexuality which in patriarchal societies is only available to men—indeed, in less extreme forms it is considered 'normal' for them. However, we assumed that

gender identities and sexual desires are socially constructed, not 'natural' or biological. This prompted us to ask whether, if cultural conditions changed sufficiently, some women might also take up the role of the sexual killer. We wondered if tendencies in contemporary western culture (notably the 1980s libertarian equation of sadism with women's 'empowerment' and sexual 'liberation') might bring this about in the foreseeable future. Since patriarchal power relations were unlikely to wither away, however, we predicted that if and when a female sex murderer emerged, her victims would most likely be women.

Now we know that well before we wrote this, a woman, Rosemary West, together with her husband Frederick, had already embarked on a long career of abducting, abusing, torturing

ROSE WEST
The most depraved woman on Earth

Courtroom killing orgy
foul
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Mother-of-eight Rose, now 41, revelled in vice and perversion – lesbian orgies, porn and prostitution.

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BID TO FREE MYRA
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and murdering young women. Fred West killed himself before he could be tried, but Rose West was convicted in 1995 of the murder of ten women and girls. These killings were shown at the trial to have occurred within a context of extreme, ongoing sexual abuse which took many different forms and was sustained over many years—it remains unclear how many people were involved either as perpetrators or victims. Some survivors testified in court; conversely, there may well have been more than ten women who did not survive their encounter with the Wests.

Ambivalent responses

In spite of having predicted that women might one day do what Rose West was convicted of, I did not find the reality easy to accept. It wasn't that I believed women couldn't do appalling things: I knew from our research that they could and they had. But this one very particular appalling thing—destroying another person for sexual pleasure—had seemed not to be in their repertoire.

Other writers claimed it was, but when we really looked into the cases they cited there was always a question-mark over what was done, by whom, and why. It is common for women's involvement in sex murder to be exaggerated, and for sexual sadism to be imputed to them on the flimsiest of evidence; some women's involvement, though real, occurs under severe duress which puts their own motives in question. 'Accomplice' would in many cases be a better description than 'murderer' (though an accomplice in such cases is still guilty of very serious crimes). But I would not describe Rose West as an accomplice. There is no question in my mind she was actively involved in and got pleasure from sexual abuse, torture and murder. Yet I still found I wanted either to disbelieve in her guilt, or to find an explanation for it that would make her less culpable.

Once I had recognised this ambivalence in my own response, I saw it in other responses too. My desire to explain Rose West differently (that is, from men like her husband) was paralleled in mainstream commentary on the case, where the effect was to give prominence and legitimacy to a lot of confusing, contradictory and damagingly anti-feminist ideas. At the same time, I was not the only feminist with ambivalent feelings. Rose West challenges everyone's most cherished beliefs about women,

and for feminists she poses a particular dilemma. Assuming we do not think she was wrongly convicted, what does it mean that these horrific crimes were committed by a woman? What do we say to nonfeminists for whom the existence of Rose West 'proves' that when it comes to sexual violence, women are as bad as men, if not worse?

I want to approach these questions from two different angles. On one hand something needs to be said about how Rose West was discussed in mainstream commentary, the way she was 'framed', categorised, made intelligible to the general public. On the other hand we do need to consider whether Rose West's case might have implications for feminist analysis too. I think it raises questions for which our own answers, though different from mainstream ones, are not entirely adequate. I will return to these questions at a later date. In this piece however I will deal with the first issue, the problematic nature of mainstream discussion.

Framing devices

The terms of public debate about the West case were set by an unholy alliance of media pundits and 'experts' (clinicians, social scientists, law enforcement professionals). In an attempt to unravel the tangled web of their discourse I will focus in particular on two 'framing devices' that were used extensively. By a 'framing device' I mean a general scenario into which, by common consent, a particular set of events may be slotted like a picture into a frame. The same event can be framed in a number of different ways: a frame is judged suitable for a given event if the same kind of event has been put in that frame before—it's a convention that solidifies over time, and its function is to provide ready-made 'angles' which save time and thought for media producers and consumers. The two devices I want to look at in this discussion are 'the [female] serial killer' and 'the mother as murderer'.

The 'female serial killer': fact or fiction?

The 'serial killer' is a cultural icon—as a newspaper article recently remarked, perhaps one of the cultural icons of the late twentieth century. The 'cultural' tag is important here. It isn't always fully appreciated that most of what we 'know' about this figure—whether male or female—comes from fiction (films, detective/

horror novels, TV shows like *Cracker*) rather than reality. Even where information is available about actual cases, it is typically packaged in a genre ('true crime') that borrows the techniques of fiction, like rounded 'characters', narrative structures which rearrange the time frame, detailed descriptions of events which the writer did not witness, suspense and pathos. This very popular genre is often written by journalists who covered a murder case for a newspaper, and in many instances it now provides the frame for actual news reporting. The boundary between fact and fiction has become increasingly blurred.

Rose West was instantly categorised as a 'serial killer'. She was also, of course, a woman; so predictably her case inspired an outbreak of handwringing about 'female serial killers'. Shortly after the West trial ended, the *Guardian* newspaper published a long article by another woman convicted of multiple sexual killing, Myra Hindley, in which she discussed her part in the moors murders. This took up two pages, and a further page was given over to commentary from various 'experts'. The newspaper's justification for the column-yards it devoted to this murder-fest referred explicitly to the West case. The trial of Rose West had made painfully clear that 'we still know too little about the female serial killer'.

There is rather a simple explanation for this ignorance. Though there are many women serial killers in fiction (cf *Dirty Weekend*, *Basic Instinct*, *Butterfly Kiss*, *Cracker*), in the real world the category 'female serial killer' does not have enough people in it to make it a respectable object of scientific knowledge. Much depends on how you define 'serial killing'—a question I will return to, since there is a suspicious elasticity in the definition where women are concerned. If we interpret it as referring to repeated homicides involving sexual sadism, I estimate that the number of women known to the authorities worldwide whose actions make them even possible candidates for the label 'female serial killer' is between seven and ten, all but one of whom acted in partnership with a man.

In this country, the category (if defined in the terms I've just mentioned) has precisely two people in it: Myra Hindley and Rosemary West. Yet the *Guardian* was typical of the media at large in basing much of its feature coverage on the idea that 'female serial killers' constitute a

growing social menace, a criminological mystery we urgently need to solve. This is, to put it mildly, a considerable overstatement. Even the FBI, no slouch when it comes to sweeping statements about criminal 'profiles', has so far declined to offer us a thumbnail sketch of 'the female serial killer'. There is not enough evidence to generalise from, and—from the point of view of law enforcement—no very urgent need.

So why are we fixated on a mythical figure? I believe that what is really happening is that the unholy alliance mentioned earlier between the experts and the media has a desperate need, not to *understand* the female serial killer but to *create* her as a culturally recognisable figure. Later I will say why I think there is this need to create the female serial killer at this time. First, though, I want to look at how 'serial killing' itself has taken over from other stories we used to tell about sex murder, and what this has meant for the representation of women.

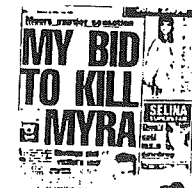
Rose West and Myra Hindley

I have already introduced the subject of Myra Hindley; it cropped up with monotonous regularity throughout Rose West's trial, right up to the point when TV viewers watched a convicted Rose West being taken away in a prison van, its destination described in voice-over as 'the same jail that contains Myra Hindley'. (Inevitably, the tabloids started manufacturing unlikely stories that the two women had become close friends.) Some news bulletins even used the archaic word 'murderess' to emphasise the parallel, pointing out that Rose West has taken over from Myra Hindley as 'the worst murderess in Britain this century'.

Though there are resemblances between the two women (both killed as one half of a heterosexual couple; both victimised children and young people) the main reason for making the connection so insistently is simply that both are women, and even more importantly, they are the *only* women of their type. The existence of Myra Hindley was crucial to the construction of Rose West: one woman is an aberration, two are a class. But since three decades separate the revelation of these two women's crimes, there are also differences in the way they have been understood.

Sexual versus serial

To begin with, their crimes were categorised differently. In 1995, what Fred and Rose West



the 'icon of all evil'

BID TO FREE MYRA

I was wicked and evil.

Mother-of-eight Rose, now 41, revelled in vice and perversion – lesbian orgies, porn and prostitution.

foul
perversion
killing orgy

Courtroom horror

ROSE WEST

The most depraved woman on Earth

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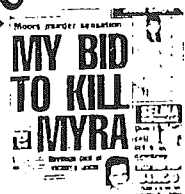
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did is unhesitatingly recognised by experts and laypeople alike as 'serial killing'—a term originally coined by the FBI which was subsequently taken up by law-enforcement agencies elsewhere and widely disseminated through popular fictions like the film *The Silence of the Lambs*. In Ian Brady and Myra Hindley's time this term did not exist, and the 'serial' aspect—killing over and over again—was far less important to people's understanding of the meaning of the crime. Both single and multiple murders where the victim had been raped, tortured, sexually abused and/or mutilated, were usually referred to as 'sex murder', a term that foregrounds sexual gratification as the *motive*. 'Serial killing', by contrast, is frequently (and misleadingly) described as *motiveless*.

The older term says more about what is at stake; it also says more about why women's engagement in this form of violence was not just statistically rare (in fact, so rare as to be virtually non-existent) but unintelligible. The sort of 'sex maniac' who is popularly believed to commit 'sex murder' could not be convincingly visualised as a woman, whereas 'serial killing' can more easily be stretched to encompass instances of multiple murder by women (which are rare, but not unknown).

This brings us back to the 'suspicious elasticity' of the category. Elastic definitions are strategically useful in discussions of the 'female serial killer,' which depend implicitly on the presupposition that such women exist in significant numbers. Stretching the definition allows you to bump up the numbers when your argument requires it, without worrying too much about the diversity of motives this lumps together.

For instance, a recent British case of multiple murder by a woman is that of Beverley Allitt, the nurse whose killings of children were attributed to Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy. Beverley Allitt's actions do not really belong in the same category as Myra Hindley's or Rose West's, but if the logic of a discussion so dictates, the mere fact she killed repeatedly can be used to classify her crimes with theirs under the heading of 'serial killing'. Other so-called 'female serial killers' may have had revenge or self-defence as their motive. The indiscriminateness of the category 'serial killing', and most especially its capacity to obscure a specifically *sexual* element in murder (which may also be present in single, non-serial

crimes), is one reason why I believe feminists should reject the term and oppose its use in law enforcement.

In the 1960s the moors murders were understood as 'sex murder' rather than 'serial killing'. So the work which had to be done around the representation of Myra Hindley was essentially the work of explaining how she, as a woman, could possibly have become involved. One approach was to represent her as Ian Brady's adoring creature (too much of a woman for her own good, she had no will of her own and submitted entirely to his); the other, which endures to this day, was to represent her as a monster, not really a woman at all.

The West case is different because of the availability of the 'serial killer' category. This has led commentators to try with hindsight to construct a *tradition* of 'female serial killers', in which Rose West figures as Myra Hindley's successor. But in consequence the treatment of both women is riddled with anachronisms and contradictions. On one hand, Myra Hindley is retrospectively redefined as something which did not exist 30 years ago (a 'female serial killer'); on the other hand, the discussion of Rose West contains traces of the 'monster' archetype which was used to represent Myra Hindley. New discourses have not *replaced* older ones, but have merely been tacked onto them, with contradictory results.

Equal opportunity evil?

Among the 'new' discourses, the most important is a pseudo-feminist popular discourse on female sexuality and violence, which has rendered the idea of female sexual deviance and sadism less alien to common sense than it was 30 years ago. The new discourse draws on ideas about 'equal opportunity' in all spheres, not just sex and violence: at its crassest, the thought behind it could be expressed as 'if we accept women can be airline pilots, we should also accept they can be rapists'. Other versions suggest either that women in the new age of equality have become capable of desires and actions previously unknown to them, or else that they were always capable of these things, but this went unacknowledged because of misplaced chivalry.

This popular discourse is not only connected with other popular discourses on gender equality, but also with a number of new expert, clinical and therapeutic discourses on female

deviance. These clinical discourses were very important in the representation of Rose West: they helped to make her intelligible in a way that Myra Hindley never was. The media gave prominence to a number of experts who had, we learned, been toiling in obscurity for some time to uncover, explain and treat the phenomenon of the sexually violent woman. These authorities were able to discuss Rose West not as a puzzle or a novelty but as an extreme example of something already known to science and in the process of being theorised by it: the sexually sadistic woman (who prototypically abuses her own children), and who, we were constantly told, is much more common than most people imagine. Although it was unclear whether any of these other alleged women sexual sadists had murdered a string of women and children (one assumes not, since if they had we would surely have heard about it), reports of their existence prompted speculation that there might be other Rose Wests 'still out there', and perhaps, too, that there were many more in the past whose crimes went undetected.

This sort of discussion created a *category* for Rose West, while at the same time implying that this category had always already been in place, just waiting for science to elucidate it. The ability to 'place' her particular brand of deviance and to invoke a historical or clinical record of other similar cases is precisely what was lacking in contemporary discussions of Myra Hindley.

Yet if you look more closely, the 'new' discourses which differentiate Rose West's case from Myra Hindley's turn out to be pervaded by older assumptions. In practice the discourse of gender equality or sameness is constantly undercut by an older discourse of difference—essentially the 'monster' discourse.

Myra Hindley is the classic 'monster'. A myth quickly grew up in which she *rather than Ian Brady* had killed the two child victims (this, for instance, is the belief of Ann West, Lesley-Anne Downey's mother, and it was recently repeated as fact in a Sunday newspaper feature that included Myra Hindley in a list of the 100 most influential modern women. At most, all that can be said is that we do not know who did what). In commentary on the West case a similar myth became evident. The defence that Rose knew nothing of her husband's activities was undoubtedly feeble; but evidence of her active involvement was widely taken, just like Myra

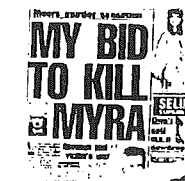
Hindley's in the moors murders, as a sign that she was the *dominant* partner, the boss. This is one of the most enduring hidden assumptions in all cases of horrible crimes involving women. An evil woman must be more evil than an evil man, because she departs more markedly from her ascribed gender role—which is to tame the beast in man, not embody it.

Pathologising the mother

The main gender role ascribed to both Myra Hindley and Rose West was that of *mother*. This might seem surprising given that Myra Hindley, unlike Rose West, was not literally a mother; but to read the trial transcripts and the commentary of the time is to realise very quickly that she was treated as a 'crypto-mother' because of the unquestioned cultural tendency to conflate femininity and maternity. Thus Myra Hindley's crimes were placed firmly in the context of women's natural and instinctive propensity to nurture children. The greater repugnance felt then and now towards Myra Hindley than towards Ian Brady arises from a conviction that the abuse of children by a woman is peculiarly heinous because it is against the order of nature. In the pre-feminist 1960s this was a truism which barely needed spelling out; in the 1990s the question of how to represent the abusive mother became a more prominent, but also more problematic theme.

Abusive mothers became both prominent and problematic for commentators on the West case not only because feminism had critiqued and to some extent displaced the axiomatic belief in 'maternal instinct' (so that the common-sense account of Myra Hindley as simply unnatural and evil—lacking something that all normal women had—was less readily available). It was also important that in the years between the two cases, the notion of 'bad/failed/inadequate mothering' had been placed at the centre of an expert discourse on sexual violence, particularly child abuse, and even more particularly *women's* abuse of children. I have already discussed the importance of the new expert discourse on abusive women in making Rose West intelligible, but here I want to point out that the 'new' discourse itself incorporates elements of older ones. The most obvious point of continuity with earlier discourses (both expert and popular) is the pathologising of the *mother*.

In the 1960s and for that matter earlier, it



the 'icon of all evil'

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had been commonplace for both expert and popular explanations to locate the genesis of the male sexual offender in the inadequate behaviour of his mother: the classic example of this story in its popular form is the Hitchcock film *Psycho*. What was more or less unthinkable in the 1960s was the idea that Mom herself might be the abuser. By the 1990s, however, this had become thinkable.

While some might see this development as part of the onward march of science—perhaps the theory was necessitated by a steady accumulation of unignorable clinical or criminological evidence—I would want to point to powerful ideological factors influencing its emergence at just the moment it did emerge. The tendency to think in terms of 'equal opportunities' which I discussed earlier in relation to popular discourse affects expert discourse as well (and of course they influence each other). One response to feminism—sometimes part of an oppositional 'backlash', but in this scientific context probably more often part of a misguided liberal, 'anything-men-can-do' agenda—has been an urgent desire on the part of many experts to frame all kinds of phenomena in gender-neutral terms, as if differences in the positioning of men and women had now been totally eliminated. Battered husbands, male anorexics and violent female street gangs have all made their appearance under this regime of equal opportunities, and deliberately genderless terms like 'parenting', 'spousal abuse' and 'family violence' have proliferated. The result is to mystify the unequal relations which still exist between the sexes.

Without necessarily denying that the newly-named phenomena exist, it is clear that (as with the 'female serial killer') their prominence in public discourse is out of all proportion to their real incidence and significance. The same goes for the mother who is a sexual abuser—but she is a double mystification. She is a mystification first, because the focus on her is a focus on women rather than men (who are the overwhelming majority of abusers); but second, and just as important, because the focus on her is a focus on mothers rather than women *per se*.

The 'mother as murderer'... but what about dad?

Rose West's trial and conviction called forth a flood of commentary either written by psychotherapists or drawing heavily on quotes from

them, specifically about the phenomenon of child sexual abuse committed by mothers. There are two points to make about this. One is that Fred West also abused the children of his own household. That fact, however, while it was absolutely obvious, did not occasion the same kind or quantity of comment.

Of course, Fred West was not on trial, having committed suicide while on remand. Furthermore, sexual abuse by fathers is not a novel concept, whereas sexual abuse by mothers, relatively speaking, is. But it is interesting that whereas early attempts to discuss sexual abuse by fathers in public were met with widespread denial, these attempts to discuss abusive mothers like Rose West were not. In a culture saturated by the discourse of equal opportunities and gender-neutrality, many people were on the contrary eager to believe (nor do I suggest they were wrong to believe, even if I find the eagerness suspect). They were also, of course, eager to condemn; but here they tended to fall back on a version of the same 'how-could-a-mother-do-this-to-children' trope as in the Brady/Hindley case.

Commentary on the case was pervaded by a contradiction between two basic theses: on one hand that women are, axiomatically, the same (that is, 'just as bad') as men, and on the other hand, equally axiomatically, that they are different (which in this context means 'worse'). While commentators overtly made much of the equal depravity of the two partners in crime, they did not treat them equally. It was somehow more understandable that a father should behave like Fred West than that a mother should behave like Rose West. And indeed, statistically Fred's behaviour is less remarkable. Yet that is surely no reason not to ask questions about it (rather the reverse).

On the other hand, why should it be assumed that Rose's abusiveness must have an entirely different explanation from Fred's? Again this seems to be in contradiction with the 'sexual abuse is gender neutral' thesis. In practice, though, a different and gender-specific explanation was what we were given. According to this explanation, women who abuse their children are guilty of a 'failure of mothering'. This isn't meant in the obvious sense that if you abuse your kids you are a failure as a mother, it means (so far as I can make any sense of it at all) that the need or desire to abuse arises from something going wrong in the mother-child

relationship. It doesn't go wrong because of the abuse, the abuse happens *because* it has gone wrong. This reworks the idea of 'family dysfunction' which feminists have criticised when applied to the abuse of daughters by fathers. Here it is transferred to explain murder as well.

But strangely we heard nothing about Fred West's 'failure of fathering': that phrase has an odd as well as unfamiliar ring. Why do people not talk about men's sexual abuse of children in these terms? Is it because we expect so much of mothers and so little of fathers? Or is it because we understand that child sexual abuse by fathers has more to do with their masculinity than with their fatherhood? Whatever the underlying logic of the assumptions, the outcome is implicitly to set up an asymmetrical pairing as the basic conceptual framework for any discussion of gender and sexual abuse: instead of *man/woman* or *father/mother* we have *man/mother*.

Distorting the picture

One of the distortions that arose from this in the West case relates to the second key point I want to emphasise, which is that the Wests did not *only* abuse and kill their own children, or children as such—most of their victims (eight out of the ten for whose murder Rose West was convicted) were young adult women who were not family members. I do not mean to minimise the killing of Charmaine and Heather West (or murder within the family more generally); rather I want to give equal value to all the lives that were destroyed and to retain some sense of the bigger picture, the full enormity of the crimes for which Rose West was tried.

It is amazing how routinely this enormity was and is glossed over, as if writers about the case had simply ignored or forgotten most of the material facts. Only a few weeks after the trial I read a newspaper article which summarised the couple's activities over more than a decade in the sentence 'Meanwhile, the Wests continued slaughtering their children' (*Observer*, 28 January). Historians of the future could easily get the impression, from supposedly accurate journalistic sources, on one hand that the Wests killed every one of their children, and on the other hand that they killed nobody else.

Apart from being morally repellent (since it implies that the other victims mattered less) this is also sufficiently unusual to be worth remarking on. Normally it is the murder of strangers

that causes the greatest public outrage, while the domestic abuse and killing of children, or wives, is seen as less heinous. But the focus on the West children as the central victims was required by two special features of the case as a whole.

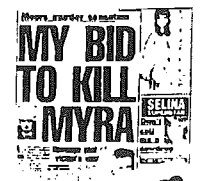
One was the desire to paint 25 Cromwell Street as the home of a uniquely 'dysfunctional' family (and not, for instance, as the HQ of a sex abuse network involving outsiders as well). The family had to be made central to evade awkward questions about the wider context. Also, *this* family had to be pathologised in order to maintain the idealisation of families in general.

The family is usually seen as the domain of the *normal*, with sexual deviance and murder lying outside and in opposition to it. That is one reason why a common (though often inaccurate) stereotype of the serial/sexual killer is the 'loner'—someone who does not fit into society, and is excluded above all from the safe and respectable world of the nuclear family. This stereotype was applied to Dennis Nilsen, another killer whose home, like 25 Cromwell Street, had corpses under the floorboards. Dennis Nilsen however was gay, single and childless, whereas the West household with its two parents, many children and countless lodgers who were 'part of the family' was almost a parody of the domestic ideal. When the truth was discovered, it was necessary to present the Wests as The Family From Hell. The fact that they were an outwardly normal family could not be treated as incidental to their hellishness, it had to be the key to it. Hence the narrow focus on what they did to their children.

Offensive logic

The other factor, which became even more important after Fred West's suicide, was the portrayal of Rose West as a murderous *mother*. If her wickedness was to be understood primarily in terms of her failings as a mother (and not simply her failings as a human being) then the killing of her own children, particularly Heather who was *biologically* hers, had to be made to rank above every other wicked act.

This bizarre and offensive logic was implicitly accepted by both prosecution and defence in the trial. Great emphasis was placed on whether Rose West had, as she claimed, repudiated Fred West when she discovered Heather had been killed. The point of arguing about this appeared to be to establish a line of



the 'icon of all evil'

BID TO FREE MYRA

I was wicked and evil.

Mother-of-eight Rose, now 41, revelled in vice and perversion – lesbian orgies, porn and prostitution.

foul
perversion
killing orgy

Courtroom horror

ROSE WEST

The most depraved woman on Earth

defence that Rose West was not so depraved as to lack the natural feelings of a mother for her child. As it happens, no-one was impressed by this defence, because they did not believe it. But even if Rose West's answer had been credible, why should it have weighed more in the scales of justice than the treatment of so many other victims? Was she on trial as a murderer, or as a mother? The answer would seem to be, both: it was as if proving that she was a murderer depended on *also* proving that she was a bad and unnatural mother.

This approach may not, in this case, have perverted the course of justice, but it certainly did nothing for the cause of understanding. When commentators focused so narrowly on the murderer as *mother*, a response which was both dictated by Rose West's gender and at the same time unhelpfully reductive about gender (i.e. 'woman = mother'), they were not just distorting the facts about what was done and to whom, but failing utterly to get to the root of what the Wests' criminal career was all about. But that is another discussion which I will take up at a later date.

Wanted?

I called this piece 'Wanted: The Female Serial Killer' because for me the only key that can unlock the manifold mysteries of mainstream commentary on Rose West—the anachronistic stereotypes that have more or less disappeared in other contexts, the wilful elevation of a tiny handful of cases into a major social problem, the fixation on motherhood which caused reporter after reporter to suffer selective amnesia about basic facts like how many women the Wests killed—is the idea that this case gave people something they *wanted*. At this point in the history of ideas about gender, which is also of course the history of feminist political struggle, a large number of people are desperate to believe in equal opportunity sex, violence and murder. No doubt the actions of Rose West fill them with horror and disgust; I do not question the sincerity of those feelings. But at a deeper level, the level at which people conceptualise and make sense of the world at large, they feel vindicated by the *existence* of Rose West. The only way they can cope with feminism is to take literally the feminist axiom of women's

equality—preferably by pouncing on any sign that women are no better than men, that there is no depth of male depravity to which women cannot equally sink.

Misogyny being what it is, this quickly leads to the conclusion women are even worse than men. But above all, it triumphantly proves that feminists are in the wrong. Wrong to celebrate women, wrong to harp on the abuse women suffer, wrong to suggest that women's position has not changed enough—for clearly, if we are now producing a monstrous regiment of 'female serial killers' it has changed far too much.

Of course, we are doing no such thing. The thesis of equal opportunity sex and violence is a gross misrepresentation of the available facts. The vigour with which that thesis is pursued in the teeth of all the evidence is indicative of deep-rooted anti-feminism and misogyny. *And yet*, there is a trap here which I do not want to fall into.

Because I am the co-author of a feminist book about sex murder, I was asked many times during the trial what I 'as a feminist' made of Rose West. Sometimes this question came from someone in the media who wanted a token feminist comment. And I often had the feeling it was meant to place me in a double-bind: either I believed in Rose West's guilt, in which case I must end up rejecting my own feminist analysis; or I could stick to the feminist line and fudge the issue of what Rose West did. The implication was that any feminist account of Rose West would be essentially a defence of her; a plea in mitigation.

I do not think that is true; but as I said right at the beginning of this piece, I do think it is a temptation for feminists. Mainstream eagerness to embrace the 'female serial killer' is matched by our reluctance to treat women like Rose West as anything other than (a) utterly untypical and/or (b) what the FBI calls 'compliant victims' (see note 2). I am not suggesting these points are inaccurate ((a) is always true, at least so far, and (b) is true very often), but the West case has convinced me they are not the end of the matter. Why did Rose West do what she did? What *would* constitute a feminist account of her behaviour? These are questions I will come back to. □

to be continued...

¹ I thank Liz Frazer for the contribution she has made over the years to my understanding of the issues discussed in this piece, but I would like to make clear that the views expressed here are entirely my own responsibility.

² Though it *has* produced a profile of the 'compliant victim', a woman who colludes with a male partner in sexual violence—not necessarily murder—following a lengthy period during which he systematically abuses her. This profile is based on about 15 case studies. The FBI clearly believes that 'compliant victimhood' is the commonest scenario for women's involvement in sadistic sexual crimes.

Gybing Round the Buoys

All women involved in sport face barriers and conflicts, problems of access and free time and expectations about feminine appearance and behaviour. Val Woodward has interviewed women involved in windsurfing, a sport which exemplifies these problems.

For the past six years I have been enthusiastic windsurfer, although developing my skills at a leisurely pace. The title of this piece, 'Gybing Round the Buoys' is a play on a windsurfer's dream to perfect a gybe, that is a turn of the board through the wind at speed, and is the logo of Windsurfing Women. My tale is amazingly similar to those told to me by many of the women windsurfers I interviewed during a small scale research project. Windsurfing to aid recovery — from relationships, death, loneliness, bad experiences at work, children growing up and going away — this was a recurrent theme in the accounts women gave as to how they started windsurfing.

My research is based on interviews with thirty British women of widely varying backgrounds and levels of windsurfing ability. Approximately fifty per cent of these women were members of the organisation 'Windsurfing Women' which provokes strong controversy within the windsurfing community because it organises women only events. Grace, for example, said:

Men are threatened by us women getting together and doing something like windsurfing which is so unlike what proper women are supposed to do.



Photo: Alex Maddox

My main interest is in women who like me, prioritise enjoyment over improvement. I therefore deliberately interviewed women at windsurfing venues where the emphasis was on recreation, not competition. They all derived a great deal of pleasure from the feelings of speed, open space, connection with the local environment, freedom and being in control, that they gained from windsurfing. Their stories are not necessarily representative of all women, or even of all windsurfing women, but instead provide interesting insights into the restrictions femininity imposes on women and women's resistance to such restrictions.

I argue that women who windsurf are challenging conventional ideas about both masculinity and femininity, as well as having a really good time. Windsurfing women, through their participation in a male dominated activity, are actively engaged in resistance and strategies for change, whether consciously or not. Windsurfing involves entering a privileged masculine world and an active physicality which contravenes norms of feminine embodiment.

...when my mother was here, she was asking is there something that happens to women when they get physical...like do they get more testosterone...she thought I was becoming more like a man (Rachel).

Through windsurfing we challenge the

oppressiveness of femininity and the privileges of masculinity and push at the boundaries of gender.

Feminine/guilt

Feminist researchers have alerted us to how small a part sport plays in the leisure activities of most women and how material and practical constraints, such as lack of money, transport and time — along with continual responsibility for others — severely restricts the possibilities for women to indulge in any leisure activities. Spare time and freedom to engage in pleasurable pursuits is a privilege in our unequal society, associated with those who enjoy the greatest power. Therefore it is no surprise that windsurfing, like most sports, is very male dominated, especially at expert levels. One glance at the glossy commercial magazines 'Boards' and 'Windsurf' confirms this. There are few 'photos of women in them and these tend to be of 'beach bunnies', emphasising the idea that 'real' feminine women are objects to be looked at, not active windsurfing subjects. Most of the women interviewed go out windsurfing with men most of the time.

There are no women in the group that I sail with, in fact I don't know any other women windsurfers at all; I hadn't met any until I came along on this week (Lisa).



Photo: Alex Maddox

This comment was made when I interviewed Lisa at a Windsurfing Women event. While those interviewed include women with a range of experiences and perspectives, only two are not reliant on a partner for their income and all are white and able bodied. Although windsurfing is the cheapest form of sailing it has been used in recent television imagery to signify conspicuous consumption, independence and freedom. It is therefore not just dominated by men, but by fairly well off, white, young, able-bodied men. Women who windsurf enter a privileged world, although the ease with which they find the time and money to participate varies.

A windsurfer, like a rock climber, hang-glider or off-road motorcycle scrambler needs a large degree of control over her life, which few women have. Windsurfing is a self indulgent activity. Any time that women do spend on physical sporting activities, is more likely to be spent on keep fit or aerobics, which are relatively cheap, and easy to fit into their scarce 'free' time, as well as conforming to gender stereotypical ideals of 'improving' body appearance. As Grace, another interviewee, said: 'you can go to work, do aerobics, go home and make the dinner. Whereas, windsurfing is so totally different, it gets you out, you spend the whole day doing it'.

For women, who have historically been defined by their ability to nurture others, a commitment to nurture themselves, through windsurfing or any other means, is a radical departure from what is expected of them. Responses from the women interviewed revealed varying, but universal, feelings of guilt arising from that self indulgence. Women in this study have learnt to put others before themselves.

Those with families reported a sense of guilt that they did not always put the demands of their family before personal pleasure.

Dorothy commented, 'I've never actually talked to other women about feeling guilty, I think it is something we hide'. She goes on:

The whole thing about women feeling guilty about having time to themselves is a big thing... It was windy and I wanted to go out, I did feel bad leaving the children... Like even going out windsurfing with you, I have to get up early, get everything organised, get packed lunches for my sons, so as to be able to feel that I can do something like go out and windsurf with you. I have to organise everything so that I know

everyone will be happy while I'm gone.

This was not restricted to those women with young children. Kim, who was nearly 70 years old when interviewed, had been interested as to why so few women were active within the organisation for older windsurfers, 'Seavets', and found that 'family commitments stop loads of women from going out windsurfing very often'.

This is despite many of the heterosexual women with male partners reporting them to be exceptionally supportive, especially if they too enjoyed windsurfing. Marcia claimed, 'I'm really lucky, because when I'm going through all the guilt feelings we women go through, my husband tends to encourage me'. Expectations about masculine and feminine behaviour lead to the women I interviewed, and those around them, being surprised when men encourage women to indulge themselves.

Those interviewed found themselves feeling guilty if, when they escaped family commitments, they did not prioritise 'worthy' activities. There are so many battles needing women's time and energy, it is very difficult to indulge ourselves. One interviewee admitted she was reluctant to let those she worked with at Women's Aid know where she was going when she set off windsurfing.

On top of feeling a need to tend to the problems in women's personal or political spheres, those interviewed reported feelings of inadequacy. The contemporary myth of the superwoman tells them that they, and other women, should be able to prove their individual abilities and successfully participate in 'post feminist' society. They often felt guilt that they were unable to excel at each of the competing roles expected of them.

Most of us still want to be feminine and caring and nurturing, but we've also seen opportunities and got some messages about the possibilities for being independent and adventurous, and it can be quite confusing (Jessica).

Windsurfing women are independent and adventurous and do enter a masculine world but they engage with that world in different ways. Some happily embrace behaviour that is associated with masculinity through being 'tough'. For example at residential Windsurfing Women events there is often some tension between women who consider warm and comfortable beds and hot baths as essential and those who wish to continue their challenge to

stereotypical ideas of femininity, by camping. While this partly reflects the differing economic freedom of participants it also reflects differing attitudes to the retention or rejection of acceptable feminine behaviour and differing analyses about how women define themselves as female individuals, within the context of definitions provided by others. Discussions during interviews highlighted how difficult it can be to differentiate between what is oppressively feminine and what is sensible. Pam said, 'I think, maybe quite a few of us who want to go out windsurfing, actually enjoy being one of the boys'. For these women not being a 'boy' has been oppressive for them in terms of restricting their freedom to participate in chosen activities. This group of women tend to participate in many outdoor activities other than windsurfing, although interestingly only one out of all the women interviewed participates in mainstream sports and very few of the women interviewed saw themselves as being 'sporty'. Pam knows women are as capable as men and wishes to prove it. She does this very successfully. She is a very competent and energetic windsurfer. She admits to frustration that so few women feel able to develop her skills, competence and confidence.

Pam is willing to tackle almost anything. This can be seen as engaging with the freedom and power of male oriented activities, but can also be foolhardy.

I have noticed that women seem to have more of a self preservation instinct. I don't know why it is. I know I'm quite reckless myself in lots of ways (Pam).

Most women interviewed suggested that learning to be less reckless and foolhardy than men, is a positive side of femininity, though still complex and often double edged.

I don't know why it is but men just seem to be more fearless and more willing to do what I'd consider to be stupid things (Trish).

The whole issue of being safety conscious which is good, against letting that hold you back from 'Going For It', is totally fascinating. I think women are really bad at pushing their limits. So it's difficult for them to progress (Tracy).

Men will go for things and women won't. It's the way they're brought up. Men aren't constantly having people warn them not to do things (Linda).

Even though few of those interviewed are as good at windsurfing as Pam, all gained pleasure from women being able to play men at men's games. Dorothy said, 'It was really nice going

out with you today, I really felt, well sit up and notice world — this is two women going out'. And despite claiming not to be competitive, interviewees enjoyed being better than men windsurfing nearby.

When you are sailing and you screech past men, like we were the other day, well I think that's really good (Lisa).

I love it when I go out there and I'm better than a man, especially when on the beach they've probably made an assumption that they are better than me (Fiona).

The feminine body and windsurfing

Men just want to be stronger than us. They'll do anything to keep that idea that they are stronger than us because it advantages them. Men feel threatened by images of strong women and they'll do anything to counteract it (Lynne).

Women may generally be less strong than men, but some women are stronger than some men. Women are able to dramatically increase their own body strength and agility if they resist messages about how women should live in feminine bodies. Recent feminist work, as Diane Costa and Sharon Guthrie say 'reveals a patriarchally imposed movement vocabulary that physically disables and thus oppresses women'.

A windsurfer needs to bring her whole body weight and strength into lifting the sail, and turning and twisting to steer the board. This starkly contrasts with a learnt feminine movement vocabulary as described by Iris Marion Young. For example when attempting to lift something, women tend to concentrate effort on those parts of the body most immediately connected to the task — the arms and the shoulders — rarely bringing the power of the legs to the task at all. When turning or twisting something, we frequently concentrate effort in the hand and wrist, not bringing to the task the power of the shoulder, which is necessary for efficient performance.

According to Iris Marion Young, learnt feminine body vocabulary also includes a lack of confidence in ourselves and our bodies:

We decide beforehand — usually mistakenly — that the task is beyond us, and thus give it less than our full effort. At such a half hearted level of course, we cannot perform the tasks, become frustrated, and fulfil our own prophecy. When we do release ourselves from this self perpetuating spiral we are surprised at what we can do.

These findings were mirrored by stories told during interviews:

Time and time again, the men came along with lots of confident expectations about soon being able to do the fancy tricks they've seen the good sailors do. But the women don't tend to believe that they're ever going to be that good. They start by saying they will be happy if they can just stand on the board..... and they get such a buzz when they can actually do things and get so excited. At the end of the course they are so surprised at what they've achieved, but the men tend to go away frustrated because they can't do more (Vanessa).

Vanessa also commented: 'men just mean a completely different thing, when they talk about lack of confidence, to what women mean.'

Similarly, Rachael commented, '...The men just wellie in there and they assume they can do it, so they just start'. This is bound up with the double edged sword of women's greater safety awareness.

Women who windsurf are overcoming gendered barriers to enjoying the power of their bodies, but are unlikely to have completely escaped them. If encouraged to see these barriers as a matter of individual competence, rather than as a collective response to patriarchal relations, they are unlikely to have much patience with themselves or other women who fail to 'wellie in'. To different degrees, about half of the women interviewed wished more women would develop the confidence they felt and so increase the number of women they could windsurf with, and admitted to occasional exasperation with feminine behaviour. Creating acceptable norms for women's behaviour and at the same time blaming women for conforming to those norms is a pervasive aspect of patriarchal thinking, which women can easily internalise however feminist they see themselves as being.

The hesitant, fearful body movements of women are symptomatic of a wider context in which women's bodies are considered objects to be gazed at. Learning how to use our bodies as women is closely bound up with western constructs of feminine beauty. Few women feel happy with their bodies because we are taught how to mould them into a particular size and shape, emphasising their ornamental value. We learn that being feminine makes us attractive and acceptable to society and that a strong, powerful body is a non-feminine one and therefore not acceptable for women.

What's being feminine? Definitely not being strong; rather looking pretty, as in portraying an image that's sort of angelic, or sexy, or being attractive to men... (Rachael).

Only by transgressing the limits and

constraints placed upon us as women, can we thrive. Yet, those who reject the lessons about controlling our bodies to fit society's norms are likely to be defined by others as not real/ acceptable women.

I really want to get my muscles into shape and to look fit but my boyfriend said he didn't want me too muscley because then I wouldn't be attractive (Lorraine).

I didn't like wearing wetsuits and that was one thing that made windsurfing more difficult for me. I used to wear long tee-shirts over a wetsuit, because I thought my body was horrible (Grace).

The windsurfing women interviewed are challenging the culturally ascribed and gendered meanings imposed on their bodies by others. Their bodies can be seen as sites of struggle and resistance; they are constructing themselves



Photo: Alex Maddox

while resisting constructions deriving from patriarchal ideology. Through defining their bodies for themselves and their own enjoyment they reported developing a confidence in their bodies, and their ability to positively occupy space, acquire strength, muscularity and athletic skill — all attributes associated with masculinity. Entering that privileged world has always been empowering for men. The experiences of those I interviewed suggest windsurfing, and similar activities, hold a strong potential for empowering women. We can re-learn ways to use our bodies and shift the focus to women as embodied subjects, challenging prevailing patriarchal depiction of women's bodies as objects.

The first time I started planing...wow...I just remember it so clearly, I just thought 'gee whizz'...I was planing, and I was in control, and I could do it... and I just felt so good (Vanessa).

Planing is when you are windsurfing at sufficient speed to lift your equipment out of the water, so that you feel as if you are flying across the water rather than travelling through it. Once competent enough to achieve this exhilarating state, many windsurfers do not go out unless there is sufficient wind to allow it. However, whatever the level of competence, windsurfing can produce great mental and physical feelings of strength which can spill over into everyday life.

Being able to sail round to that next bay was just an amazing feat, an incredible feeling of achievement (Jessica).

I've become a much stronger person since I windsurfed. I mean, ten years ago, I would have been sitting at home with my knitting and I would never have had the confidence to let you interview me (Olga).

Now Olga Gybes Round the Buoys with Windsurfing Women.

Sexuality and windsurfing

As windsurfing attracts women who are physically, mentally and emotionally strong, it can provide a meeting ground for women who reject patriarchal ideology, whether lesbian or straight. Lesbians are less dependent on male approval and are less likely to be restricted, by themselves or others, as to the activities they indulge in, or the images they portray. Both lesbian and straight women reported that they frequently came across assumptions that windsurfing women, because they reject

patriarchal definitions of femininity, are more likely to be lesbian than straight.

I said to this bloke I know, that I am going away for a weekend with a group of women windsurfing, and he said, 'Oh, a lesbian weekend then' (Marcia).

The women, in the room at the time this comment was made, laughingly confirmed similar experiences:

In fact, there aren't that many dykes in Windsurfing Women, it's just that people have made such a big thing about the few that there are (Vanessa).

'Compulsory heterosexuality' and 'lesbian baiting' are both reflections and reinforcements of men's general control of women's sexuality. Windsurfing women generally look relatively happy in their bodies, probably look strong and therefore may look 'unfeminine'. Also, by concentrating on indulging themselves windsurfing women may be distancing themselves from conventional male and female sexuality. While some of those interviewed found this empowering, others felt a need to emphasise their femininity in order to be 'acceptable women' to the mainstream windsurfing community. This usually means not appearing to be lesbian. Windsurfing lesbians are often made to feel uncomfortable about their sexuality.

I tend to be pretty much in the closet I suppose about my sexuality mostly because of my experience of how people react to my sexuality, particularly within windsurfing (Vanessa).

Dominant constructions of femininity and heterosexuality indicate a male fear of female empowerment.

That's the threat — it's women wanting each other's company rather than depending on men. It's not really a fear of women going to bed together, it's fear of men not being needed (Celia).

Strong women, and particularly lesbians, are a threat to masculine dominance. Femininity is posed in opposition to masculinity and it is convenient for those currently enjoying the privileges of masculine power to dismiss all women who do not conform to femininity, as not real women.

Women who windsurf are a threat to masculinity and to male privilege, and we should celebrate that threat along with the enjoyment we get from actively using our bodies.

Gybe Round the Buoys! ☐

To join Windsurfing Women, or to find out more about the organisation, contact-

Marion Lockey
37 Hertford
Allerdene
Gateshead NE9 6DG
(0191) 487-4917

Names of interviewees have been changed.

Costa, D.M. and Guthrie, S.R.
(eds.) *Women and Sport* (Human Kinetics, 1994)

Young, I. M. *Throwing Like a Girl and other Essays: Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Indiana University Press, 1980)

Lesbians take on the UN

The issue of lesbianism was one of the most contentious at both the official 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women and the Non-Governmental Organisation Forum. Jill Radford talks with Margaret Page — a former worker in Hackney Women's Unit and now a freelance action researcher, including a study of UK participation at Beijing — about the struggles at the conference and how lesbians need to think about 'bringing Beijing home'.

Jill Radford: Perhaps the first question is what made you decide to go to go to Beijing?

Margaret Page: I heard about the train that was going to Beijing from Helsinki. That really captured my imagination: the idea of several hundred women going on a train with three weeks to get to know each other through organised workshops and discussions, and stop overs with women to greet us and have round table discussions. I love trains and I love to travel and I really got stuck on this idea. But for lots of reasons I couldn't do it. It wasn't until I met up with other lesbians planning to go, at a preparatory meeting, that I actually decided to go.

I still did feel envious of the women who had experience of the train journey though. As I predicted, at the Forum they all knew each other, and although they didn't necessarily do things together, they were already more acclimatised to this huge event by the time they arrived. They had a sort of transitional time to get tuned into the idea of working with women from all over the world.

Jill: You went as an individual woman rather than representing a group?

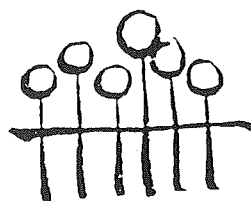
Margaret: I went as an individual woman, but I had up my sleeve membership of the lesbian caucus and membership of the older women's caucus. Help Age International had accredited me for the conference and I wanted to contribute something in return. Also one of my good friends was there in an initiating role in that caucus. As a member of the National Women's Network for International Solidarity, I sent email messages back from the Forum for the bulletins they were producing while the event was going on. So I was loosely connected to several different groupings. I didn't want to be



Lesbians on the Road to Beijing



Anjaree



Thai women
organized
to fight
for
the right
to love
women.



all the time in the lesbian tent or the older women's tent. I wanted to be free to move around in different workshops, and get an overview of the process. In particular I was interested in how women at the Forum would influence the Conference. That felt to me like the most exciting part of the event and I wanted to play an active part in it.

Jill: Can you explain how the two parts of the conference connected — the NGO (non-governmental organisations) Forum and the official government Conference at Beijing?

Margaret: The Forum was like a gathering of women's groups who were active in areas related to the 12 areas of critical concern included in the Draft Global Platform for Action. The Forum was held at Huairou. In contrast the governmental Conference in Beijing was a more formal and very task orientated event. Its goal was to arrive at an agreed language so there would be an agreed Global Platform for Action. The Draft Global Platform for Action had been put together through preparatory regional Conferences held under the auspices of the five UN regional economic Commissions. NGOs organised their own forums at each of the regional conferences.

Jill: Were you able to attend both the Forum and the Conference in Beijing?

Margaret: Yes, to attend either involved a lengthy process of registering and waiting for registrations to be accepted. The Conference was a separate process of registration. You had to be accredited by a national or international NGO. I managed at the last minute to get a place through Help Age International — they were allocated five places as an international NGO (national ones were allocated three places). They had not been able to use all five places and they sorted out my documents for me. I was able to get a Conference Pass without any trouble — which was terrific.

Because of the geographical distance between the Forum and the Conference — it was an hour and a half journey on a shuttle bus — it wasn't possible to take part in both at the same time. You really had to be based at one to be able to understand and take part in what was going on. I divided my time between the eight days at the Forum at the beginning of my stay and then another ten days at the Conference.

That meant in terms of lesbian activities, I

was able to take part in some events at the Forum, in the lesbian tent, which is where we were based and also to take part in the lesbian caucus at the Conference itself and follow some of the progress of how it went and how successful we were in terms of influence.

Seeing the world through women's eyes

Jill: We heard a lot about practical difficulties. I have also heard that women from the South thought some of this was the 'preciousness' of some of the Northern women. I'm interested in your perception of the extent to which the difficulties intruded upon or obstructed events.

Margaret: This is a fascinating thing to discuss. We all reacted very differently. This is probably explained by our different cultural expectations about the quality of accommodation we would have, the quality of the food, toilets and basic facilities — things we can laugh about, but are really important if you are in a strange place with 30,000 women. It's quite a shock to your physical system as well as your emotional system. The Forum for example was very dispersed. It was physically demanding to get around. You needed a map of where the workshops were. There were 400 different workshops a day, held in tents, old school buildings, hostels and conference centres. There were 10,000 yellow T-shirted volunteers, men and women, mostly Chinese students. But they didn't always have map reading skills and we found the maps were wrong sometimes. Imagine feeling very tired and jet lagged, not having the food we are used to, pouring over this telephone directory sized programme the night before, carefully selecting the workshops you wanted to find, setting out early in the morning to find the workshop, then several hours later having to give up.

After a few days I realised this was not the way to go about things. I decided I needed to slow down, unwind and just go with whoever I happened to meet. Because all the time, you were walking alongside women from different countries, different languages, and I would say 'Where are you going?' — 'To a workshop on structural adjustment programmes led by Gabriella from the Philippines, a fantastic feminist group organising on sexual violence and prostitution'. So I'd just go along.

This particular workshop — like all the ones

I attended — was highly organised, with very sophisticated and highly articulate speakers from all regions of the world talking about the real effects of structural adjustment programmes on women's lives at a grass roots level combined with micro economic analysis.

I found it inspiring at a very deep level to witness women from every corner of the globe, speaking about every subject you can think about, completely rubbishing the idea that women are only interested in 'women's issues'. It really was seeing the world through women's eyes. And as you walked along, you were seeing women of different races speaking different languages, different national dress all together. Some African women were wearing robes made out of amazing cloth, printed for the Conference, with beautiful head-dresses. I felt very inadequate in my Stoke Newington shorts and T-shirt! It was a very energising experience.

There were issues about security which did focus on certain areas, certain groups. For example the lesbian tent which was constantly videoed, with security men constantly coming in rifling through the leaflets, looking at the notice boards, training their cameras on women coming and going and also on women sitting there for our 5.00pm meetings. Whilst that was quite unnerving, it was only one small part of what was going on. It would be a mistake to see it as something that prevented us. It didn't prevent us, it was more an irritation. If you were from a country where there was more political surveillance, obviously it was more significant than it was for me for example. Tibetan women in exile who had managed to get in on foreign passports were harassed and followed — it was a great deal more serious for them than it was for us.

We were all worried about security before we left Britain. I was too scared to bring with me the lesbian leaflet written by one of the international lesbian and gay human rights organisations. They were very good leaflets which just explained in basic terms what it means to be a lesbian and it was translated into Chinese. I deliberated but in the end, I didn't bring the leaflet, I felt ashamed, when I saw that others had brought those leaflets in and hadn't been deported.

The lesbian leaflet was being distributed and used in the tent very successfully. When I was on the Great Wall with Jamal, a woman who I met from Nepal, she at one point got out the family photos and we sat on the Great Wall

and looked at them. I said I hadn't got any with me and also I was a lesbian. I explained to her as best I could what a lesbian is and she said 'O, are there a lot of lesbians in London?', I said: 'Yes, and especially Hackney!' We went off on a different subject. At the end of the walk, she asked if I had any sisters. I said 'No' and she replied 'Oh, now I understand why you are a lesbian! In our country there are lots of things you can't tell your husband but you can tell your sister'. There were lots of occasions like that. I wished I'd had that leaflet to press into her hands. But a lot of the leaflets were given out and a lot of links were made with Chinese women who may or may not have been lesbians.

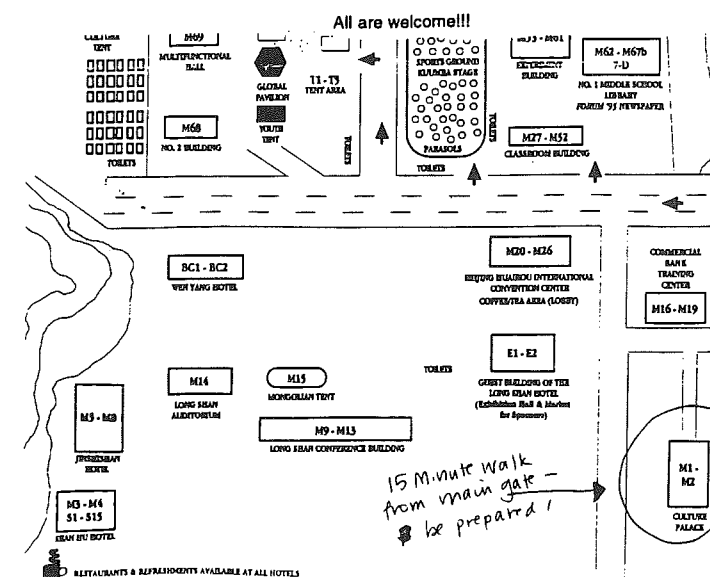
Jill: Regarding the event as a whole, one woman described it as 'less a world conference

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UNSPOKEN RULES

Sexual Orientation and Women's Human Rights

on women, more a women's conference about the world'.

Margaret: Yes, I would agree with that. It's why it was so different from the other UN conferences in the series, the Social Summit in Copenhagen, the Human Rights Congress in Vienna or the Conference on Population and Development in Cairo.

Lesbian activism

Jill: Can you tell us a bit more about the lesbian tent. Was it fully international or predominantly western women?

Margaret: The lesbians who were running activities were mostly members of established networks. The two other lesbians from London were constantly in the tent running activities, welcoming women and there were women from the SE Asian networks and Latin American lesbians who seemed to be there a lot. There was a rota for anyone who wanted to volunteer to be there in the day. At 5.00pm every day there was a briefing meeting to share what we had done during the day or to share any plans. There were lots of workshops, a couple of parties, and one evening several hundred lesbians went off to a disco in Beijing with several hundred police! We organised a demonstration at the Forum, and a demonstration at the official Conference which was a far more risky affair. Several lesbians managed to go into the plenary which was in constant session with a banner which they unrolled which said 'Lesbian Rights are Human Rights' — that was on Human Rights Day and photographed in the media. We also held press conferences at the Forum and at the Conference. There were a lot of strong public statements that we made as well as less obvious lobbying and the contacts we made. We were very busy, with a full programme of activities at the lesbian tent — 20 workshops on lesbian issues were run as part of the Forum programme at other venues. One of the most dramatic moments was at the

SUPPORT SEXUAL ORIENTATION

In the Draft Platform for Action, Paragraphs: 48, 180 (b), 226, 232 (h)

Sexual orientation should be maintained in the Draft Platform for Action. 'Sexual orientation' language within the Platform for Action is not framed as a new right. Rather, it simply states that sexual orientation, along with age, sex, race, religion, language, ethnicity, disability should not be grounds for discrimination.

Human Rights tribunal when a young American lesbian testified about her incarceration in a psychiatric unit for 'gender identity disorder'. Her testimony got a standing ovation.

Jill: Can we focus on the politics around lesbianism and sexuality at the official Conference. I understand there were various resolutions in the Draft Platform for Action about sexual orientation.

Margaret: There were four references to sexual orientation in the Draft Global Platform for Action and we had them all on our publicity leaflets. Two of the references were in fairly generic paragraphs which listed areas of oppression and referred to categories of women. The other two were more specific, one referred to discrimination in employment and one was a call for legislation to protect lesbians from discrimination. Those four references were there because of lesbian input into preparatory Conferences and NGO forums which had taken place over two years before the conference in all five regions and at the final Preparatory Conference in New York. All of them were in square brackets, which meant they were open to negotiation at the Conference. The task of the official Conference was to remove the square brackets to make an agreed Global Platform for Action. This meant the role of legal advisors and lawyers was very significant at the Conference, because the wording and its implications were very important.

Jill: My understanding is that at the end of the day, there was no agreement on these points so all references to sexual orientation were removed from the Global Platform for Action.

Margaret: That's right, at the end of the day, all references to lesbians were deleted from the document. One could either say it was a failure because all references were deleted. Or see it as a success in getting sexual orientation debated as a mainstream issue at an international conference of this scale. That is a major achievement. It was not a marginal issue, but one of the key issues that was a focus of the divide between the Muslim/Catholic coalition and other countries at the Conference. So it was being debated in the working groups and plenaries of the Conference, right up to the last minute. We did succeed in getting para 97 included in the document which was a significant advance even on the Cairo Conference.

Paragraph 97 talks about women's right to decide free from coercion or control not in relation to 'sexual orientation' but 'on matters related to their sexuality including sexual and reproductive health'. How it is interpreted will depend on testing, if not in courts, in terms of policy formulation by national governments.

Another illustration of the support, the positive result of the work we did, was that 20 countries agreed a statement of support drawn up by the lesbian caucus which stated that wherever the phrase 'and any other status' appeared in the document, they would interpret it as including sexual orientation.

Jill: Was the UK one of those 20?

Margaret: The European Union was — fortunately for us, the UK didn't speak as an individual country. Of course the UK is also committed to implementing the ECE Regional Platform for Action which clearly defined the human rights of women to include sexual orientation. We had one vote through the European Union and this meant more support than we could have expected from the UK government alone. Other countries which signed the statement included Canada, Slovenia, Latvia, Israel, Jamaica, South Africa, New Zealand, and Norway and the Cook Islands. What was striking was that it wasn't a straight divide, north vs south or Islamic Countries and Vatican versus a united front of secular countries. There were countries from the South strongly supporting sexual orientation as well, and not all Muslim or Catholic countries were part of the Muslim-Catholic coalition.

Jill: Where did the obstructions come from?

Margaret: The Holy See (the Vatican) supported by Iran, Egypt, Sudan and some other G77 countries. They tried to frame the issue as one of respecting culture whereas we were trying to frame it as a human rights issue. It was a coalition between fundamentalist Muslims, Catholics, Protestants with right-wing fundamentalist Americans over family, religion, sexuality.

Talking us in or out

Jill: Can you tell us something about the processes of this discussion?

Margaret: The conference organised through a main committee which appointed two working

groups. Their task was to find agreed language for the paragraphs they were allocated. To achieve this, working sub-groups had been set up. You can imagine the task, trying to arrive at agreement given the wide range of opinions on lesbianism — north and south versions of extreme fundamentalism to radical feminism.

One of the things a friend, who was a member of one of the sympathetic government delegations, and a lesbian, told me, was that she found many lesbians coming up to her from other government delegations to thank her for speaking up on lesbian issues, because they could not be 'out' to their government delegation. So there was a lot of hidden support for the lesbian issue, which could not be made explicit, but most have been important to how the discussions went.

It is also useful to understand that government delegations were made up not just of of government representatives but also NGO representatives. Who the NGOs were depended on the different mechanisms countries set up to nominate them. For example, the Canadians were careful to ensure the full diversity of women were represented, including lesbians and women of colour. In contrast the UK delegations had only two NGO representatives, both representing NGOs working on development issues for women.

Another issue was the position of the US delegation. They had previously been strong in their support for keeping sexual orientation in the document. But they weren't able to be so up front about their support because of the Republican influence. They knew when they got back they would be called to account because of the hostility within the US government to their participation in the event. So it is important to recognise the influence of political forces back home, for each delegation, on what they felt able to say and do on sexual orientation.

I think this shows how important it is that we work hard to build coalitions and to work with a wide range of women's groups, including straight women who may not have formally supported lesbian issues. The work that we did at the Forum was an example of this: having the lesbian tent; having 20 workshops outside the tent on issues like human rights, lesbian health, young lesbians, as well as the setting up of new lesbian networks in Africa and the Caribbean and possibly Central and Eastern Europe and the strengthening of existing lesbian networks in

Extract from Margaret's journal

Ahead and behind me I could see members of the lesbian caucus leaning forward, waiting for the moment when Beverly would ascend the rostrum. On the platform, the Chair announced Beverly Palesa Ditsie, and she came forward, a small figure facing a huge audience in a huge hall. As she read her speech with passion and dignity, I felt tense, proud, and aware I was taking part in a moment of history: the first ever lesbian addressing a UN Conference on lesbian rights, a voice for all of us, for which we had fought and would continue to fight as a part of a wide ranging agenda for women's equality. The applause was loud and long. We made our ways to the foyer as planned. As Beverly emerged from the hall, film crew and press converged on us and Beverly spoke about what it was like to grow up feeling different, and eventually to work it out for herself, without the help of books and leaflets, that she was a lesbian in South Africa.



MEDIA ADVISORY

Lesbian Caucus

For Immediate Release
September 13, 1995

SE Asia. Every day hundreds of women came to the tent to find out about what it means to be lesbian. We did manage to strike up conversations with Muslim and Catholic women who might be under pressure to be hostile. Our demonstration on the Forum site was attended by over 500 women. It got a very good, very positive response. I felt really proud to be at that demonstration.

As the Forum went on there was a mood change from the intense workshops about what was wrong with the world, to emphatic demonstrations about what we wanted to put right in it, and then we went on to action planning. It felt psychologically important to me to have that demonstration, a real coming out: an assertion that lesbian rights are human rights; that lesbian rights are women's rights; that as lesbians we are part of the mainstream, not some marginal group. It felt very important to be making these points and connections with all the women at the Forum. This is quite apart from the influence we had at the Conference itself. All of that work will pay off now, I think, in follow up if it is to mean anything to us as lesbians. We will have to work with national governments, for us that means the Conservative government and through regional networks and structures within the EU, for example. So all that work we did making links with other women who came from the UK, straight women who might have formerly been hostile, through personal relationships we built as well as the political issues we raised, hopefully will now pay off. We must continue to build on and take this work forward.

Lesbians organised

Jill: Perhaps you could say a little more about the workings of the lesbian caucus at the Conference itself?

Margaret: We began each day with a morning meeting where we had briefings both from NGOs and UN officials about what the main negotiation issues were going to be on the day ahead and also what had been achieved the day before. This enabled us to know what the

lobbying issues were. At the meeting we also had a briefing from one of the caucuses, including the lesbian caucus.

The morning meetings were organised by a group called the Ekipo made up of one representative of each of the NGO caucuses and one representative from the CSW — UN Women's Commission that organised the Conference. It was their job to set the frame for morning meeting. Some caucuses were what you could call identity caucuses — lesbians, migrant workers, refugee women, women of color. There were also five regional caucuses. Altogether there were about 30 caucuses, each allocated 1 hour meeting space per day in the official



building allocated for NGOs at the official Conference site in Beijing.

Those meetings were extremely focused and task oriented. Particularly important was the experience of some of the women in lesbian caucus who had been active internationally before, who understood the workings of the conference, knew how to lobby and how to influence the proceedings. We would hear from them what had been achieved the day before, what the task was on the day ahead, who we should lobby.

We would also have very strategic discussions. One example was that at one point we had to decide whether to drop 'sexual orientation' and go for 'sexual rights'. We had to

weigh up whether there would be more of a chance of succeeding if 'sexual rights' was used in those four paragraphs instead of 'sexual orientation' or whether this would leave us open to being interpreted as being paedophiles and into bestiality which was some of the propaganda being put round by the fundamentalists at the Conference.

We were also able to secure one of the highly sought after NGO speaking slots, which enabled a representative from the lesbian caucus to address the UN Conference. Beverly Palesa Ditsie, a young black South African lesbian was the speaker chosen by the lesbian caucus. Caucus members worked on the draft of her speech with her. Its aim was to make maximum impact to counter the negative propaganda put out by fundamentalists, to educate government delegates about anti-lesbian discrimination and human rights violations, and to inspire government delegations to support retaining sexual orientation in the Platform of Action.

So that was how we organised at the conference. During the day we would lobby the EU, our own government or any other government — we could lobby any government we chose, just by standing around in the corridors or through the offices they have set up in their hotel on the Conference site. We would also attend some of the many other caucus meetings that were going on. There was the European lobby and one on alternative economics for example. So there was a lot going on in the Conference.

We had a lot of work to do with media to counter the very negative images that were being put out about the whole event. One of the problems we had was that the journalists didn't want to hear about all the positive work we were doing. All they wanted to know about were the brushes we had had with the security or the fracas at the Forum when there had been some sort of bust up with the fundamentalists. They just went on and on at us to tell them about that.

Bringing Beijing home

Jill: What do you see as key things that came out of Beijing for us in the UK to follow up and develop?

Margaret: There is an awful lot of work to be done to counter the negative news reports that were put out. Everyone here seems really surprised when I refer to anything positive about



the Conference. They think that it rained a lot, there was a lot of mud, we had a horrid time. Then they switch to the Chinese human rights record and the surveillance. All of those things were true but every single woman I have spoken to, and this includes myself, came back with a really deep sense of commitment to working on feminist issues, from a feminist perspective. Speaking for myself, it has given me a much broader vision of what that means and also having witnessed and taken part in making direct links with women from other regions, especially the Southern regions, has been really important to me in broadening my view — that and the knowledge that women are organising and a loyalty to keep up with it.

I think that has even got through to the Tory women and civil servants who went to represent our government. I have noticed at the meetings I've been to since Beijing, there does seem to be a real determination, even from the government delegation, to see that something comes of this. I am not under any illusions that they will make far-reaching changes to their policies or become feminist, but I think what we are going to see is a much clearer Tory agenda for women. We mustn't lose the opportunity it opens up of working with them on certain defined areas where we can build on that. I think we owe it to each other and to women to do that.

For lesbians it means perhaps being prepared to work with women whom we perhaps otherwise wouldn't have previously looked to for support — to make the point that we are not prepared to go back to just working with lesbian groups alone. Rather, from our base groups we will take our issues into the main-

Useful names and addresses:

What Women Want Postcard Campaign

Sue Tibble, Co-ordinator
Women's Communication
Centre
3-4 Albion Place
London W6 0LT
Tel (0181) 563-8603
Fax (0181) 563-8605
email:
womentalk@easynet.co.uk

Report on what UK women want from Beijing, to be launched shortly. Campaign will continue up to the general election, and is keen to work with local groups.

National Women's Network (NWN)

Shirley Nelson, Ann Khambatta
11 Goodwin Street
London N4 3HQ
Tel (0171) 263-7553
Fax (0171) 272-3044

Focus on making local, national and international links between women. Report on the UK Testimony of Women event organised to coincide with the FWCW. Aims to provide accessible information about the conference for grass roots women. Guide to the Platform for Action will be ready in April @£3.00. Information on hire of Women Weaving the World Together video.

National Alliance of Women's Organisations (NAWO)

PO Box 257
Twickenham TW1 4XG
Tel (0181) 891-1419

Umbrella organisation responsible for electing UK delegates to the European Women's Lobby. Beijing Information Pack and Women's Guide to the UN. Working on implementation of the Global Platform through issue-based Networks.

stream and not allow them to be marginalised again. All this would be incredibly hard work. I am speaking for myself here, but I think perhaps we need to become more strategic in identifying areas where there is a real chance of getting results, and being willing to put other issues aside, so that we don't lose the chance to achieve results in what we may consider limited areas at the moment. But all of that requires some organised networks or groupings. This is what starts to make me depressed because I don't at the moment see the spaces for doing this.

Jill: *Were there any plans made by lesbians while you were in China to do that, to find spaces to meet again to maintain contacts either internationally or among the women from the UK?*

Margaret: There was a commitment made to set up a regional East-West network, and this was to be discussed at a conference in Riga, Latvia in December 1995. A lot of informal links were made and renewed, for example, women from former Yugoslavia, some of whom were lesbians, and were able to speak about their work to link women across ethnic divides and those links will continue.

Here in the UK, there are a few of us who met before going to Beijing and worked together to publicise efforts to get lesbian issues onto the agenda, and are now working together to keep the issues on the agenda in discussions with the government delegation about implementation of the Global Platform. These negotiations will focus on interpretation of paragraph 97. We have noticed a great deal more open support for our interventions from other participants and from civil servants since we all came back from Beijing. We are now trying to find ways of keeping up the momentum and ensuring that our issues do not get lost.

Jill: *Are there any plans in place for some sort of Conference or workshop for lesbians in the UK to receive some feedback from Beijing and to think about ways of taking things forward?*

Margaret: The three of us who went to Beijing have already organised a follow-up meeting in London; ten lesbians came despite the snow and there was some interest in follow-up. All of us have spoken at various other meetings, for example the RADS group, an open meeting

organised by LB Lewisham Equalities Unit, to students on courses on which we teach, as well as informal gatherings organised by friends. Besides this we try to raise the issues in workshops at the various follow-up conferences which continue to be held. But workshops tend to be on policy themes or the Critical Areas of Concern, and do not address lesbians directly.

I think we do need to think of ways of increasing lesbian involvement in the follow-up process, and we can do this both by organising specific lesbian information events as well as by publicising our existence at more mainstream events. A start would be for more lesbians to get onto the mailing lists for consultation about the implementation process, by using the address list below, and to invite us to come and speak at their meetings. We have got some wonderful photographs of the lesbian tent and the Forum and Conference, as well as of Beijing itself and the Great Wall!

Then we need to find ways of educating straight women who are committed to working for implementation of the Global Platform, and getting their support for our lobbying. We have got to make them see that we want paragraph 97 interpreted to include us.

Cheryl Gillan, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State and Minister responsible for co-ordinating work on women, has made strong statements of commitment to working in partnership with NGOs in implementation, and to mainstreaming gender within government policy making. This will be implemented through the Cabinet Subcommittee on Women, serviced by the Sex and Race Equality Branch of the Department of Employment and Education. We need to get involved in this process now, using our positions within the organisations for which we work if we can, and of course the campaigning organisations to which we belong, to put pressure on the government, and the Labour Party to tell us, for example, when they are going to repeal Clause 28; how they are going to implement paragraph 97, and their commitment in the Regional Platform for Action 'to achieve by the year 2000 a more equitable... society, ...based on the principle that the human rights of women... must reflect the full diversity of women, ...and recognising that sexual orientation is an additional barrier.' □

The Beijing Global Platform for Action

This consists of recommendations on a wide range of issues, crystallised into 12 'critical areas of concern'. These are:

- the persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women;
- unequal access to and inadequate educational and training opportunities;
- inequalities in access to health and related services;
- violence against women;
- the effects of armed or other kinds of conflicts on women;
- inequality in women's access to participation in the definition of economic structures and policies and the productive process itself;
- inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and decision making at all levels;
- insufficient mechanisms at all levels to promote the advancement of women;
- lack of respect for and inadequate promotion and protection of women's human rights;
- stereotyping of women and inequality in women's access to and participation in all communication systems, especially in the media;
- gender inequalities in the management of natural resources and in the safe-guarding of the environment;
- persistent discrimination against and violation of the rights of the girl child.

There were several controversies at the final preparatory conference in New York in March 1995. Square brackets (indicating no consensus) were placed around much of the draft Platform of Action, by various delegations of the 45 member UN Commission on the Status of Women. These disagreements focused on three main issues:

- macro-economic development issues, including criticisms of structural adjustment programmes, debt burden on developing countries — most of the objections coming from the western world;
- sexual rights, sexual orientation, reproductive rights, women's rights as human rights, objections to the word 'gender', advocating equity rather than equality; and concerns that 'the family', 'motherhood' and religious values were being side-lined — these objections came from some Catholic and some Muslim countries;
- financial commitments and funding sources for implementing the programme.

References to prostitution as a form of violence against women were bracketed since the Netherlands insisted that 'forced prostitution' was the correct language. Lesbians at the NGO Symposium in Manila 1993, and at the Latin American and Caribbean Lesbians Satellite Meeting in Peru 1994 issued statements calling on the UN and its member states to include lesbian rights in the Global Platform. A petition signed by thousands of women from over 60 countries representing every region of the world was presented to the UN Commission on the Status of Women and to Gertrude Mongella, Secretary General to the Beijing Conference. Much of the official conference was devoted to finding forms of words which meant the brackets could be removed. □

Violence Against Women; Women in Media; Women, Work and the Economy.

Women's National Commission

Wanda Brown, Joint Secretary
SEB4 Level 4
Dept. of Education and
Employment
Caxton House, Tothill Street
London SW1H 9NF
Tel (0171) 273-4906

Membership organisation responsible for co-ordination of voluntary sector consultation for the UK government report to the Beijing conference. Directory of Women's organisations in the UK; Beijing conference report and briefing materials.

Sex and Race Equality Division

Department of Education and
Employment
Fran Greaves, Co-ordinator
SRED4, Level 4
Caxton House, Tothill Street
London SW1H 9NF
Tel (0171) 273-5325

Services Cabinet Subcommittee on Women's Issues; now drawing up action plans for mainstreaming implementation of the Global Platform across government ministries. Co-ordinates on behalf of Cheryl Gillan, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State and minister with day-to-day responsibility for co-ordinating work on Women's Affairs, consultation with women's organisations on priorities for implementation of the Global Platform. Will send free copies of the Global Platform for Action, UK government delegation Conference report and report on priorities for implementation.

Beijing Implementation Group

Anette Lawson
Fawcett Society
5th Floor, Beech Street
London EC2 P2LX

Weasel Words:

Paedophiles and the Cycle of Abuse

In making child sexual abuse a political issue, feminists focused attention on male power, challenging the idea that abusers were abnormal, sick individuals. Recently, however, the term 'paedophilia' has been creeping back even into feminist discussions. Here Liz Kelly warns of the consequences.

Over the last few years I have become increasingly alarmed at the ways in which feminist perspectives on child sexual abuse are being undercut by the adoption and acceptance of extremely flawed concepts and ideas. It would be bad enough if this was confined to professional perspectives, but more and more I have encountered use of, and support for, some of these ideas in women's organisations. The consequences of this sloppy thinking are immense, and it behoves anyone who thinks of themselves as a feminist to take the meaning and implications of using the word 'paedophile' and subscribing to 'cycle of abuse' theories extremely seriously.

What has happened over the last couple of years is an increasing awareness of not just the extensiveness of sexual abuse, but also the ways in which adults organise abuse networks, and the ways some of these are linked to child pornography and child prostitution. Whilst feminist analysis has had a profound influence on how sexual abuse in the family is understood,

this has not yet been applied to these other contexts.

The return of the 'paedophile'

The issues became particularly clear to me whilst undertaking a review of what we know about sexual exploitation of children (Kelly *et al.*, 1996). The spark for this piece was attending two seminars at which the word *paedophile* was used routinely, without question, in which I was the lone dissenting voice: one feminist suggested that there was not a problem since 'fathers who sexually abuse are also paedophiles'. The necessity of it was confirmed when I heard French, Swedish and Belgian delegates (all senior women policy makers) link the concept of paedophilia with cycle of abuse. One neatly summarised their perspective: 'It is deplorable that one out of three children could be a paedophile in the future'.

The ease with which these terms now trip off women's tongues disturbs me greatly; do we too —on one level—want to distance ourselves

from the implications of sexual abuse in childhood, confine it to limited contexts, have a group of men who we can justify thinking and talking about as 'other'?

During an international seminar in Brussels there was marked discomfort at attempts to broaden the definition of sexual exploitation through reference to familial contexts in which child pornography is produced and children may be prostituted. Many participants wanted to maintain the 'commercial' element in the definition. Underlying this was a desire to shift attention from 'sex' to exploitation. This may make the issue easier to deal with for many, but to do so would result in a loss, rather than a gain, of perspective. Whilst the motivations of ruthless entrepreneurs may not be the same as those of familial child abusers, children are exploited and sexually used in both contexts, and the legacies which such abuse results in do not stem from whether financial gain was involved.

Documentation of 'organised abuse' networks tends to preface this with the word 'paedophile', and indeed many in the child protection field have begun using 'paedophile' as either a collective term for all abusers or to refer to what is presumed to be a particular type of abuser (invariably those who abuse children outside of familial contexts).

Immediately the word *paedophile* appears we have moved away from recognition of abusers as 'ordinary men'—fathers, brothers, uncles, colleagues—and are returned to the more comfortable view of them as 'other', a small minority who are fundamentally different from most men. The fact that they have *lives*, kinship links and jobs disappears from view in the desire to focus on their difference. Attention shifts immediately from the centrality of power and control to notions of sexual deviance, obsession and 'addiction'. Paedophilia returns us to the medical and individualised explanations which we have spent so much time and energy attempting to deconstruct and challenge. Rather than sexual abuse demanding that we look critically at the social construction of masculinity, male sexuality and the family, the safer terrain of 'abnormality' beckons.

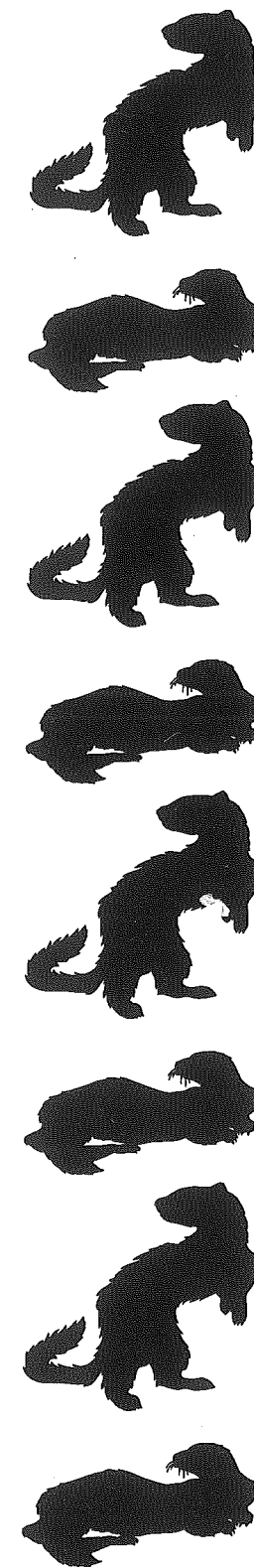
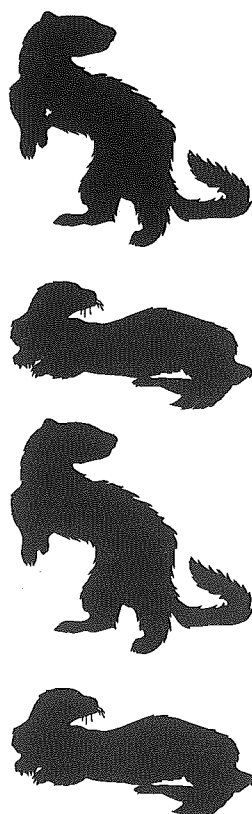
Disguising and distracting

The self-serving construction of paedophilia as a specific, and minority, 'sexual orientation' acts as a useful distraction to both the widespread sexualisation of children, and girls in particular,

in western cultures and the prevalence of sexual abuse. In one US study a significant proportion of 193 male college students reported that they could be sexually interested in children if they were guaranteed that there would be no legal consequences (Briere and Runtz, 1989). The representation of the 'ideal' heterosexual partner for men continues to be younger, small, slim with minimal body hair. Across many cultures sexual access to girls and young women is often the prerogative of powerful men: chiefs, priests and religious leaders through customs such as 'devadasi'. The western echo of this age-old patriarchal tradition can be seen in the pre-requisite young girlfriend (occasionally 'under age') of older rich men. There is an important theme here which links male power, economic power and social status with sexual access to girls and young women.

The separation of 'paedophiles' in much of the clinical literature on sex offenders from all men, but also other men who sexually abuse, has involved the presumption of difference. Similarities—in the forms of abuse, in the strategies abusers use to entrap, control and silence children—are ignored. In this way fathers, grandfathers, uncles, brothers who abuse are hardly ever suspected of being interested in the consumption, or production, of child pornography, nor are they thought to be involved in child prostitution. This in turn means that investigations of 'familial sexual abuse' seldom involve either searches for or questions about these forms of abuse. This contrasts with what we know from adult survivors who tell of relatives showing them pornography, expecting them to imitate it and being required to pose for it. Some also tell of being prostituted by relatives. A significant proportion of organised networks are based in families.

Who are the clients of children and young people involved in prostitution? I suspect only a minority would fit clinical definitions of 'paedophiles'—men whose sexual interest is confined to children. Whether intentionally or not, calling a section of abusers 'paedophiles' is accompanied by an emphasis on boys as victims, and the abuse of girls and young women outside the family becomes increasingly invisible. Unlike 'child abuser', or 'child molester' the word 'paedophile' disguises rather than names the issue and focuses our attention on a kind of person rather than kinds of behaviour.



Confused definitions

In much of the literature there are inconsistencies in how 'paedophilia' is defined, although the most common element seems to be the assumed 'fact' that it is not just a preference for, but the restriction of sexual arousal to, children. This 'fact' is however presumed, and the possibility that the 'paedophile' may have sexual contact with adults is never explored. Julia O'Connell Davidson's (1995) work is documenting the fact that the dividing line between the men who exploit children and women in sex tourism is neither clear nor absolute. The focus on sexual arousal moves us into further difficulties, since the recent feminist (and also some child protection professionals') emphasis on individual men *choosing* to act or not act, and having to take responsibility for those choices is much more difficult to sustain where 'deviant' sexual arousal is represented as having a biological basis in individuals.

These confusions have, if not created, at least contributed to a context in which men who seek to justify their wish to abuse have been able to organise politically, and even seek the status of an 'oppressed sexual minority'. They also form the basis for a differential approach in terms of intervention, with responses being proposed in relation to 'paedophiles'—such as life licences, and denial of any contact with children—which would cause outrage if proposed in the case of fathers. The issue here is not whether the responses themselves are appropriate, but the ways in which distinctions are being made between 'types' of abusers which are both spurious, and result in abuse by family members being regarded as less 'deviant', and therefore, less serious than by men outside the family.

The recent announcement by the Home Office of plans for a national register fudged the issues by referring both to 'paedophiles' and convicted sex offenders (*Independent* 23 March 1996). A consultation document is due to be published soon, and the proposals are expected to include requiring convicted offenders to notify the police of changes of address ('a residency order') and being disallowed from employment which involves access to children ('a child protection order'). The disjunction between these proposals and the fact that a conviction for sexual abuse does not constitute grounds for removing parental rights under the

Children Act has not been noticed either by Michael Howard or in any of the media reporting. But then fatherhood has never been considered 'work'!

The dangerous implications of a resurgence of the label 'paedophile' was evident in an article in *The Guardian* on 17 January 1996. It was a small piece noting a problem delaying the publication of the first British commentary on Catholic canon law due to a mistake in relation to papal infallibility. Within this document are two pages on how to respond to priests who 'are paedophiles'. The church's position is that paedophiles have diminished responsibility because their sexual urges are 'in effect beyond their control'. This forms the justification for arguing that the church should not punish abusive priests except for 'perhaps only a mild penalty, a formal warning or reproof'. Anyone getting a sense of *déjà vu* yet?

If we allow the term paedophile to re-enter discussions about sexual abuse, all the arguments about responsibility for action will have to be had all over again.

Cycle of Abuse

Whilst 'cycle' explanations have a long and inglorious history, 'cycle of abuse' has become the dominant explanation of why sexual abuse happens in the 1990s. The origins of this 'theory' lie in nineteenth century philanthropy and early twentieth century psychiatry. It has proved a popular explanation for all forms of physical and sexual abuse in the family (and in a slightly different guise—'cycles of deprivation'—has been the conservative approach to explaining poverty and Black socio-economic disadvantage). Every cycle model attempts to reduce complex social realities, which have more than a little to do with structural power relations, to simplistic behavioural and individualistic models.

Cycle of abuse has become the most commonly understood explanation of sexual abuse in childhood and has been uncritically accepted as 'the truth' by many sections of the population. Virtually every speech I have heard by a politician recently about sexual abuse in childhood and violence against women, contains some reference to it, and a significant number of workers in British refuges adhere to versions of it. This alarming and widespread acceptance of a flawed model needs to be challenged, both in terms of the evidence to support it and its

consequences for child and adult survivors of abuse.

In its simplest and most common form, 'cycle of abuse' proposes that if you are abused as a child you will in turn abuse others. But if we begin with what we know about the gendered distribution of sexual victimisation and offending the proposition begins to fall apart. We know that girls are between three and six times more likely to experience sexual abuse, yet the vast majority of sexual abuse is perpetrated by males. If there is any kind of cycle it is a gendered one, and that in turn requires explanation. Even if arguments that there is a hidden iceberg of female abusers have some validity to them, to reverse the gendered asymmetry would require an iceberg of literally incredible proportions.

Even if we limit our focus to perpetrators, the data here is also equivocal. No study has yet demonstrated that there is an obvious 'cycle' even within samples of convicted offenders; the range of those reporting experiences of abuse in childhood varies between 30 and 80%. Few of these studies define abuse in childhood in the same way. Some limit their data to whether the individual was abused in the same way as he has subsequently abused children, whereas others include *any* form of child abuse in the individual's childhood whilst focusing on *sexual* offending in adulthood. Clearly the latter method will produce higher findings, but the psychological mechanisms involved in moving from experiences of physical abuse and neglect to sexual abuse cannot be the same as those where the same form of abuse is involved. These crucial differences are invariably ignored.

In all studies to date either a majority or significant minority cannot be fitted into the theory. Alongside these glaring problems in evidential support for the proposition, there is seldom any exploration of the precise mechanisms involved whereby those who have been victimised become victimisers, since this is not simple repetition, as any models suggest, but a reversal of roles.

Double distortion

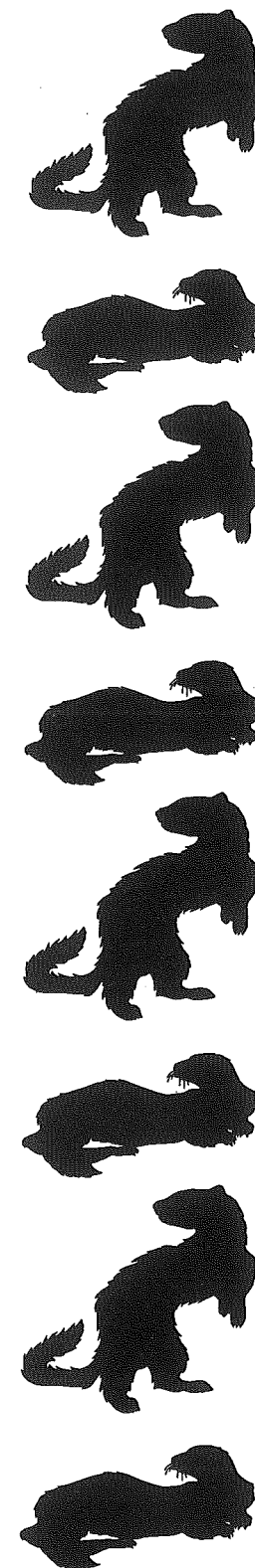
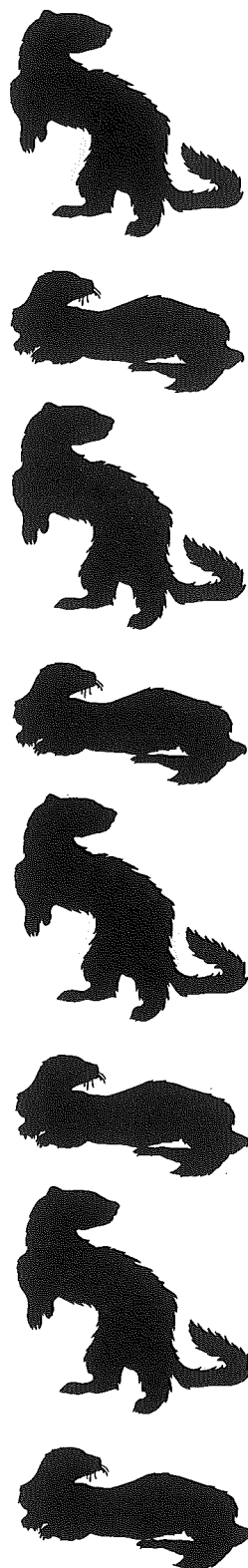
A rather deft sleight of theory occurs when proponents of this pernicious idea recognise that women do not proceed in great numbers to abuse. There are two ways in which mothers who have been abused are implicated: experiences of abuse are presumed to make women

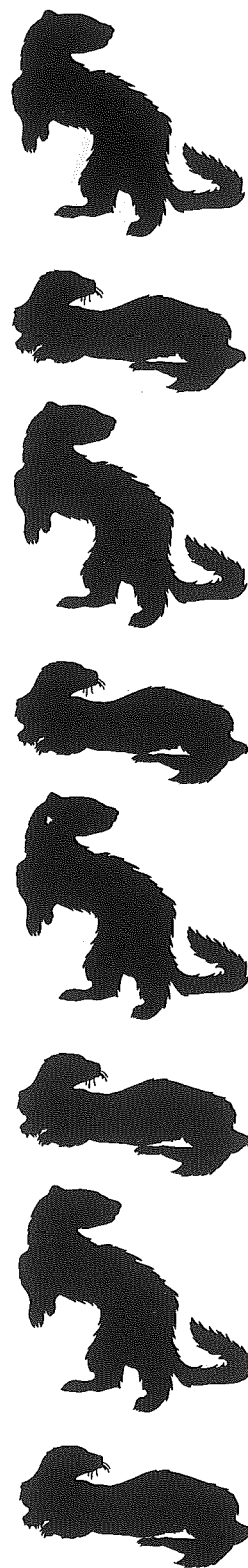
less able to protect their children or to choose an abuser as a partner. These propositions are frequently used in tandem, but they are different arguments. (The influence of this idea is been so strong that some social services departments consider knowledge of a woman's abuse in childhood sufficient to place her children on the at risk register!)

The first proposition is usually supported through reported cases, although few of its supporters take seriously what prevalence research tells us: that in any group of women a substantial number will have a history of abuse. Harriet Dempster's (1989) Scottish study provides an explanation for why there may be a higher than predicted proportion: mothers who have been abused are more likely to report the abuse of their children. The link proposed here is precisely the opposite of that which 'cycle of abuse' presumes. These mothers are so determined to protect their children, their own experience makes them more willing to seek formal intervention. Presuming a negative link prevents researchers and practitioners from countenancing an alternative 'positive' one. The tragic irony which some women encounter is that if they reveal their own abuse their report may be accorded less validity.

The second proposition is remarkable. Very few women begin relationships knowing their male partner has abused children—prospective employers have legal rights to information about Schedule 1 offenders, prospective sexual partners do not. Since no clinician has yet devised a certain way of distinguishing abusive from non-abusive men, how do women achieve this? If clinicians/researchers really believe that women have 'abuser detection antennae', why are there no studies designed to discover how they do this? If 'choice' is operating here it is made by men. We know that some experienced abusers deliberately target single mothers. If we listened to what women have to say we would also know that some men, when trusted with information about a woman's own abuse or that of her child by another man, use that as 'permission' to act similarly.

Recognising the deliberateness of abusers' behaviour (Conte et al, 1989) is disturbing; it is much more comfortable to believe that abusers and/or their partners are merely repeating what they learnt in childhood. 'Cycle of abuse' theories rework old orthodoxies; transforming abusers into victims, and placing mothers back





in the collusive frame. Quite how the theory is supposed to explain abuse outside the family (and more children are abused by known adults than family members) has not yet appeared in print.

Psychic determinism

'Cycle of abuse' is based on a psychic determinism: experience A leads to behaviour B with minimal choice/agency in between. Apart from offering abusers carte blanche to avoid responsibility, it makes the thousands of survivors who, as result of their own experiences, choose to never treat children in similar ways invisible, logically impossible. This theory does an outrageous injustice to countless women whose courageous and passionate testimony made sexual abuse in childhood a social issue. It also makes a travesty of support for children, since the aim becomes preventing them 'repeating the cycle' rather than enabling them to cope with having been victimised. A recent twist is the shift from talking about the sexualised behaviour some children who have been abused display as 'acting out' to defining children as young as three and four as 'abusers'. By presuming the impacts and meanings of abuse we close off investigating the most important question of all: what makes the difference in how children and adults make sense of, and act in relation to, experiences of childhood victimisation?

It is this psychic determinism which connects 'cycle of abuse' to the view that the impacts of sexual abuse are in every respect, and in all cases, devastating; that survivors can only be rescued from an appalling future through intensive therapy. However, studies which use community samples, rather than adults or children in therapy, discover a wide range of impacts; from those experiencing extreme levels of distress through to many who fit within the 'normal' range.

Disputing 'cycle of abuse' does not mean there are no examples where experiences of abuse are present in generations of families, or that some individuals have decided to deal with past hurts by inflicting pain on others. But the negative consequences of this 'idea' are being most strongly felt by child and adult survivors; these consequences are extensive and seldom referred to. It is now commonplace for adults who have been abused in childhood—women and men—to believe that they cannot be trusted

around children, that there is an inevitability that they will abuse them. In my experience when women are asked to explore the issue in more depth none have felt a desire or wish to sexually abuse children. Their conviction that this will be the case comes *solely* from ideas in the public sphere. Some adult survivors are very clear about the pernicious consequences of this model, as these examples from a research project I am involved with illustrate:

My mother was abused by men outside her family—she hasn't abused myself or my brother. I know many people—male and female—who were abused, some continuously and severely. They have not become abusers. I am very sceptical about this theory. The majority of abused are female, the majority of abusers are male. Where are all the female abusers?

I don't agree—I haven't found myself fondling 3 year olds and don't feel any desire to. It's an excuse to avoid the real issues of abuse. A person has the choice NOT to abuse. Many men go on to abuse and use it as an excuse.

It confirms everything victims of abuse already believe about themselves. It offers no hope of healing, ... it denies the possibility of survival. It allows 'experts' to look at these distant mad, bad, sad unfortunates, sexual deviants, rather than themselves... It removes any responsibility from perpetrators.

Why, when the evidence is shaky and the implications for child and adult survivors so negative, has 'cycle of abuse' become widely accepted as an explanation? On one level it is a neat and accessible concept. In offering this 'common sense' explanation it represents abuse as learnt behaviour as if it were the same as learning a nursery rhyme. Apart from the basic fact that abusing others is a very different action to being victimised, a thinking and decision-making process is involved before we act similarly or differently to events we have been witness to or experienced. Much of the knowledge developed on offenders over the last ten years shows that they are careful, deliberate and strategic in entrapping children.

So powerful is this 'idea', though, that even academics who recognize that most people do not 'repeat the cycle' refer to this as 'breaking' it. We need to ask ourselves why this notion has taken such a hold within public and professional thinking. Most crucially it excludes more challenging explanations—those which question power relations between men and women, adults and children. 'Breaking cycles' is a much easier and safer goal to discuss than changing the structure of social relations.

Some important connections

There are two contexts in which the concept of 'paedophilia' is used. One proclaims difference in order to protect 'normal' men (see previous discussion). The other asserts difference in order to justify and legitimise abusive behaviour.

The sexual freedom model is frequently presented as an alternative and radical approach. It is based upon a belief that all laws on sexual conduct, except where explicit force or violence are used, are an incursion into individual freedom and privacy, and as such are a form of coercive social control. This has been argued most cogently in relation to children and young people by self-defined paedophile groupings; PIE (Paedophile Information Exchange) in Britain and NAMBLA (North American Man/Boy Love Association) in the USA. The support for what has been deliberately called 'inter-generational' sex in order to disguise the power differentials involved, has extended in recent years to include some of those who have defended pornography from feminist criticism, such as Gayle Rubin and Tuppy Owens. The philosophical assumptions which are the basis of this perspective are:

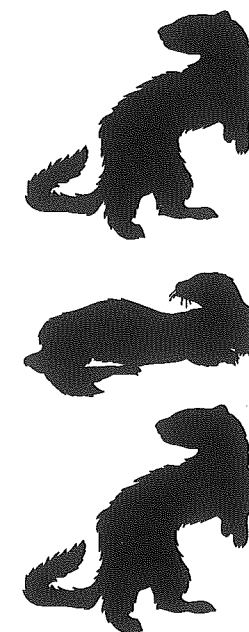
- that paedophilia is a sexual orientation, and therefore that paedophiles are an oppressed minority, with whom other sexual minorities ought to have a 'natural' affinity;
- that 'inter-generational' relationships are not just about sex, but are beneficial and based on a form of love that is more honest than most familial relationships;
- that what is seen as sexually abusive varies culturally, and that in some cultures adult/child sex is acceptable;
- that children are sexual beings, but this is denied and controlled by adults;
- that consensual sexual relationships are possible between children and adults.

Critics of this position have raised a number of uncomfortable issues including: that it is overwhelmingly men who argue this position; that it is invariably adults arguing (albeit in disguised forms) for *their* right to be sexual with children, usually boys; that sexual activity is prioritised above other rights children lack, such as the right not to be hit, or to sex education. It is also the case that childhood (unlike gender, class, race and sexuality) is not *only* a product of oppressive social relations. Whilst the social

construction of childhood does disadvantage children in relation to adults, early childhood involves levels of dependency on others which no amount of social change can remove. This material reality makes the notion of non-coerced consent between children and adults inherently problematic.

Whilst the most eloquent supporters of the sexual freedom position clearly locate themselves within the gay and/or paedophile movements (Sandfort, 1987) there are some heterosexual groupings which promote similar arguments, particularly sexualized family relationships. The most well known is the Rene Guyon Society based in the US, whose slogan has been 'sex before eight or else it's too late'. In 1990 their membership was estimated as 5,000, and they have been public in promoting 'kid porn' (O'Grady, 1992). Evidence has also emerged of a number of the 'new religious movements' (often referred to as 'cults') promoting adult/child sex within the group, and much of what is currently known points to this being primarily heterosexual and following the patriarchal tradition of privileging male leaders' sexual access.

Both approaches to paedophilia, and cycle of abuse explanations, function to exclude feminist understandings and approaches. They all, in different ways, serve to excuse or justify abusive behaviour and provide an extremely limited basis from which to work towards the right of children to lives free from intimate intrusion. The importance of maintaining our perspective and challenging approaches which refuse to name men and male power was graphically illustrated by the hysterical response in sections of the media to the recent publication of a report on sexual exploitation of children (Kelly et al 1996). What some male radio and newspaper journalists balked at was not the need to take sexual exploitation seriously, but our temerity in questioning the distinction between 'paedophiles' and other men. Taking note of what resistance to feminist analysis turns on has always been an important guide for me in knowing that we were 'onto something' important. Talk about the 'paedophile' and the 'cycle of abuse' indicates a point of resistance to feminist analysis which needs to be challenged now. □



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Ignorance is Bliss, when you're Just Seventeen

Earlier this year there was an outbreak of concern about the sexual content of young women's magazines, which were portrayed as a threat to childhood 'innocence'. But is the real agenda innocence or is it ignorance? And why is there no concern about boys' 'innocence'? Stevi Jackson reads between the lines...

On 6 February 1996 a bill was introduced into the House of Commons to print minimum age recommendations on the covers of teenage girls' magazines, a move which followed publicly aired concern about their sexually explicit content. A week earlier, BBC2 screened a documentary in its 'Under the Sun' series about five year old beauty queens in the Southern USA. The *Radio Times* carried a feature article on the programme — 'Made up, dressed up, fed up' written by Alison Graham. The media was suddenly full of discussion about children and sexuality, or more specifically about girls and sexuality. As usual, public debate missed what feminists might see as the main issues, the perpetuation of compulsory heterosexuality and the construction of female sexuality in terms of objectification and pleasing men. Instead the focus was on the threat posed to childhood.

Age of 'innocence'?

I cannot claim to have caught all the media

coverage of either event, but what struck me about what I did read, see and hear was the prominence of the concept of 'innocence'. For example, on the morning of the 6th February Radio 4's regular phone-in focused on sex in teenage magazines, framed by the question 'whatever happened to childhood innocence?' 'Innocence' appears to be taken for granted as a defining feature of childhood, so that anything which threatens it is seen as a danger to childhood itself. Hence a recurrent theme in media discussions of both young women's magazines and child beauty queens was the idea of lost or stolen childhood. It is not, however, just asexual innocence which is seen as threatened, but the supposed golden age of freedom from the pressures of adult life. Thus Alison Graham says of the little beauty queens: 'childhood is forgotten in a whirl of singing lessons, modelling tutorials, photo sessions and hairdresser's appointments' (p.22). Yet asexuality is nonetheless thought of as central to



this age of innocence — Graham makes it clear that sexuality is something which such young children should know nothing about.

Where have we heard all this before? One arena where the concept of innocence has been deployed in the media is in coverage of child sexual abuse. In an article entitled 'Defending innocence: ideologies of childhood' Jenny Kitzinger argues that feminists should be critical of the way this concept is used to evoke public revulsion against sexual abuse. She points out that 'innocence' itself is seen as titillating and is eroticised as a sexual commodity and that the ideal of innocence is used to stigmatise the sexually knowing child, to make her a potentially legitimate victim. Moreover, in the name of protecting 'innocence', adults deprive children of access to sexual information which might help them avoid sexual abuse and exploitation. Meanwhile, those who have worked to put child sexual abuse on the political agenda are themselves accused destroying the 'age of innocence'.

We should be equally sceptical about the application of this concept to child beauty queens or the issue of sex in teenage magazines. I argued in *Childhood and Sexuality* that the idea of 'innocence' is a means of depriving children of knowledge and justifying their powerlessness. I still stand by that argument and, like Kitzinger, would suggest that we need to think critically about the power which adults wield over children, the power that makes child abuse possible and which gives individual parents exceptional rights over their children. In so doing, of course, we need to pay attention to intersection between parental power and patriarchal power. Feminists are unlikely to lose sight of patriarchal power but we are, as Christine Delphy pointed out in *T&S 24*, sometimes guilty of neglecting the power that mothers wield over children.

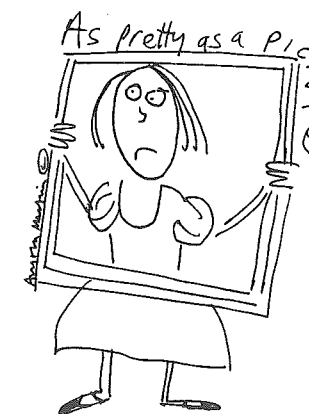
In the recent public debates on childhood sexuality the wider context of both adult power and the construction of gender have, for the most part, been ignored. In all this discussion of children and sex, it is rarely made explicit that gender is an issue: yet in both the case of the beauty pageants and the magazines the children who are the objects of concern are *girls*. This makes a difference, since discourses on both childhood and sexuality which underpin these discussions are profoundly gendered. This neglect of gender has meant that the emphasis is

on what is deemed extraordinary, the challenge to idealised models of childhood, rather than on what is depressingly and predictably ordinary — the cultural construction of sexualised femininity.

Of Barbie dolls and beauty queens

Like most women I know who watched the BBC documentary on child beauty queens, I was both fascinated and appalled. And yes, part of what appalled me was what was being done to these children, their whole lives governed by their parents' desire for their success in competition. Clearly the children did not have much choice in the matter. The documentary followed two rivals preparing for a major competition, concentrating on the one who finally won. She was certainly not happy — most of the time she seemed bored, fretful and sulky — only on stage did she come alive.

The issue for me, though, was not that the discipline and sexualisation enforced on these children was robbing of them of their childhoods — rather it seemed an extreme manifestation of the ways in which children in general and girls in particular are treated. Children are defined as dependants subject to parental authority and, within limits, parents have the power to rear them as they choose. Childhood is also remarkable for the degree of control exercised over the



body by others. Children's appearance, deportment, posture and movement are regulated; they are touched, kissed and fussed over and more likely to be subject to physical punishment than any other category of person. This control of the body is more rigorously imposed on little girls, one facet of the intersection of gender with the more general powerlessness of children.

The five year old beauty queens are young enough and small enough to be physically coerced. They are inexperienced enough not to know that any other mode of life is possible, since they live their lives competing on a relatively small circuit against the same opponents. Like all children, they are constrained to live their lives according to their parents' choices — they are forced to go along with what parents think best for them, whatever it is. What their parents think is best for these children is to win the contests, be the prettiest girl in town, or in the whole of the South.

A degree of 'femininity' is being imposed on these children which might well seem excessive even by non-feminist standards. Just when little girls are beginning to escape from the confines of frilly frocks and restrictive injunctions to be 'feminine', this programme came as a reminder that there are still sections of the population imposing very rigid and traditional ideals of femininity on their daughters. This is carried to extremes for the contestants in beauty pageants. These girls are being taught very deliberately, rigorously and systematically that the only thing about them of value is their prettiness and their ability to carry off a carefully managed performance of stereotypical femininity. This form of feminine attractiveness is culturally specific: blonde is beautiful, white is beautiful. In one section of the contest the girls are dressed as 'Southern Belles'. Not surprisingly there is not a black child in sight — the racist standards of beauty noted in adult contests are also evident in those for children.

This commodification of a specific form of feminine attractiveness merges with the reduction of children to objects owned by their parents. With little girls this has often lead to them being treated as dolls to be dressed up and displayed. During the documentary on children's beauty contests, one doting mother said of her daughter that, when dressed up and made up in her stage costume, she 'looks just like Barbie'. Like many girls her age, this one owned a collection of Barbie dolls. These dolls are

hugely popular with little girls, a means of playing at a form of adult femininity; *Barbie* magazine is read by 14% of girls aged 7-10 in the UK. The little beauty queens have the opportunity (or misfortune) to act out the fantasy.

What impressed me was not how grown up these little girls looked in their adult clothes, hair-dos and make-up — but how infantilised is the form of adult femininity they are emulating. I've always thought that extreme 'femininity' is a form of childishness — a sexualised gloss on the vulnerability and powerlessness of children. This was underlined by the performance of these children, already able to be feminine in these terms. Yet in the way that the girls were talked about in both the programme and the *RT* article, these superficial signs of adult 'maturity' were taken as some sort of real difference between little girls and adult women. In the *RT* there is a photo of one of them captioned 'Look, no make up... Brooke as she really is.' The authentic child is one without make-up — no-one says this of adult women. Imagine it said, say, of a supermodel. For adult women, make-up and all other aids to 'femininity' are advertised as 'bringing out' the 'real woman' within. The dividing line between authentic childhood and authentic womanhood in this discourse, it seems, is a thin veneer of 'sophistication' symbolised by the presence or absence of make-up.

Sexualised girlhood

Yet the sexualisation of childhood is not new. Little girls have long been taught to cultivate prettiness and coquettishness, to get what they want by sexualising themselves — and they know they are failures if they don't match up.



Beauty pageants can be seen as just a logical extension of this. For generations little girls have aspired to be 'May queens' or local carnival queens. The beauty contest is just a more commercialised and professionalised version. Even this is not a recent invention: beautiful baby contests are something I remember from my childhood. I also recall that Pears soap sponsored a 'Miss Pears' competition, the winner of which then featured in advertisements. It might be said that these represented properly innocent, asexual childhood. If so then these images illustrate Jenny Kitzinger's point that innocence itself is often sexualised. In *The Sexual Exploitation of Children*, Judith Ennew suggests that such representations have distinct parallels with pornography. One example is a painting by Munier called 'Playmates', used by Pears Soap advertisements in 1903 (pre-dating Miss Pears) which features a scantily clad child in a distinctly sexual pose. She also places the famous photograph of Marilyn Monroe with her skirts blowing up around her next to a Oxo advertisement featuring a similar depiction of a small girl, suggesting that both represent the same fantasy (see pp 132-3).

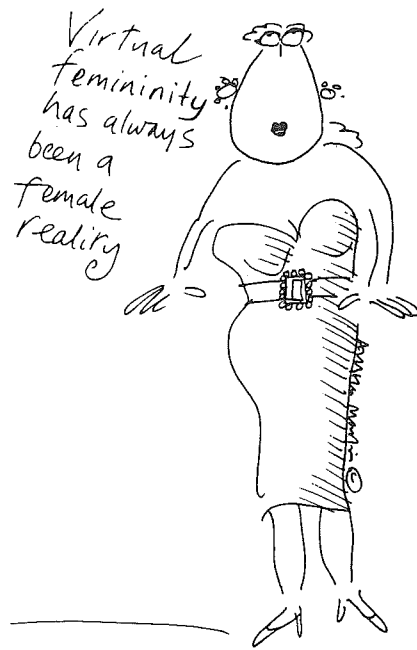
What separates the beauty queens from past generations' Miss Pears or hundreds of 'cute' little girls featured in advertisements? How do we tell the Barbie dolls from the baby dolls? Partly the difference is produced by the superficial effects of make-up and more adult clothes and hairstyles. It also, however, derives from something called 'sexuality', something antithetical to authentic childhood which is signified by dressing up for this 'adult' per-

formance. 'Sexuality' is further indicated by gestures, movements, a particular turn of the head, a knowing look or wink — all of which the competitors in the beauty pageants were being explicitly taught. They were being deliberately schooled in the performance of a sexualised femininity. The result, according to Alison Graham is a little girl who 'imitates a sexuality she should know nothing about'. This phrase presupposes that sexuality is in itself improper for children and, more importantly, it hinges on the idea that female sexuality is reducible to how one looks, to a performance of sexual desirability and availability. Women's 'sexuality' is talked about in these terms too — even by some feminists (for example in Ros Coward's *Female Desire*). It is not an autonomous female sexuality which is meant here, but the process of self objectification.

The little girl who 'imitates a sexuality she should know nothing about' is just acting out a more stylised version of the usual little girl performance — and in one sense she knows nothing about sexuality while in another she knows a great deal. She is probably ignorant of the mechanics of heterosexual sex, yet she knows that being attractive, flirtatious and cute wins a positive response from adults — and little girls know this even if they don't enter beauty contests. Again, this is not a new phenomenon: Simone de Beauvoir noted it nearly 50 years ago. In *The Second Sex* she argues that the little girl 'soon learns that in order to be pleasing she must be "pretty as a picture"; she tries to make herself look like a picture, she puts on fancy clothes, she studies herself in the mirror, she compares herself with princesses and fairies'. Through engaging in 'childish coquetry' she will seek to be the centre of attention (p.306). This is not so far away from the five year old contestant in a beauty contest who announces to approval from all around her 'I'm a queen every day'.

This knowing but not knowing — being encouraged to sexualise themselves as objects without understanding the implications — is a dangerous game for girls. Paradoxically the same parents who encourage their daughters to behave like this would, I'm sure, think it terrible for them to know about the realities of sex. It is this anxiety which underlies recent concern about teenage magazines. On the one hand these publications encourage aspects of femininity which are socially approved —





interest in fashion, make-up and being attractive — while in another they appear to pose a threat of a more knowing and active female sexuality. It is the issue of sexual knowledge and how much of it should be available to young women which is the central issue at stake in the attempt to regulate teenage girls' reading.

Sex and the teenage girl

The Periodical (Protection of Children) Bill is a private member's bill introduced under the ten minute rule and, as such, is unlikely to become law. Even if there were a law requiring the printing of minimum reading ages on the covers of magazines, I cannot see this stopping young women from wanting to read them — though it might enhance parents' ability to police what their daughters are reading. The most popular magazine among boys aged 11-14 — *Viz* — does carry on its cover the message 'not for sale to children'. According to the Central Statistical Office's publication *Social Focus on Children*, over a quarter of boys in this age group read it. I find this far more worrying than the magazines girls are reading, but boys' reading habits have not come under public scrutiny — a point I will return to later.

We might want to consider why a magazine called *Just Seventeen* is the most popular purchase among 11 to 14 year olds in the first place, or why *19* is read by girls in their mid-

teens. Part of the appeal of these magazines is that they speak to those who are still classed as children, still lacking the rights of adulthood but who aspire to the maturity and status that young womanhood seems to offer them. Girls of this age often want to be older, want to be treated as adults, want what they are debarred from on the grounds of age. Wanting the forbidden does not necessarily mean that they all want to rush out and have sex, but they do want the right to know about it.

More sensible commentators, such as Claire Rayner writing in *The Guardian*, have pointed out that teenage interest in sexuality is nothing new. I entered my teens in the early 1960s when teenage magazines had lots of romance and no explicit sexual content (it was *Mirabelle* and the like in those days, even *Jackie* had yet to be launched). In the stories a kiss was the culmination of every romantic encounter. I and my peers were desperate to know more but starved of likely sources. At the age of 11 or 12 we were reduced to reading out 'the dirty bits' from James Bond novels (it was that bad!). I recall great excitement when someone got hold of a copy of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. At fourteen, continuing this communal reading practice, three friends and I were nearly expelled from school having been caught with *The Perfumed Garden*. Following this incident my father forbade me even to talk to boys — assuming, rather like some of those pontificating about teenage magazines today, that if I was reading such things I must be about to put it all into practice.

At least the magazines girls are reading today circulate in a public domain, where their content can be discussed and perhaps challenged, rather than furtively exchanged and whispered over in classrooms and playgrounds. Moreover, we cannot assume a direct link between the magazine's representations of sexuality and young women's sexual activities. The tendency to treat women as 'cultural dupes' brainwashed by whatever they are reading or seeing on television has been much criticised by feminist cultural theorists. Early feminist critiques of romance, for example, have been questioned, with much more emphasis being placed on women and girls as active readers who are not necessarily conned by the ideologies peddled by magazines or romantic fiction. For example Elizabeth Frazer's study, 'Teenage girls reading Jackie' demonstrated that girls

reflect upon what they are reading and are often critical of it.

Teenage girls are being depicted as cultural dupes by those seeking to restrict their access to magazines, and are even more likely than adult women to be seen in this way. The assumption is that, as children, they are peculiarly vulnerable to brainwashing, they do not know their own minds and therefore they are in danger of being corrupted. We need to credit young women with some ability to think for them-



selves. On the other hand, the new emphasis on women and girls as active readers can go too far in denying that particular texts have any effectivity at all. We can see this by means of analogy with the pornography debate: it is far too simplistic to argue that pornography directly causes sexual violence, but at the same time those of us opposed to pornography would want to argue that it contributes to the construction of a form of masculinity which makes sexual violence possible. Arguing this case on the pornography issue, Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Frazer make the point that we cannot ignore the ways in which humans construct meaning and represent their actions to themselves and others.

... we need to move beyond causal accounts of human actions, and look instead at the resources humans bring to their interpretations and representations, the meanings which shape their desires and constrain the stories they can imagine for themselves. For we are clearly not free to imagine just anything; we work both with and against the grain of the cultural meanings we inherit.

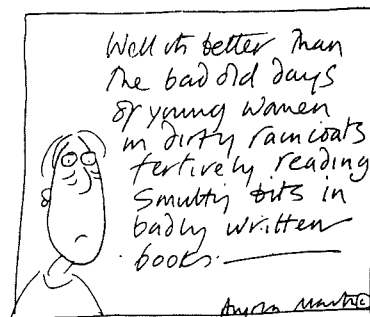
What young people read about sexuality will not make them act in particular ways, but it is likely to inform the meanings they construct around their own sexuality. Girls read maga-

zines, in part, for information on how to manage sexual relationships. They do not read uncritically, for the contents of the magazines are discussed among them and mulled over individually. Nonetheless, what they read does feed into the competencies or lack of them that girls bring to relationships, their understanding of and expectations about sexuality. This is not grounds for barring them from reading about sex, but is grounds for being concerned about what sort of sex they are reading about.

The debate around the bill is framed in terms of whether access to explicit sexual information is a good or a bad thing — rarely is the quality of information discussed, other than in moral terms, and what counts as 'sex' is almost never questioned. Moreover the 'shock horror' tone of the discussion emphasises what is new and different rather than considering their content in the light of wider, longer-term trends. The increased sexualisation of the magazines' content is seen in isolation, rather than as an aspect of the increased sexualisation of femininity in general. Changes in teenage girls' magazines parallel those in adult women's magazines and, in many respects, the boundaries between the two are blurring. There is now far more explicit sexual content in women's magazines in general and far less desexualised romance. Heterosexual love is itself becoming more sexualised, a trend discernible in Western culture as a whole since the early 20th Century and visible in girls' magazines since the 1950s. Earlier magazines featured romance and male pin-ups (with their clothes on), now they feature sex and pin-ups (often with most of their clothes off).

One feminist interpretation of this trend is that it is indicative of the increased eroticisation of women's subordination. Other feminists take a more optimistic view. Angela McRobbie, for example, sees signs of progress in the newer magazines, a postmodern celebration of plurality. She argues that they represent a potential for less uniform, monolithic modes of femininity, for a more knowing and assertive female sexuality, for the exploration of alternatives to heterosexuality. In some ways the new magazines are an advance on earlier ones, but in many other ways I find it difficult to share McRobbie's optimism — indeed I wonder whether we have been reading the same magazines. We have certainly been reading them differently.

I blame Single mothers and Bunties.



So what's in these magazines?

The content of these magazines offers a predictable diet of fashion, beauty, articles on sex, romance, and how to manage relationships (including 'true life' stories) and pin-ups of male pop stars, sport stars and models. Other contents include the occult and more serious items on such issues as drugs and bereavement. There are also, of course, horoscopes, 'self knowledge' quizzes and problem pages. The main focus is on boys — how to attract, please them and get on with them — or what might be called 'compulsive heterosexuality'. This is a term one of my students accidentally substituted for 'compulsory heterosexuality', but which seems an apt depiction of what is going on in girls' magazines.

While writing this article I bought a selection of these magazines over a period of about three weeks and asked friends and colleagues with teenage daughters what they read. The most popular ones are either music focused — although their real interest seems to be male stars as objects of female lust — or the fashion and relationships variety. It is the latter which have the most explicitly sexual content and it is these I have looked at most closely — although it was *TV Hits* which sparked off the controversy by printing a problem page inquiry about oral sex.

These magazines have certainly changed from those around in the 1960s and 1970s. Although the earlier magazines, of which *Jackie* is the best remembered, did include fashion, beauty tips, pin-ups, features on relationships and so on, their stock-in-trade was the comic strip romance. This has disappeared and the magazines now look much more like adult women's magazines of the *Cosmopolitan* or *Marie Claire* variety.

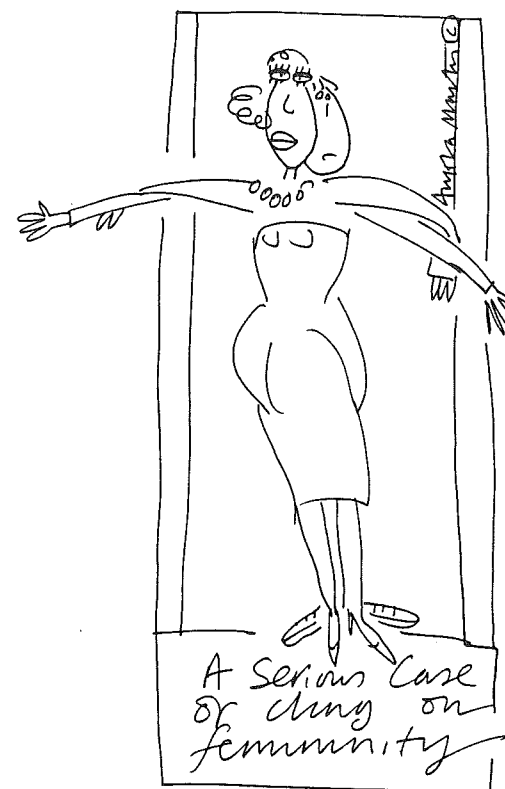


Even magazines for pre-teens now have a more grown-up look and share some content with teenage magazines. *Bunty*, for example, which I remember as being a comic book featuring stories about boarding schools, gymkhanas and ballet classes now has a more adult look. It still has some of the old favourites — nearly forty years on, the Four Marys remain trapped in the third form at St Elmos — but these sit alongside articles with lead-ins like: 'Which holiday hunk is the one for you?' Glossy pictures of fluffy dogs vie for space on the bedroom wall with pin-ups of Boyzone. And this is where you can still find comic-strip romance including a tale about a girl who gives up drooling over posters of a TV star when a real boy rescues her dog and then asks her out.



Once past this stage, the next step up is to magazines like *Just Seventeen*, the most popular of this genre among 11-14 year olds — read by 52% of them (CSO 1995). There's also the fortnightly *Mizz* and somewhat glossier monthlies such as *Sugar* and *Bliss* (the latter carrying the message 'a girl's gotta have it' under the title). The monthlies may be intended for slightly older girls, but I know of twelve year olds who read them regularly. All, in any case, are aimed at girls still at school — a good indication of this is provided by the problem pages and the quizzes: for example, 'At a school disco, you spot your boyfriend chatting to a girl you don't know, do you... etc.' (*Sugar* quiz entitled 'Are you a cling-on?')

The barkers on the front of these magazines give an indication of what the fuss is about: 'Sex: should you tell mum or keep schtum'; 'I slept around, but I'm still a virgin'; 'Make him want you bad'; 'He slept with me for a bet'; 'Does sex change your life?'; 'I got pregnant on



purpose'; 'Dribble over the sexiest footballer alive' and so on. There are also more serious sexual themes: 'Shock report: why 12 year olds are turning to prostitution'; 'Could I have AIDS: one girl's scary story'.

The sexual message is more explicit still in the magazines for older teenagers such as *19* and *More!*, the latter being (in)famous for its regular 'position of the fortnight' (with line drawings, full instructions and a 1 to 5 difficulty rating). The May edition of *More!* and June edition of *19* both feature orgasms: 'Talking about the Big 'O': Orgasm stories to get you going and coming'; 'Blissed Out: Treat Yourself to the O to Mmm of Orgasm'. *More!* is the most adult of these magazines in other senses, in that it addresses its readers as young women with jobs living independently of their parents. The biggest clue to its target audience is that it is alone among these magazines in assuming that the objects of its readers' lust are men rather than boys. It is a tackier, more downmarket version of *Cosmopolitan*, with cheaper clothes in its fashion features and more of a tabloid journalism style. According to Angela McRobbie its 415,000 readers are aged on average between 15 and 17.

Mixed messages

Once past the lurid headlines, the contents of these magazines are mixed and often contradictory. Problem page reassurance that all bodies are normal is contradicted by injunctions to improve, disguise or conceal bodily imperfections. Advice on saying no to sex and not rushing into it sits side by side with articles and quizzes which give the impression that the only important thing in life is to attract, keep and please your man. An article in *Bliss* about the joys of being without a boyfriend, which looks at first sight like a positive move, lists among the 'good things about being single' such items as being free to do what you want, to spend time with your mates, but also 'you can eye up any guy you want without feeling guilty'.

It is true that the tone of all this talk of boys, sex and looking good is, as Angela McRobbie says, often ironic and self mocking. Boys are not treated with any great reverence and often they are the butt of jokes. I'm not sure, however, how far this undermines the fairly conventional range of femininities represented in these magazines, although it does suggest a certain distancing from and self-consciousness about the constraints of femininity. Certainly the way readers are addressed implies a more knowing and active sexuality: girls are no longer expected to passively wait until Mr Right makes a move, they are expected to make it happen. This does speak to girls' desires for more equal sexual relationships, in which girls can take the initiative, in which they usurp what was once a male prerogative: objectifying those one desires. But is this progress? Equality seems to be understood within the discourse of these magazines as behaving like men: girls can look at male bodies just as men have traditionally looked at female bodies. Even some of the language is the same as that used by men, for example: '8 poster prints — top totty for your wall' (*Bliss*). At the same time there is an acknowledgement of persistent difference as in '11 things you should NEVER say to boys' (*Sugar*); 'Dazed and confused: just 17 girly things lads will never understand' (*Just Seventeen*).

Moreover, the old idea that girls' sexuality is being attractive and alluring has by no means vanished. The boundaries of what is acceptable in this respect have shifted and behaviour once thought of as that of a 'slag' or 'tart' is now playfully endorsed. Here is the response to those



who score highly on a sexiness quiz in *Mizz*:

Grrrr! You little tiger! You have the secret of sex appeal all right, right down to wearing slinky black numbers to take the dog for a walk, and flirting with your Headmaster to get out of detention. Stop that wiggle when you walk — you'll do yourself an injury!

Yet alongside this sexualisation of traditional femininity are more serious articles about both sexuality and other aspects of life. The same issue of *Mizz* carries articles on teenage prostitution and on a girl coping with her mother's death. The more considered discussions of sexuality in both articles and problem pages are often constructive and informative. The readers of these magazines certainly know far more about coercive sex, sexual exploitation, rape and incest than previous generations and are better informed about avoiding pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Girls also know more about their own bodies and how to derive pleasure from them. This is all to the good. So too, in my view, is the demystification of romantic notions that good sex is something which magically happens once you fall in love. However, this has its downside, in that the idea that sex has to be 'worked at' produces its own anxieties and is itself a form of social regulation.

The advice given on heterosexual sex in the problem pages is often sensible and, in this respect at least, magazines read by younger teenagers cannot be accused of promoting early sexual experimentation. Generally the message is not to rush into early sex and to resist being pressured into it either by friends or boyfriends.



Some carry regular explicit warnings on their problem pages on the illegality of under age sex: 'Be sure, be safe and remember sex under 16 is illegal' (*Just Seventeen*); 'It's cool to wait, sex under 16 is illegal' (*Bliss*). Some of the advice on sex is helpful and positive, the sorts of things young heterosexual women need to know but may not find out from other sources: for example, that a condom is ineffective if the guy doesn't withdraw before losing his erection. Sex, however, is still defined in terms of the penetrative norm — 'having sex' means heterosexual coition — even though there are items on problem pages and elsewhere explaining clitoral orgasms and masturbation.

Endorsing heterosexuality

These magazines are relentlessly heterosexual. This is one of the points on which my reading of these magazines differs markedly from Angela McRobbie's. She says that:

Gay and lesbian identities now move more freely across the field of popular women's and girls' magazines. These exist as sexual possibilities where in the past they were permitted only a shadowy stigmatized existence. (p 183)

This may be more true of magazines for older readers, or it may be that my sample (two copies each of *Bliss* and *More!*, one each of *Sugar*, *Mizz*, *Just Seventeen* and *19*) is unrepresentative. In any case, I did not find evidence of 'gay and lesbian sexualities [being] frequently invoked' in the pages of these magazines (p188) or any great sign of a postmodern plurality of sexualities. It may true that, as McRobbie says, 'teenybopper stars now come out as gay' in

teenage magazines, but even on the gossip pages, which she sees as a source of representations of alternative sexualities, I found only the odd oblique reference to (male) gay identities. While there is undoubtedly greater openness about lesbian and gay sexualities, in the magazines I read these issues remain marginalised.

I only found four explicit discussions of lesbianism and homosexuality — all, significantly, on problem pages. The line taken is, on the whole, a liberal one which seeks to present a fairly positive view of homosexuality and lesbianism but without challenging the normality of heterosexuality. For example, a girl writing to *19* who had just discovered that her father was gay, is angry that he has not told her before and worried about friends ostracising both her father and herself. She is encouraged to be understanding, told that she might end up being proud of his courage in coming out and that if her friends can't deal with it 'that's their problem'. A young woman writing to *More!* saying that she is attracted to women but afraid of her parents' reaction is encouraged to ring Lesbian Line and is given some contact numbers. However, where young people are less certain about their sexuality, the reaction seems to be to reassure them that they are 'normal' — i.e. heterosexual. A girl concerned that 'her friend' might be a lesbian because she was fourteen and had never had a boyfriend was advised not to worry, there was still time, it didn't mean that she was a lesbian — then, as an afterthought, that if she was a lesbian she shouldn't feel bad about it (*TV Hits*). A boy worried that his friends were calling him gay because he had kissed another boy while drunk wasn't told that it was OK to be gay — just that his friends would stop teasing him eventually (*Just Seventeen*). In this last case an opportunity to challenge heterosexism was completely missed.

The problem pages reveal that some boys, at least, read girls' magazines — assuming, that is, that the letters are genuine. It is now common for magazines to have 'agony uncles' as well as 'agony aunts', both to advise on boys' problems and to offer a male point of view on girls' dilemmas. Given that these magazines assume a community of young, heterosexual and primarily female readers and that they focus on heterosexual relationships, one obvious question is: what are the boys these girls relate to reading?



What are boys reading?

In all the public discussion of girls' magazines, there has been a silence around what boys are reading. In part this reflects the lack of magazines aimed at a young male market. Since there are still only a few adult 'men's magazines', aside from pornographic ones, it is not surprising that no-one has yet launched a publication aimed at teenage boys — particularly since boys seem to read less than girls. *Viz*, the most popular magazine among young teenage boys, is intended for adult men of a puerile disposition. Its appeal may be that it is a fairly easy progression from *The Beano* (which remains among the top five magazines for boys in the early teens). A large proportion of *Viz* is devoted to cartoons and its entire tone — as well as being overtly misogynist — can best be summed up as lavatory wall humour. (I had already decided on this phrase when I caught sight of the cover of an issue of the magazine in my local newsagent, proudly advertising 'a golden shower of piss-poor cartoons and lavatory humour').

Aside from *Viz*, and *The Beano*, the other 'top five' publications for boys in their early teens are *The Sun* and two computer game magazines: *Gamesmaster* and *Sega Power*. It would seem from this list that if boys of this age are engaging with issues of sex and relationships at all, it is at the level of page 3 and 'the fat slags' — hardly promising for young heterosexual women in search of either true love or sensational sex. Most research on young people's access to sexual information suggests that pornography is boys' main source of 'knowledge' on sex.

There is no moral panic about what boys





are reading. Sex is not thought of as a threat to boys — they are expected to 'know' about it rather than remaining innocent. Yet what they 'know' is deeply problematic — especially given that male definitions of what sex is still largely prevail in the negotiation of heterosex. It is male sexuality which constitutes the major problems young women face — whether manifested as sexual harassment and coercion, male reluctance to engage in safer sex or simply men's inability to understand women's sexual desires and aspirations. Yet it is young women's sexuality which is being constructed, once again, as a social problem. The message is still that young women should remain 'innocent' — in other words ignorant.

Double standards

In the early 1970s, while I was researching teenage girls' ideas about sexuality, I worked in a psychiatric unit for teenage boys aged 11-15. The boys all read pornography and the walls of the unit were covered in photographs of naked women — those with fully exposed genitals were strongly favoured. Some of the staff objected, but the psychiatrist in charge saw the consumption of pornography as a sign of 'healthy development' in the boys and a legitimate part of the therapeutic environment. Meanwhile the youth club in which I was conducting my research, which claimed to have liberal attitudes to sex, threw me out because I mentioned orgasms to the girls and let on that it was possible for girls to masturbate. While more politically correct health and youth workers might no longer endorse quite such gross double standards, I suspect they have by no means vanished and that interest in pornography is still regarded as part of a normal 'healthy' development for boys, that it is not seen as a problem that this is their main means of learning about sex. Finally, I suspect that these double standards are what underpin the concern about explicit sex in teenage magazines.

Whatever reservations I have about the magazines girls are reading, however much I

might object to their relentless endorsement of compulsory (or compulsive) heterosexuality I can't help feeling that girls are better served by these magazines than by those available in the past. The girls I was talking to in the early 1970s all read *Jackie*, thought of sex in terms of 'love' and were woefully ignorant about their own bodies, although many were sexually active. Readers of *Bliss*, *Mizz*, *Sugar* and the like are far better informed about safer sex and their own bodies and are constantly exhorted to assert their own sexual wants and needs — including saying no to sexual practices they don't want.

This knowledge does not, of course, translate easily into more egalitarian sexual relationships. All the evidence we have suggests that whatever girls may know in theory, in practice the power dynamics of heterosexual relationships still work against them. However, ignorance would only make girls more vulnerable. One of the problems girls have in negotiating sex with boys is finding a language in which to discuss sexuality and assert their own sexual desires. At least these magazines begin to provide them with such a language, speak to them in terms which make sense in terms of their everyday experience — even as they simultaneously help construct that experience. The problem is not that girls are exposed to too much sex, or too explicit sex, but the limited, male oriented ways in which sexuality is discussed. □



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Sustaining the struggle in Bombay

In their Annual Report for 1994-95, Bombay Women's Centre demonstrate that uncompromising feminism is alive and kicking, able to combine political analysis, practical support and campaigning.

The year 1994-95 has been a year of major political changes in Maharashtra and in particular for all women's groups in Bombay. The growth of communal forces and sentiments among large sections of Hindus in the country has been strikingly manifest in this state. Maharashtra, which has been considered one of the most progressive states in India with its history of social reforms and agrarian and commercial affluence has been a loyal Congress State largely. The 1994 elections truly marked the end of an era with the people of Maharashtra electing to power the 'Hindutvavadi' alliance of the Shiv Sena and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) — two parties whose commitment to the democratic and secular values of post independent India have always been suspect. Though all political parties have an instrumental perspective towards women as a possible constituency, the change from the Congress I to the Hindutva-

vadis implies a change in state policy towards women, as a social group. This is a factor that women's groups have taken into account in their political strategies.

Thus when the new Shiv Sena-BJP government proposes a Uniform Civil Code, women's groups in the country are not convinced that they have a genuine interest or concern for women's rights, but rather that they have their own agenda. A strong feeling is that it is a ploy to harass minority communities, using women's rights as a politically correct reason. A genuine democratic process involving women's groups working with grass roots communities, to evolve a gender-just family law, is what all women's groups would readily agree to, rather than enforcing a law which will be seen by some sections as a threat to religious freedom and practice.

In June 1994, a State Policy on Women was



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launched by the then Chief Minister Shri Sharad Pawar, with much fanfare. This policy was seen as a step forward in the right direction. Many women's groups and organisations discussed and assessed the policy. There was much lip service given in the text to concepts like women's empowerment and self-reliance. But the lack of will on the part of the State to implement the policy was evident from the fact that close to a year after the launch of the policy, the implementing authorities at many levels had not received directives to implement the various provisions mentioned in the policy. Actually, Shri Pawar seemed to have announced this policy hoping to mobilise women for elections as a counter-strategy to what appeared to be an emerging OBC-Dalit alliance in the State. In retaliation, the opposition played up the Jalgaon sex and video scandal in which Congress I members were involved.

The State Policy had very little to say about violence against women except to propose some cosmetic changes in the police force.

The Women's Centre's particular concern and area of work being violence against women, especially within the family, it will be appropriate to quote some statistics issued by the Crime Record Bureau of the Home Ministry:

A woman is raped every 47 minutes, another is kidnapped or abducted every 44 minutes, while a third is subjected to cruelty by husband or in-laws. Seventeen dowry deaths are reported every day. The number of reported crimes against women was 82,818 last year. In the last two decades, there has been a dramatic increase in the rape cases reported, nearly 40%.

Maharashtra reported the maximum number of crimes against women in 1993. This of course does not mean that Maharashtra has the highest incidence. Bihar reports much less; but in reality the incidence might be higher there. The reporting and registration of crimes against women are much higher here in Maharashtra because of the presence of a dynamic women's movement here. The Jalgaon issue, where over a long period, a number of young women were sexually exploited by politicians and elected representatives, reveals another fact; that it is the nexus between the police, the politicians and other influential persons so that crimes against

women are not only on the increase, but do not come to light immediately; and when they do, there is no immediate conviction, but rather a seemingly deliberate delay in booking the culprits. While the government talks of empowering women through various policies, its elected members blatantly perpetrate atrocities on women. The values imposed by a patriarchal society put further pressure on the women and their families as they face social stigma and ostracism. In spite of the wide ranging powers given to the State Women's Commission, it did not involve itself in any way in enquiring into such incidents.

The other dimension of women's lives, namely their economic life, has been affected very badly too, due to the World Bank-IMF dictated New Economic Policy which has been willingly accepted by our government. Structural Adjustment Programmes, privatisation of state owned ventures, and the cutting down of welfare measures have resulted in increasing poverty of 80% of the people, more than half of whom are women. Most of the women who approach the Centre are from this section and many feel the brunt of the steep rise in the price of basic foods. For instance, during 1991-94, the years of structural adjustment and liberalisation, the wholesale price index rose by 51.5%. During the same period, consequences for basic food items were worse and the foodgrain price index rose by 70%. This is a matter of life and death for many of the poorest in the country. To make matters worse, during the same period, the government withdrew its support from the Public Distribution System, resulting in its total collapse. These two developments have severely affected the availability of food to the poorest of the poor, 50% of whom are women. Many of them are forced to do more than one job, which in turn affects their health. All this has made life much more difficult for women, as they are still the home-makers, and are ultimately responsible for the welfare of their families.

The new economy's other effect seems to be the growing consumerism which is being promoted through events such as Ms Universe and Ms World competitions, and our country's so-called 'image' abroad and at home being measured by the so-called rise in the standard of the physical beauty of women. Our government and the decision makers of the country provide ample support and enthusiasm for such pursuits, but are taciturn about the growing violence

against women. If anything, they only make token attempts for the genuine development and empowerment of women. This is a clear indicator of the value system that is being promoted in society.

Supporting Women

Support to individual women continues to be the Women's Centre's main work. This is necessary because despite women's commissions and women's policies being set up and initiated by governments, and women's development being given top priority on all NGO agendas, the condition of women continues to deteriorate. The inclusion of women in every formal structure has become almost a norm, but the oppression and exploitation of women in the family and society still persists. Individual women find themselves in unbearable situations and support to such women becomes crucial to their survival.

The reasons women approached the Centre ranged from harassment by own family members to severe beating; from desertion to bigamy, and wife burning. A general breakdown will give an idea of the variety of ways women are harassed within the family, and despite the seemingly great strides in women's development, the family environment and structure still hamper their development, restricting them from asserting themselves.

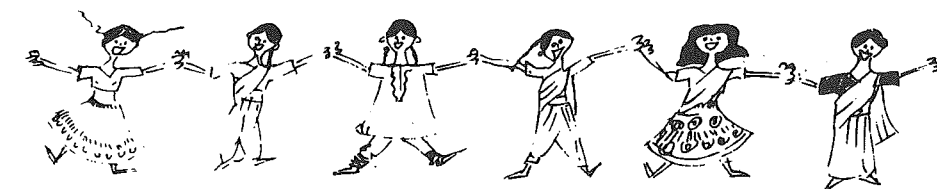
Very few women are really able to come to terms with divorce even now, although at the time they approach the Centre some of them express their intention to get out of the violent marriage. However, social conditioning and the reality of women's lives is such that, even today, the label of being a married woman offers more social security and respectability than that of someone who fought for her rights and dignity.

Statistics for 1994-95:

- | | |
|--|----|
| 1. Severe beating by husband accompanied by other forms of violence and harassment | 61 |
| 2. Thrown out of marital home | 19 |
| 3. Legal cases already in court | 12 |
| 4. Single women, divorcee, minor daughter, harassed by family or neighbour | 9 |
| 5. Dowry harassment | 8 |
| 6. Services like job, shelter, scholarship | 6 |
| 7. Bigamy | 4 |
| 8. Widows, harassed for property | |

by in-laws and/or neighbours	4
9. Harassment by children	3
10. Unnatural deaths—burn cases (suspected murder)	2
11. Desertion by husband	2
12. Incest	1
13. Boyfriend problems	1
14. Miscellaneous	3
Total	135

The first category, namely severe beating accompanied by other forms of harassment, requires further explanation. Other forms of harassment include withdrawal of financial support by the husband, sexual harassment, and husband's suspicious nature. Beating is seldom an isolated phenomenon in a violent marriage. Mental torture caused by withdrawing financial support to the wife, sexual harassment, not allowing wife to see the children, and the continuous threat of being thrown out of the house: any one of these culminates in severe beating. The suspicious nature of the husband, his psychological problems, his pre-marital affairs kept undisclosed, or his wanting to re-marry: these were some of the other situations where women tried to exert their rights, and got severely beaten. In one case, after a severe beating, the woman was thrown down by the husband from the first floor of the building. Fortunately, she survived with minor injuries. Extra-marital affairs of the husband, when questioned by wife, is another excuse for wife beating. The women who come to the Centre with complaints of beating believe that if the immediate situation, like the other woman, or the influence of mother-in-law, or the husband's suspicious nature, or alcoholism is changed, their husbands would stop beating. Fourteen women who came to the Centre seeking help were convinced that it was their husbands' alcoholism that drove them to beat their wives. It is through prolonged counselling that women were able to understand that it is the patriarchal society which has given men the right to view their wives as a piece of property, to beat them, to throw out or torture; curing them of their alcoholism or suspicious nature could only be a short term solution. Desertion by husbands is another phenomenon women face. In such





situations the tendency of the husband's family is to throw the women out thus denying them the right to matrimonial home. In some cases, it was found that it is the man's involvement with another woman, or even a second secret marriage which has led to his deserting his first legal wife.

Single women being harassed by their families need special mention here, as society's definition of family and domestic violence takes into account only marital violence, but not the harassment and sometimes even physical violence many women face from parents, brothers, sisters, sisters-in-law or even neighbours. Therefore, the victims are reluctant to talk about it; on the other hand, they are made to feel guilty. It becomes difficult and awkward for them to approach anyone for support, as they fear that they may not be taken seriously, especially by the state machinery like the police station and courts. This year, nine such cases came to the Centre, all of them facing harassment from parents. Parents think of the unmarried daughter as a burden. A daughter is denied property rights and made to feel like an outsider in her own house.

Again it is within the parental home that single women of another kind, viz. divorcees and widows, face mental torture and isolation. Widows are also prey to scheming neighbours and relations who try to grab their homes or property. Due to lack of support they feel victimised, and become vulnerable.

Nineteen women who came to the Centre this year were thrown out of the marital home due to the extreme possessiveness, jealousy, or the suspicious nature of the husband. Severe beating was present in every case, so much so in some cases the women themselves left the home, as it became unbearable to stay on. Almost all of them are back in the parents' home now. Society has given total right and authority to the husband and his family over the wife, so that her life becomes restricted, and emotional and physical space is denied to her. Her personal and public life is so jealously

guarded by the husband that any space or recognition she gains for herself is resented, and she is victimised. A strong mother/son relationship verging on abnormality is another reason a wife is made to feel redundant and unwanted and then thrown out. A widow's right to the matrimonial home is not recognised and her in-laws throw her out. Again, a woman's right and position in the family become shaky when the husband is out of the country; the in-laws throw her out. In the case of a woman living with her step-sons, due to constant and extreme harassment by them the woman opted to move out.

Legal Aid

The legal aid programme of the Centre can be seen as an empowering tool when women feel that through legal recourse, they can regain something of what they have lost; custody of children, marital home or maintenance, not the least their freedom and dignity. The process itself helps them to gain some self-confidence. Though the legal system has its limitations, within its framework, women do have certain rights. However, even to assert these rights women need legal assistance.

Among those who approached the centre for legal support were women who faced severe beating and harassment from husband and in-laws, or parents, or were being cheated by the husband as he was already married, or for the custody of the children. The Centre tries to play an arbitrary role to settle disputes without in any way compromising the woman's position, and always conveying to the husband, in-laws or parents the right of the wife or daughter to live in the family with freedom and without threat or fear of violence. Court proceedings are expensive and time consuming. A legal battle is advised as a last resort.

Approximately 60 women sought legal advice last year, and 12 cases are in court, out of which five cases were filed by the Centre. In two cases the women were the defendants as the husbands had already gone to court against them for divorce.



Campaigns

An essential dimension of the Centre's work is to relate and link individual women's lives and experiences within the family to wider issues facing women in society. The patriarchal system which subordinates and violates women within the family is strongly operative in society too, which results in taking away all her rights as an equal citizen. Any challenge to change, the system in favour of women is met with strong resistance from all sections of society — religious, political, and generally the propertied class. In such cases collective campaigning by women's groups, if necessary, a nation-wide campaign, is the only way to stem the opposition.

Women's equal right to property, especially the parental property has always been opposed by patriarchal society. The Mary Roy case of 1986 is now well known, wherein after a prolonged battle, the Supreme Court judgement gave equal rights to the Syrian Christian women of Kerala, and the judgement made it applicable with retrospective effect from 1951. However, the Kerala legislative, supported by the male leaders of the Christian community and the Church tried to bring a new bill (Revival & Validation Bill) to strike down the retrospective aspect of the judgement. The Women's Centre, at this juncture, initiated a national campaign to oppose this. Action Alerts were sent to all women's rights groups and women's organisations in the country, giving background information and asking them to lobby the state and central governments to withdraw the new Revival & Validation Bill from the Kerala Assembly. A spate of telegrams and letters flooded the offices of the State Law Minister, Chief Minister and the President of India. A deputation of women from Kerala met the President of India. As a result of all this, the ignominious bill was eventually withdrawn.

Sexual exploitation

The Jalgaon sex scandal which suddenly came to light was another issue which shook the

people of Bombay and horrified women's groups. Jalgaon, a big town in Maharashtra, was the scene of rampant sexual exploitation of young women by corporators and other such 'respectable' men of society. It was very clear that there was a nexus between politicians, the police and influential persons which kept this matter in the dark for a long time. The women were further victimised by social values, apart from the stigma. Many of them faced broken engagements, demands for additional dowry, and further restrictions of their mobility. This issue called into question the basic values of our society, the involvement of the government's elected representatives in such degrading acts, the subsequent delay in booking the culprits, and the non-involvement of the State Women's Commission. All this reveals that women's issues are always pushed to the back seat. The Women's Centre organised the first demonstration in which many groups in the city participated. An open letter to the public was circulated, in which several demands were made to the State government. A deputation of women met the Secretary to the Department of Women & Children, Maharashtra State. The demands included the appointment of a Special Court for the trial and the case to be concluded within a month, the denial of bail to the culprits, the name of those involved to be revealed to the public and the immediate suspension of the police officers involved. Women's groups also demanded that election law should be changed so that those convicted of sexual crimes and violence against women are barred from standing for election, and if already elected, are recalled.

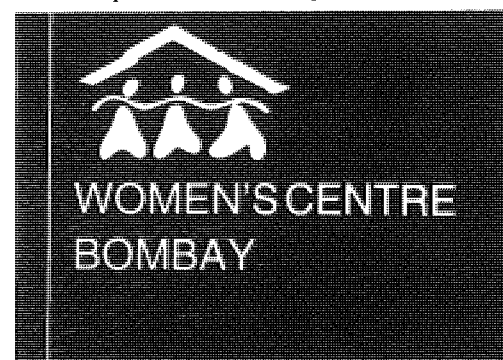
The International Day of Protest against violence against women was observed by the Women's Centre on 25th November. Banners were put up at several suburban railway stations to draw the attention of the public to this increasing malaise. A sit-in was organised with other women's groups at a public place. Pamphlets giving statistics on violence against women were distributed. Songs and slogans



affirming women's right to freedom from violence, and that violence against them is a violation of human rights drew the public's interest and attention to these issues.

Get-togethers

Monthly get-togethers have evolved as an integrated part of counselling at the Centre. Challenging family structures and inequality in it is one part of the struggle. To link up this struggle with the larger issues of economic and other inequalities is the other part of the



struggle. Women's involvement in these monthly meetings helps form interconnections between these two inseparable parts of the struggle. While counselling of individual women equips her to deal with her problems in a better way, get-togethers motivate her to get interested in larger issues which affect her in the society. For a woman who comes to the Centre with her problems, these get-togethers link her family with the society as such. Nearly 25 to 30 women attend these monthly meetings. Those who do not attend give the feedback that they feel happy when they receive a letter from the Centre regularly. They say they feel they are in touch with the Centre through these letters though they are not able to make it to the meeting. Of late, a group called Saheli Committee working at Behrampada, Bandra, has started attending these meetings regularly. This group has consolidated after the riots. Nearly seven to eight women have emerged as leaders. They say they receive a lot of strength from these meetings. This group handles family violence, ration cards, demolition etc. Six to seven Muslim women from Saheli Committee have become a regular feature of these gatherings. This is one way Women's Centre is reaching out to the community. These women are keen on participating in any public event, meetings and

Dharna.

This year current events like the announcement of Women's Policy and Jalgaon scandal formed the topics of two separate meetings. The main features of the Women's Policy and the process that led the formation of this policy was summarised. Then the discussion followed. Women felt that if equal rights to property was made effective many of their problems can be solved. It was observed that the gap between the demands of women's organisations and the remedial measures taken by the state is widening.

While discussing the Jalgaon issue two questions were put to women. One, why do you think it happened to women in Jalgaon, two, why did these young girls not speak about the injustice done to their family members. The responses were: 'such things will not happen to good women', 'it will not happen if we take care', 'the women involved may not be educated women'. As a natural reaction it came out that these things happen only to women of bad character and uneducated ones. Later they were asked to question their own statements by commonplace experiences of eve-teasing and harassment at the workplace. That sexual exploitation of women is so much part of our system was brought home to them. 'Women did not speak, because it is a question of family honour'. 'They were frightened because they were threatened'. The discussion focused on what is the role of the family. The kind of family that we create for our children, should it not give space for our daughters to speak out? These thoughts were put forward for women to react.

At one of the meetings, a film 'I live in Behrampada' was screened. The discussion can best be summarised in one response, 'During the riots many Hindus and Muslims lost their lives. Where was Allah or Ram to save them?'

Instead of having the meeting at the Centre, women joined a dharna at Hutatma Chowk on 25th November 1994, as a part of the International fortnight against Violence Against Women Campaign.

At the next get-together on 24 December 1995, some of the women shared their experience of dharna. 'Passersby to whom we were distributing leaflets were asking us questions. We felt very good. But some did not even look or bother to read the leaflet. We should have many such campaigns', they said.

Two meetings were devoted to 'Women &

Health'. Activists from the forum for Women's Health shared their experience. They gave information on different types of contraceptives, particularly the least hazardous contraceptives for women. (The concept of self-help was not welcomed by the women.) Women expressed their powerlessness within the family to decide on the number of children they would like to have. Women were cautioned against going to (family planning) camps run by government health authorities for reasons like a) the contraceptives offered are target oriented. They do not take into account an individual woman's need, b) The standard of hygiene is very poor, c) No follow-up is done.

These get-togethers act as collective sharing and consultation platforms. It is a 'woman's own' time and sharing, with freedom.

Training & Intervention

For several years now the Women's Centre has become a training place for students from SNDT who are doing their masters or graduation in Human Development. The students are placed for 3 weeks to 6 weeks, and participate in every activity of the Centre. This year, a young student from the University of Pennsylvania was placed for a month's internship.

This year through the Centre's intervention and help, Praveena Patel residing in London was able to get custody of her children. The agency in the UK which was dealing with Praveena's case, requested the Centre to collect information about her family background and the educational and other facilities being provided to her children in Surat, Gujarat, by her parents. A centre member travelled to Surat, met with local authorities and the family. A detailed report of the family's status, the children's home and school environment, was sent to the agency. Subsequently, it was reported that the London court granted Praveena the custody of her children. The information sent by the Centre, it seems, contributed to a great extent.

Renovation and redesigning of the office this year has given a new look to the centre, at the same time adding more work space, and providing a warm and cheerful atmosphere.

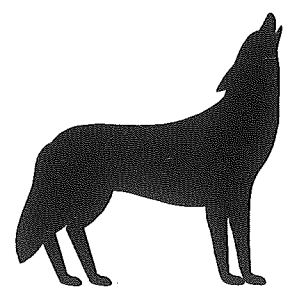
Sustaining the struggle

As we look back over the year's work, we feel that what we have done is to sustain our struggle — a struggle which was many dimensional and at many levels. At the individual

level it has been a struggle to retain our personhood within a patriarchal structure. The struggle for equality and justice also had to be maintained while interacting with the state and its machinery. Women need to be empowered so that their struggle against oppression is kept alive and sustained, and a political and social environment is created in which women's rights become a reality and women's space within the family and society is guaranteed.

Our experience in recent months also tells us that women's groups locally and nationally now have a responsibility to come together and with one voice express clearly their demand for a gender-just family law, which takes into account the reality of women's lives and experiences. When fundamentalist and communal forces keep harping on a Uniform Code which gives no guarantee of justice to women, women's groups must come forward to press for laws that will ensure justice and equality for women within the family. Another responsibility of women's groups would be to see that the democratic processes in the society which seem to be getting endangered now are kept alive, and that the concept and practice of secularism are not diluted. In a context of both democracy and secularism being in constant danger of being set aside, women's liberation will become a casualty. The women's movement must thus take upon itself to strengthen its position and make its voice heard on these issues so that women's struggle for equality and justice is maintained. □





Barking Back

Has something got right up your nose recently? Have you a bone to pick or an issue you want to chew over? This is a space in T&S where women (under an assumed name if necessary) are invited to bark back at the annoyances which dog radical feminists. This can be a brief yap or an extended growl, on any subject of concern to radical feminists. Here Julie Bindel and Joan Scanlon express some gnawing doubts about widespread lesbian feminist attitudes to questions of love, sex and friendship.

Since the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist paper *Love your Enemy* the terms of debate on sexual politics and practice have shifted dramatically. Instead of questioning heterosexuality the focus has been on the sexual practices of libertarian lesbians who claim that sado-masochism, pornography and having sex with gay men are liberatory practices. The overwhelming attention given to this issue has also pushed into the margins any critical engagement with ideas about the wider politics of personal relationships. All discussion has been virtually reduced to the question of whether you are for or against libertarianism. Moreover, it is as if, once having crudely established who your political allies and enemies are, there is no need to subject your own position to any further scrutiny.

What concerns us here, therefore, is the apparent complacency and self-righteousness that prevails in some sections of the anti-

libertarian camp. It is not simply that couple-structured relationships have become commonplace amongst lesbian feminists; the problem is that they are taken to occupy the moral high ground in the current political climate and are assumed to offer the only coherent alternative to s/m culture. In our view there is nothing morally and politically admirable about resurrecting 19th century models of exclusive romantic friendship. These models are entirely unthreatening to the heterosexual establishment and can be accommodated into a comfortable parody of heterosexual marriage; moreover, when transported in the 1990s, they become sentimental and individualist, playing into the perception of radical lesbian feminists as moralists, prudes and dinosaurs.

At best there is a neglect of the issues, a feeling that since there are 'more important' things to be doing than challenging seemingly

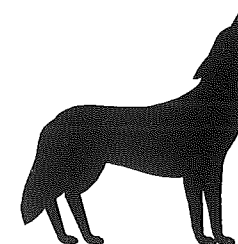
harmless and inoffensive lesbian couple relationships we shouldn't challenge them at all. At worst there is tendency to associate any politics which challenges the sanctity of coupledness with the fall-out from the earlier heated non-monogamy debates, and to see such challenges as a continuation of the ghastly history of non-monogamy and the abuses which that term was used to condone. Those who defend monogamy may well be right to see that history of disastrous 'experimentation' with different models of relationship as responsible to some extent for the onset of s/m libertarianism. But that history was not simply destructive and exploitative; it was also, for many women, a time of serious commitment to challenging the conventions of heterosexual models of sexual relationships and friendships, rethinking previously unquestioned priorities and risking new ways of thinking about and acting (or not acting) on feelings towards other women. Even so, while it may for some have brought about dramatic and positive shifts of possibility, for others it was like trying to scale Everest with a toothpick.

From 'non-monogamy' to 'couplism'

In the late 70s and early 80s, the main critique of a heterosexual model of relationships amongst lesbian feminists was the muddled and muddy (if well-intentioned) theory and practice of 'non-monogamy'. This is such a misused word (and of such dubious etymology: mono = one; gamus = marriage) that we can scarcely bring ourselves to use it, chiefly because non-monogamy seems never to have been conceivable in terms other than the specifically sexual. Nonetheless, it was this term, and the various conflicting ideas that it was taken to represent, that was central to an important debate about heterosexuality and alternative models of relationship. It is more than a little ironic that the model of heterosexual relations that was being challenged in this way was not only the domestic model of the self-contained exclusive emotionally prioritised couple, but also (in some cases quite opportunistically) a model of sexual fidelity which was generally a myth anyway. Fidelity has been one of the cornerstones in the heterosexual romantic double-standard for men and women; it was never intended to apply to

men. The irony, therefore, was that many of those lesbian feminists who practiced non-monogamy ended up simply behaving like heterosexual men.

The discussions which took place amongst lesbian feminists at that time were fuelled by the desire to create new forms of relations that were consistent with a feminist politics, but the *practice* which accompanied this aspiration was either a variant of heterosexual practice or a self-righteous resistance to all things heterosexual that led to the deprioritising of sexual relationships and the contingent impossibility of treating such relationships as friendships. In other words, a rather crude reversal (friends are more important than lovers) or a rather crass simplification (friendships are the same as sexual relationships) often substituted for an argument in favour of trying to value each, equally and differently. With



hindsight it seems as if these patently flawed propositions quite displaced efforts to look at ways of minimising the differences in our behaviour towards lovers and friends — not only to figure out the crucial common ground and acknowledge the significance of all our various friendships, but at the same time find ways of addressing the specificity of

feelings of jealousy, possessiveness and insecurity in sexual relationships.

No wonder then, that the damage was phenomenal, and that a particular version of non-monogamy (i.e. promiscuity) was held responsible for a general disillusionment with sexual relations between women and a lack of optimism about creating different models of relationship. Thatcherism, post-feminism and the politics of individualism are largely responsible for the celebration of the purely sexual version of non-monogamy amongst libertarian feminists and the revival of (or reversion to) full couplism amongst radical feminists. On the one hand there is the denial of the need for an ongoing radical critique of personal relationships, and on the other hand the perception of a loss of an active political movement to sustain revolutionary endeavours in any sphere of women's lives — positions which mesh rather than clash. In the absence of any coherent radical feminist models of relationship, and in the absence even of a coherent oppositional model, we have allowed the most traditional

heterosexual model of all to creep back into our ways of organising our relations with each other. At the same time, simply because the discussion of sexual relationships has moved from the arena of sexual politics onto the feminist libertarian agenda, we are left with a sickening combination of romanticism and conservatism about friendships.

It is bad enough that lesbian feminists have resurrected couplism through a kind of slippage, but the fact that it is being reinstated as the orthodoxy of radical feminism makes it almost impossible for other kinds of relationship to coexist. Lesbian feminists who are trying to organise their relationships differently, and are trying in particular to resist the pitfalls of coupledness, cannot sustain that endeavour in a political vacuum without being accused of simply being 'difficult', secretive or unreasonably judgmental. Couple-identified lesbian feminists will define your relationship for you if you don't volunteer enough information yourself, treat you as if you have a political or psychological problem if you refuse their definition, or simply ignore your protests and invite you and your alleged 'girlfriend' to dinner anyway. What is peculiarly depressing about all this is that it is not simply a matter of how we organise and understand our most personal and intimate relationships, including how we organise and value our friendships, it is also about our political networks, our ability as individuals to make connections across the different areas of our lives and sustain a coherent commitment to a collective political process.

Offensive practices

For this reason we have chosen to identify and respond to a number of particularly offensive practices which go hand in hand with this tendency to treat couple-structured relationships as the morally consistent application of radical feminist politics and as the accepted practice of lesbian feminism:

1. The ubiquitous, irrelevant and insulting question: "Have you got a lover?". This question appears to be premised on a number of related assumptions about how this information is crucial in determining: a) your identity; b) your sexual availability; c) your accessibility and potential for intimacy as a friend; d) the rules of conduct towards your 'lover'; e) the perceived need to include your 'lover' in social arrange-

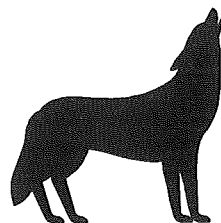
ments and accord to them the right to impose themselves without invitation; f) a limited expectation of your ability to function independently of your 'girlfriend'.

We take it to be *imperative* that your identity as a lesbian feminist is understood to be political rather than dependent on whether or not you are involved in a sexual relationship. We consider the whole idea of 'availability' demeaning and profoundly anti-feminist. Moreover, your availability for other relationships should not be *determined* by your existing relations with other women; there may be a number of circumstantial constraints, but the imposition of a form of emotional monogamy diminishes your existing friendships as well as inhibiting the formation of new ones.

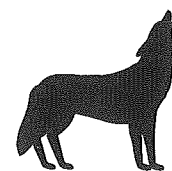
The whole area of jealousy (gross possessiveness vs understandable forms of insecurity) which exists within the discourse of relationships defined primarily by sexual intimacy is still hopelessly undertheorised; all the same, we take it as *mandatory* that *all* of your friendships operate without the unreasonable restrictions that so often go unchallenged when imposed by 'partners'.

Finally, imagine the idea of anyone welcoming or even tolerating the presence of an uninvited stranger joining you on holiday, coming to dinner, staying overnight in your home, if she wasn't simply taken on 'faith' (however much you may dislike her as a person in her own right) simply by virtue of her sexual connection (however short-lived) with an established friend who you have no wish to offend. This attitude, and this commonplace practice, is reserved almost exclusively for lovers. We all have friends who we would move heaven and earth to *avoid* putting in the same room, and we tend to introduce friends to each other only when we think they have something in common. Yet most lesbian feminists move heaven and earth to impose their lovers on other friends, however unlikely it is that they would choose that contact independently, and when they are the only 'thing' they have in common. If the situation then proves difficult or impossible, it is usually the friend who gets dumped (and usually gets the blame as well).

2. The assumption



that (a) sexual relationships should be public knowledge and (b) all such relationships inevitably follow a heterosexual pattern, i.e. romance followed by a catastrophic break up or the onset of tedium and loss of desire in long term relationships. This is particularly offensive when the basis for this latter assumption is that women who are known to be in a relationship



are not fawning over each other (despite the fact that they have never behaved like that publicly). The 'first flush' of uncontrollable passion which is supposed to 'overtake' us all in the early stages of a sexual relationship is often used as an excuse for women behaving in this way towards each other. What is rarely acknowledged, if it is not self-censored (because of the fear of misinterpretation), is the excitement and enthusiasm which any new friendship can inspire; this is a circular process by which intense feelings are restricted to sexual relationships. What is also denied is the way in which this feeling may change but not diminish in any relationship.

3. The uncritical use of the term 'in love' to describe feelings within sexual relationships as distinct from friendships. If pushed to define the emotion referred to in this way, most women revert to full-on heterosexual romance constructions, and feelings generally remarkable for their self-destructive capacity. The argument generally goes like this: that we *need* a term to describe all these very distinct emotions that go hand in hand with sexual feelings for someone (desire has too much of a postmodern psycho-analytic ring; passion has religious connotations; lust is too simply carnal; love is too general and inclusive). We would agree that we need a term to describe all the horrible tendencies that follow from the impulse to categorise and classify a relationship by virtue of its sexual status, and the tragic chain of consequences that can ensue, but the term 'in love' is intended to connote something positive. As for all the positive feelings that can appear to make a sexual relationship distinctive — the overcoming of vulnerabilities, a heightened sensitisation to the physical world, the excitement and comfort of intimacy without words, the enhanced sense of self-worth in being valued by someone that you are astonished and pleased to be close to, even the sense of amazed good

fortune at being on the same planet as someone you respect and care about intensely — all of these things are true in different ways of our friendships, so why is the term love not good enough?

What makes sexual relationships distinctive, at their most positive *and* negative, is their capacity to challenge or reinforce the particular meaning of the sexual in our personal lives. As women, the baggage of our sexual histories and the damage done to our physical self-perception is likely to differ only in the degree of harm (and the harm may well be irreparably great). The specific meaning of the sexual in our intimate relationships can therefore either serve to heal or to do further damage in very particular ways, which are often intensely private. The public curiosity about sexual relationships is in conflict with this, as is the impulse to publicise such relationships.

Some may argue that this notion of privacy could be used as a cover for abusive relationships, but it would be impossible to imagine a relationship in which many or all of the positive things we associate with love were present, and for this abuse to be restricted to the specifically sexual. Moreover, publicly abusive forms of behaviour are far more frequently condoned when the women in question are known to be lovers, and so it is hard to be convinced that the desire to publicise relationships is necessary or even useful in preventing abuse between women. Instead we should be trying to find ways of challenging each other when we behave without respect for other women in private and in public — not when we are simply tired and bad tempered — but where we can see, for example, that a particular dynamic is operating in which another woman is being systematically humiliated or diminished. That may well be more likely to happen in a sexual relationship, but it is not the fact of knowing it to be sexual that should affect our decision to act or not.

4. The assumption that you do not experience feelings of any significance at all unless you manifest them through gross forms of objectification, jealousy, public exhibitions of flagrant sexualised behaviour and the use of a language of sentimentality and gush and chocolate box romanticism.

5. The notion that women who have any public profile should be flattered by the fact of complete strangers (in this case lesbians) 'fancying' them, and that this attention goes

with the territory so those women who are on the receiving end are 'asking for it'. While there is an explicit commitment on the part of British radical feminists to a movement without stars, there is a completely negative and contradictory combination of resentment and heroine-worship towards those who are seen as the public face of feminism, and an allegedly 'harmless' collusion in the objectification of various (often explicitly anti-feminist) female film and pop stars.

This love-hate tendency is straight out of the Mills and Boon tradition of being infatuated with those who you may reluctantly admire, mistrust or who even stand against everything you believe in, and who you know mainly through other people's representations of them. How is this tendency compatible with a politics of relationships based on, or striving towards, equality and respect rather than the objectifying practice of 'fancying' other women?

This practice operates across the board within lesbian feminist networks. For instance, the lack of critique of the phenomenon of 'lesbian icons', whether we are talking about kd lang, Martina Navratilova, Tracy Chapman, Sigourney Weaver or Helen Mirren, means that we purposely avoid looking at the criteria by which these women acquire that dubious status. The fact that some lesbian feminists are also committed to a form of visibility politics which involves celebrating the public existence of lesbians and images of strong women, whatever they stand for (and still others are simply hungry for representations which bear any resemblance to their lives) somehow legitimates this practice of objectification. We need to unravel these apparently harmless hobbies which involve 'fancying' women, for they are continuous with the way we talk (and think about) our relationships with women we *do* know. There should be room for a real debate about the significance of public female role models, and the place of representation in radical feminist politics. Instead, any expression of dismay at objectifying tendencies of this kind — whether in the form of a refusal to join the Annie Lennox fan club or being pissed off or depressed (rather than flattered) at being told that somebody's friend fancies you — is usually treated as if *you* have a problem, in that you are humourless, arrogant, prudish, puritanical, and probably in denial.

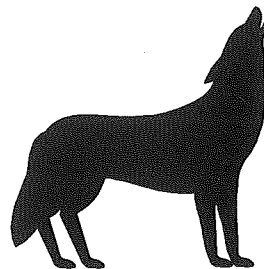
6. The way in which the personal is political has come to mean the private is public, and that it is entirely politically consistent (and a

measure of your interest in and concern for other women) to gossip, speculate, overinterpret information, such that any significant friendship which evidences intimacy, commitment, enthusiasm, is the subject of speculation. This is not only a grotesque and prurient form of objectification of the women in question and their relationship; it reduces all forms of intimacy to the sexual, and it implies that significant relations between women must be sexual or they cannot be valued. It assumes that relationships can only be valued by being named, categorised and understood within a borrowed heterosexual framework for analysing and conducting relationships.

'Can't change our feelings?'

Inherent in the practices we have outlined above is the belief that although feminist politics may inform your behaviour, they can't change your *feelings* and that it is therefore at best hopelessly idealistic and at worst completely dishonest to try to have relationships that are politically coherent, because in reality they just don't work like that. It is probably true that no aspect of our lives is likely to be more messy and contradictory than that of our personal histories and sexual feelings. It is probably also true that our friendships with other women have sustained most of us in the political work that we do and in our commitment to radical feminism in theory and practice. How can it *not* make sense, therefore, to try to conduct and represent all of our significant relationships with women in terms of friendship, and where we choose to be involved in sexual relationships to try to formulate and experience the inevitable differences in ways that are consistent with the reasons we value friendship (within and outside of the sexual)?

As radical feminists, committed to change in every other area of women's lives, we ought to be convinced of the fact that if we change our behaviour, our conduct and our representations of relationships and friendships in the light of our political beliefs, our structure of *feeling* will inevitably change as a result of the opportunity to put those things into practice. □



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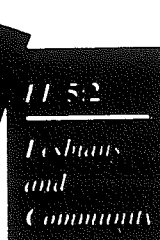
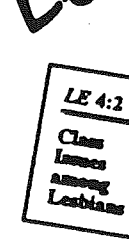
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