

Trouble

The radical feminist magazine

& Strife

wave
goodbye
dinosaurs



Women in Politics

Campaign to End Rape
Urban Amazons
Sexist advertising
Lesbians at work

No. 35
£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.

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Letters

Fighting female genital mutilation

Dear T&S

I was born to a Cameroon Muslim in France who had gone there with my mother to study French. We hailed from Ngaoundere in Northern Cameroon. My parents stayed in France for eleven years because at the completion of his studies he worked for some time before returning from France.

Because female genital mutilation, misleadingly called female circumcision, is prohibited in France, my Muslim parents found it very difficult in getting us mutilated according to their Muslim rites. An attempt by my father to get me, his eldest daughter, secretly circumcised by a Turkish doctor who was working in France almost booted him out of the country and because of this my parents rescinded from further attempts until when we would return to Africa.

When I got wind of this situation I began to ask my mother the rationale for excising me but since I was born into a family where sex and sexuality were taboo subjects my mother would always hush the question each time I inquired.

When we returned to Cameroon my paternal grandmother asked whether we (her grandchildren) had been closed (infibulated) while we were abroad and my father replied in the negative and added that an effort to get one of us infibulated almost led to his prosecution by the French Government. Immediately, my grandmother went into an arrangement with a traditional midwife in our locality to get me and my sister infibulated. While the arrangement was made, I was fortunate to be told by a young girl in our compound the pain which accompanies the ritual and I was much frightened.

In the evening of that day I planned my escape from my native land Cameroon. I had with me 700 French francs which was given to me during my last birthday celebration in France before our return to Cameroon. The following morning when I left for school I took the money and hid some few dresses in my school bag, greeted my parents pretending I was heading for school. On the way to school I passed straight to the motor park, boarded a bus and left for the border town of Kuar on the Nigeria-Cameroon border.

At Kuar I was fortunate to meet some Catholic nuns who were going to Nyonya in

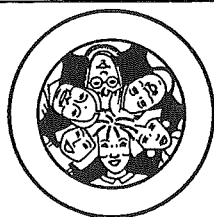
Nigeria; I narrated to them my plight. One of them who was teaching in a secondary school in the Cross River State of Nigeria at that time became very sympathetic to me and asked me whether I would like to stay with her. I immediately replied in the affirmative. I was taken to Nigeria by the Catholic nun and sent to school after which I went into Nursing until I qualified as a nurse.

I have vowed that if I would successfully escape this genital mutilation, I would spend the rest of my life on earth to fight for the eradication of this sexual abuse. I am wondering why we cannot be left with our bodies as we are born.

I am happy that today I have found a group of women in Nigeria who are fighting to end this obnoxious practice and which I can join to redeem the vow which I had earlier made in this connection. It is beyond my comprehension how a man or woman could postulate that a woman has no right to enjoy sex, if that is what they mean by woman being 'too sexy', and that her clitoris should be removed. It is indeed high time the African women claim their rights as human beings, not as second class citizens, brainwashed to accept that sexual pleasure is restricted to men only.

Support to this group of women should be forwarded by registered post to H. Edemikpong, Box 185, Eket, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, West Africa.

Fatima Ishaya



Women's Health

a resource and information centre providing information in a supportive manner, helping women to make informed decisions about their health

- Enquiry line 0171 251 6580
- Informative leaflets & tapes
- Quarterly newsletter
- Library

**52 Featherstone Street
London EC1Y 8RT**

In the Best Interests of... Men

In the last twelve months at least one woman — Dawn Austin — has been imprisoned for refusing to hand her children over for contact with their violent father. Countless other women have been threatened with prison if they refuse to comply with orders made by the court. Sandra McNeill outlines the issues, interviews Dawn Austin and reports on feminist campaigns to challenge the presumption of father right.

The law does not say a child should have contact with both parents. What the law says, is that decisions on residency and contact should be taken in the best interests of the child. However for some reason this is being interpreted by Court Welfare Officers and by Judges to mean that the child must have contact with the father no matter how unsuitable he is to care for the child, and no matter that he has abused the mother and even the child, in the past.

Mariannè Hester and Lorraine Radford's research on child contact in the context of domestic violence is revealing. They followed 53 women in England and 24 in Denmark through the process. Most women wanted the children to see their fathers and tried hard to maintain the contact. However, contact arrangements broke down because of the men's continuing violence and abuse. All of the post-separation violence was linked in some way to child contact. In only 7 out of the 53 English cases and 2 out of 24 in Denmark was contact eventually set up in a way that there was no

further abuse of the mother or children — at the time of final interview.

In both countries there was an assumption that contact with the father was in the child's interest — however in Denmark there was a greater emphasis on listening to the children and so they were more likely to recommend no contact or supervised contact.

In neither country was concern shown for protecting the woman from further violence. The professionals all assumed that the violence was in the past. Women's Aid refuges exist because men are so dangerous after women leave. Why do the courts assume the man will now cease to be violent? In neither country was there awareness of the impact on children of witnessing their fathers assault their mothers, though this has been well documented. Finally, the professionals did not ask the children about their experiences of violence on contact visits. In this study these included

- threats to kill the children
- sexual abuse



Leeds Case

Recently in Leeds a father refused to hand over his daughter to his mother in law after a contact visit. The mother came. He dragged her into the house and held her at knife point. The police arrived. They witnessed him threatening to kill her and threatening her with the knife all in front of the child. Before he was disarmed he also threatened a police officer with the knife.

The police and Crown Prosecution Service took this incident very seriously and referred him to the Crown Court charged with two counts of threats to kill and one of false imprisonment. There His Honour Judge Charlesworth said he did not think a trial was appropriate because it was a domestic incident. He asked if there were any formal contact arrangements. (No). He suggested they go to the Family Court for this.

He said: 'A trial is not in anyone's interests. It is in the interest of the child that her parents stop warring'.

- physical abuse — punching slapping kicking
- child snatching and keeping the children against their will
- failure to treat a sick child (he died)
- pumping children for information on their mother's whereabouts or activities
- using children to convey threatening or abusive messages to the mother
- involving the children in plans to kill the mother
- neglect and inability to care for the children resulting from alcohol or drug abuse.

Hester and Radford conclude:

In circumstances of domestic violence, contact should not be presumed to be in the best interests of the child. The starting point should be a presumption of no contact, with the possibility of contact only if this can be arranged safely for both mother and child.

Women's Aid Federation, England (WAFE) and Rights of Women (ROW) have started campaigning to bring about this change in law. This is needed. But as usual more than law needs to change. There needs to be a change in the assumption that contact with the father — any kind of father — is good for the child. At the moment Judges and some Court Welfare professionals are more concerned with coercing mothers and punishing them when they refuse contact, as the story of Dawn Austin illustrates.

Dawn Austin's Story

Dawn Austin was the first woman in UK to be jailed for refusing to agree contact for her child with a violent ex-partner. While she was in jail she found out Social Services had organised contact with the father. So her staying in jail was not protecting her daughter. She then agreed to contact — as it was happening anyway, and because she feared if she stayed in jail his mother would apply for a residency order.

Dawn Austin and Lee Norton got together when she was 22 and he 20. Dawn had a son, Kane, from an earlier relationship. Within 6 months Lee had turned violent. Troy was born in January 1992 but Lee took no interest in her — for 2 years. 'She was just a noise to him'. Dawn threw him out and promised her children 'he will never hurt us again'. But some months later Lee demanded contact with Troy. Dawn defied court order after court order: 'I didn't

want that thug anywhere near my daughter'. In October 1996 Judge William Poulton sentenced Dawn to six weeks in Holloway declaring, 'It would be far less damaging for Troy to see her mother go to prison than to grow up without a father'.

Judge Poulton like other judges in the UK seems to have been indoctrinated with the idea that contact with your father — no matter what or who he is — is good for you. The court was told that Lee is: violent, diagnosed as schizophrenic and has received treatment for this, a drug user (amphetamines and heroin) and alcoholic. He had tried to cut Dawn's throat. He had tried to throw Dawn and Troy off a balcony — when Dawn finally threw him out (the police were called and saved them). He has made numerous threats to kill Dawn and kill Troy saying, 'If I cannot have her, you can't either'. Most worrying to Dawn is his history of suicide attempts — she fears one day he will kill Troy and himself.

For all these sensible reasons Dawn refused to comply with court orders to give him contact. Lee meanwhile was harassing her and watching her flat. She applied for an injunction but the judge would not grant it as she was 'disobeying the court'. The judge recognised the danger to her by imposing such an order the moment she complied. (He asked Lee to give an undertaking to stay away from Dawn making clear if he broke it he would go to jail.)

The contact Dawn agreed to finally was 'supervised contact'.

I thought this would mean that the worker would be in the room all the time with Lee and Troy, but they left her and Lee alone. The worker said to Troy, 'If you need me just call'. So supervised contact seems to mean someone else is in the building. Occasionally a volunteer would walk through the room. I complained that contact was not being properly supervised. They explained to me that, due to lack of resources, this supervised contact could only last for a short period. The aim of supervised contact was to get the child used to the father as a step towards unsupervised contact. I was not told that when I agreed to it.

Dawn was prepared to go to prison rather than agree to contact which she thought was dangerous. She was sentenced for contempt of court. Whilst she was in prison the judge ordered contact to take place. Since staying in prison wasn't protecting Troy, Dawn decided to purge her contempt. Contact now takes place at Lee's mother's. It is five hours every other Saturday. Lee and his girlfriend (also a heroin

user) applied for residency but the judge just laughed at them. So he knows they are not suitable. In stepped Lee's mother. She had also applied for contact. So the courts see this as the solution.

She has four grandchildren and she sees them all on contact orders on the Saturday as all his brothers are as bad as him. The courts used the fact that she was successfully supervising contact for her other grandchildren as being a reason why she could supervise contact between Lee and Troy. But if he were really determined to take Troy away and harm her, she would not be able to stop him. He has no interest in Troy. He never has had. It is just to keep tracks into my life.

I asked how Troy was coping. She is OK so far. She has said she would prefer not to go:

'I am going as I don't want my Mummy to go back to the naughty Mummies' home'. Troy is so scared of him. She remembers him hitting me. She remembers him trying to throw us off the balcony. She should be heard.

The judge refused to appoint a guardian *ad litem* [person appointed by a court to represent the interests of the child] to represent Troy as he considered her too young. He made it clear he did not want to hear about the child objecting to contact. He said, 'Whether she is crying or screaming or whatever she has to go and stay for the whole of the contact'.

No one seems to be concerned with the effects of all this on [my son] Kane. I think he has suffered the most. He used to call Lee, Dad, in the past. Not that he wants anything to do with him now. He supported his sister when I was in prison and he is a big support to me.

And how is Dawn now? She is afraid for Troy. And still afraid of Lee herself. She has been encouraged by the letters of support she has had but upset by some sections of the press. Some portrayed her as a total victim — which she is not — she is a fighter to protect her child. Then Families Need Fathers organised a demo against her and gave interviews saying, 'She is not a martyr. She is irresponsible', and making racist remarks.

I am not against all contact. If he had been a caring responsible person I would have allowed him contact. But he is not. He is a monster.

And the future? If Lee breaches any order Dawn will be straight back to court. More generally she says:

Judges should be more up to it. The (current ones) have never had a hard day in their lives. They do not understand. The children should be heard. They say the child's interest is paramount but it is not.

One of the positive things to come out of

Dawn's case is a support group for mothers contesting contact, based at Canterbury Women's Resource Centre.

Women's Support Group

Canterbury Women's Resource centre runs various women's groups and drop ins. They have been a great support to Dawn generally, since she got the courage to come out the house and make friends (Lee had kept her in, apart from shopping, for six years). When Dawn was disobeying the courts a Women's Support Group formed, initially just for her case but now supporting other women and beginning to campaign.

Many of the women in the group have also experienced domestic violence and some have had custody battles. Yvonne Wood is one. She split up with her violent boyfriend before her baby was born. Though he came to see the baby initially it did not work out. He came round on one occasion unexpectedly and tried to grab the baby... the police came and told him to leave.

About four years later when he heard Yvonne had got engaged to the man who is now her husband, he started a battle for custody and access (as contact was called). 'What he wanted was control. He is a total control freak'.

Yvonne finally won after three and a half years, although she went as far as being threatened with prison. What helped her win was a number of things such as her child being older and having a guardian *ad litem* — and the fact that his ex-wife and ex-girlfriend were prepared to testify against her ex regarding incidents of 'borderline child sexual abuse'.

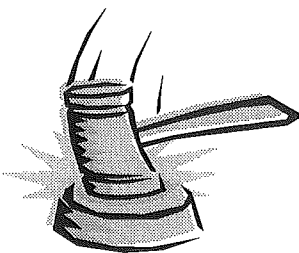
I want to be clear that I and the group, are not against contact. Only when the man has been violent. The father of my older child is supportive and I organise contact with him.

The aim of the group is to change the law regarding custody cases and domestic violence.

We want domestic violence to be taken into account, as it is not in a child's best interest to have contact when there is a history of domestic violence, especially where the child has witnessed the violence. In New Zealand if there has been violence there is no contact with the perpetrator. That is what it should be here.

As an interim measure they want some changes in practice.

Currently all these cases are held behind closed doors. You should be allowed a Mackenzie friend [supporter with some legal knowledge] in with you. At present once you are in with the judge they treat you like shit. Stand up. Sit Down. You have





no dignity. And solicitors.. they don't want to rock the boat.

Solicitors always tell you, you must obey the law. But we are fighting to protect our children. The solicitors always seem to start from the idea that we have to go along with it. That some contact is going to be ordered so all we can do is minimise it. What they don't seem to understand is that when you agree to any contact the other side just see that as a foot in the door. Once you agree to say, two hours, then soon they are back wanting overnight. And it goes on from there.

The group is supporting other women fighting cases — encouraging them to do so — where the man has been violent and the women fear for themselves or their children.

They are also writing to MPs: 'They say they are sympathetic but can't get involved in the judicial process' and compiling a dossier of cases to send to the Lord Chancellor. 'The judges make the orders but who is responsible if it goes wrong?' They are keen to work with other groups doing similar work and/or who share their aims (see box at end for address).

WAFE Action

WAFE have produced a briefing entitled 'Contact Orders and Domestic Violence'. They argue for a change in the law — similar to that in New Zealand — where contact is not allowed to take place unless and until it has been shown to be safe for 'all parties including the parents'.

Refuges have been reporting more and more cases where child contact orders have been granted to men who have been violent to the mother and sometimes the child. Not surprisingly, they report that abuse and threats took place during or after subsequent contact visits. Thangham Debbonaire, the national children's worker says:

Women feel pressured or threatened into agreeing to contact arrangements which they feel are unsafe for themselves and for their children, with no recourse to change the situation even when it becomes dangerous for her or her family. Women tell us that they are told that their own safety is not relevant to the case.

The Children Act requires the courts to consider 'any harm' the child 'has suffered or is at risk of suffering' when deciding cases. WAFE point to the research which has shown the effects on children of witnessing violence against their mother and the links between the abuse of children and the abuse of women. They intend to highlight this. In addition they point to the fact that 'Many of the men in these cases were not capable of meeting even the basic

needs of children, having never taken responsibility for them before'.

WAFE highlight another problem. Men are using the Children Act 'as a form of detective service to trace women who are often in fear for their lives'. In many cases the men do not bother to keep up arrangements for contact with the children, once they have used the contact orders to find where the woman is living.

WAFE are engaged in carrying out training for Court Welfare on this issue, and in some parts of the country there has been some improvement but whether or not a violent man is granted contact, should not depend on where he happens to apply for the contact order. So WAFE are concerned to work with the Probation Service (under which Court Welfare comes) to develop policy. They argue, so far without success, that there should be compulsory training for the judiciary on issues around domestic violence. WAFE continue to lobby Parliament and all political parties on this issue, and the Lord Chancellor has just agreed to send copies of the briefing to judges in the Family Division, and other relevant parties.

I asked WAFE what readers of *Trouble & Strife* could do. They ask all readers to write to their (new) MPs and raise this issue. You can also write to the Secretary of State for Health, who is responsible for the Children Act. Send copies of your replies to Thangham and the Women's support Group (addresses below).

The Best Interests Campaign

Rights of Women (ROW) is co-ordinating a campaign to change the law and practice of the Children Act — to promote the safety and well being of women and children in relation to contact. Lucy Anderson said: 'In particular we want to establish a clear presumption against contact between children and violent fathers'.

Campaigning action being considered includes lobbying for amendments to the Children Act, promoting test cases and pressing for judicial training. ROW have also conducted a survey of solicitors and will shortly be publishing their results.

The campaign is provisionally called 'The Best Interests Campaign'.

If you have a story to contribute, need a sympathetic solicitor in your area or want to help the ROW campaign, the contact address is below. □

Taking on the Dinosaurs

After three decades of British occupation, sectarian violence and the predominance of nationalism in politics, a prospect for peace emerged in Northern Ireland. The cease-fire by the paramilitaries forced politicians to consider a political solution. A complex model for electing representatives to the formal peace talks, and the broader forum for peace and reconciliation was created. Liz Kelly interviews Monica McWilliams about how women decided that they would not be excluded, and in the process created the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition: an exciting, inclusive, creative and visionary women's organisation.

Liz Kelly: Let's begin with how the Women's Coalition came into being?

Monica McWilliams: It was around about April of last year, 1996, the government published a list of parties they had decided were going to stand in the elections for the peace talks and to a new elected body called The Forum. I and the women I know were furious when we saw this because we had been engaged in a whole range of conferences with women's groups across Northern Ireland about the increasing participation of women in mainstream decision making. One of these, *Women, Politics and the Ways Forward* was in response to the framework document published by the British and Irish Governments. They hadn't mentioned women once in the entire document and we wanted to make sure we were going to be agents of change in any new political structuring that took place about the governance of Northern Ireland.

Representing Women

It wasn't that we weren't political animals and political agents, we have been extremely active in grassroots politics, community politics, trade union politics and the various professional and voluntary sectors. Yet here was this opportunity that was being denied to us, to have a role in the new negotiating machinery. At the same time another organisation called the European Women's Platform had written to all the political parties asking them: if they were going to be 'equity proofing' their list; where they were putting women in their lists; whether they had given serious attention to the number of women that would be elected — not just in terms of the women that were going to be standing but where, and what position had they been selected on. The response to that was abysmal with replies from only three small parties — the Communist Party, the Democratic

The 1996 elections were for both the Peace Talks and the Peace Forum. The first ten parties in the poll would be elected; three people from the large parties and two from the smaller ones are allowed to sit at the negotiating table for the Peace Talks. Sinn Fein have been excluded from the outset, the grounds being that the IRA ceasefire broke down. The small parties linked to Loyalist paramilitary groups have taken part, since their ceasefire held (although it too has broken in 1997). The two elected women from the Coalition are the only women at the table. The Talks are in session four days each week.

About 115 were elected to the Forum, which meets every Friday and is akin to mini parliament. Sinn Fein did not take their seats on June 15th 1996, and the SDLP (Social Democratic and Labour Party — the other nationalist party) walked out after Drumcree — the stand-off in relation to one of the protestant marching band marches in the summer of 1996. The Women's Coalition continues to attend the Forum.

Women's Support Group
c/o The Women's Resource
Centre, 56a Dover St,
Canterbury. Tel 01227 451 753

The Best Interests Campaign,
The Family Law Policy Worker,
ROW 52/54 Featherstone St,
London EC1 8RT

WAFE,
National Children's Officer, PO
Box 391, Bristol, BS99 7WS.

References

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Child Contact Arrangements in
England and Denmark* (Policy
Press, 1996)

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and Domestic Violence, from:
Thangham Debbonaire, WAFE
National Children's Officer, PO
Box 391, Bristol, BS99 7WS.

Left, and the Workers Party.

There was the view that not only had we lobbied the parties on the one hand but actually needed to do something ourselves as a kind of vanguard action. We figured that if we wrote to the government and demanded they change the legislation if they said no then we would publicly go to press on it, and if they said yes we would have to do something quickly. They responded by saying that they had taken on board our views and they had agreed to change it — and what was the name of the party! We called meetings of over 200 groups, faxed every group we could think of. We called meetings in Belfast and other areas and we still had not made a decision whether or not to stand but we were informing people that there was now an opportunity to create a women's party.

There were different views at those meetings: that this wasn't the election for us because these were constitutional issues; if we did stand and didn't do well we would be doing a disservice to the whole idea of women going into politics. Those were the views against. The views for were that this was a unique election because it was about getting the small parties to the table. They had created a particular type of election where you only needed about 1% of the vote, approximately 10,000, and we could do it. If we stood 100 women and each of them went out to seek 100 votes, knowing that they didn't have to be elected themselves because they would be aggregated across the whole board, every woman would be standing for someone else, she wasn't necessarily standing to be elected for herself. That was a very comfortable space to be in. Also we said if we did engage in it we would put in the skills training, the media training, and we would prepare the pledges for what they believed in and would engage them in producing their policies. It was going to be a tough exercise but we knew that the actual catching of the votes mightn't be the most difficult part of it — that would be the actual machinery that we would need to put in place. Those women who chose to disagree said that was fine and in fact some of them went on to give us financial donations whilst voting for other parties. Others who were in other parties chose to leave their parties and come into ours.

Realising that we were going to form a coalition the other parties suddenly began to say that they were promoting women, they were doing this and that. So we had already met one

of our objectives which was to put pressure on the other parties. That has gone from strength to strength because in the forthcoming general election there will be more women standing than ever before in Northern Ireland. We took a decision that we would stand and took the name Women's Coalition with Northern Ireland in front as that would put us around the middle of the ballot paper whereas Women's Coalition would have been at the end.

Getting organised

All along these decisions were made at open meetings which were advertised in newspapers. We also advertised for candidates because we felt that just using the networks was not always the best way to do it. We wanted to be as public and as transparent about it as possible. It was fun but chaotic in that we just covered walls in huge sheets of paper and put up all the names of constituencies and went round the rooms and women put their names up and when they saw that other women were prepared to do it then others came up. It was like an evangelical meeting. Women saying, well if she can do it, I can do it. We had the youngest candidate standing ever in an election and we had disabled candidates. We equity proofed our lists as far as possible so everybody felt comfortable with the groups and in every constituency we had at least three or four candidates standing. Then the machinery was put in place — we had no offices, no fax machine, no telephone, no nothing so we had to start fundraising and we had to get an office and we had to start running press releases.

We found many interesting things along the way. For instance in relation to disability the lack of access into the polling stations — the fact that you could only take a male or female partner according to marriage to the count with you, you couldn't take a female partner. There were lots of things like that which we managed to have changed when the election was over.

Creating feminist structures

The structure we operated through was never the management structure of an executive. We built teams of people: a press team, a campaign team, an administrative team, a finance team, and to this day that's still the way we operate. We opened three offices, one in Eniskillen, one in Derry and one in Belfast and we ran our election campaign from those three offices.

It was only six weeks from the start of the campaign to the day of the election. We had to get the media on board so we started working really hard with them, all they want is sound bites so we had to train women. We ran lots of training sessions for all the local women because that was the part they were most terrified of, actually having to take on the media. We had to keep reassuring them — did they ever hear much better from the people who'd been elected over the last 25 years. We managed to get a lovely little leaflet into 600,000 households with the word WOMEN and for each of those letters we had a couple of sentences. So we used it as an acronym it was Women Working for Solutions, but we were able to start each of the sentences with a W, O, M, E or N. We picked the suffragette colours, green white and purple, and our slogan was Women For Talks, Women in Talks. For our canvassing papers we had just the manifesto and the joke in the papers was that was the only 'man' we had about us. The press kept that line up, another one was that the closest we would get to the negotiating table would be to polish it!

The election was first past the post. People who would otherwise have said oh I would have given you my second choice, or people that didn't necessarily hear about us but would have been sympathetic to women, said oh, we'll give you our second choice. We had to convince people that we needed to get their first choice and that was tough going. The mainstream SDLP lost votes to Sinn Fein and likewise on the unionist side with the mainstream Unionist party losing votes to the most extreme unionist party which is Paisley's party. It was a very bitter kind of election. We were delighted to have polled in 9th place considering we had only been in formation for six weeks.

Taking everyone by surprise

When we got elected the journalists were so ill prepared. They had produced these graphics for the front of the main Belfast newspaper showing ten little men with black ties on sitting around the table. Someone informed them by the evening edition that they'd better change it because we'd been elected so they took the little black ties off the graphic in the last edition of the paper. I guess they felt they were paying us a compliment when they titled their piece 'The Hen Party Leaves The Nest In Style'. We picked the slogan 'Wave Goodbye to Dinosaurs' and

produced these huge purple white and green posters with that spread across them and white T shirts with a large X saying 'eXpress yourself and 'Vote Women's Coalition'.

But the hard work started after that. Luckily enough the Beijing conference happened the year before, so we had a lot of policies around that we had already prepared for Beijing that we took as our policy statements, on the economy, on social policy.

Liz: When you say we, who was it that had prepared things from Beijing?

Monica: Various groups came together under a Beijing platform and they had been producing policies. People say 'did the coalition come out of nowhere', well it didn't. Many of us have been around for the last 20 years in different parts of the women's movement and what this brought together was a kind of very disparate collective from across both sides of the community including very different kinds of women. What we tried to do was have a dialogue across our differences it was very much a politics of transition. We were trying to see if we could work from out of a fixed position into positions that people felt were more accommodating of each other. That was a very interesting process and that's a process we still use.

One of the most difficult things after we were elected was the actual abuse that we were given, both in terms of the fact that we were women, but also the fact that we came from a different background than either of the main Nationalist or Unionist parties. We have stayed in the forum even though the SDLP withdrew so we were the only non-Unionist party. As a result the main Unionist parties, such as those led by Ian Paisley (DUP — Democratic Unionist Party) and David Trimble (UUP — Ulster Unionist Party) called us traitors, rebels, Pan Nationalist Front, whinging women, whining women, it gets worse and worse as each week goes on.

Liz: To go back a bit how did you decide which were the two women who were going to go into the talks?

Monica: We decided at a public meeting that there should be a woman who would be catholic and active in the women's movement and there should be a woman from a working class protestant/loyalist area. The group decided that one of those women should be me. I didn't really want to stand at all but women were quite



fearful of putting themselves forward. Also we didn't actually know what it was going to entail, whether the talks were going to last for a day and collapse or whether you were giving up a year or two years of your life. The other woman is Pearl Seger a loyalist working class woman with a community activist background. Some people saw me as rural because I'm originally from County Derry even though I'm living in Belfast, but it was more the catholic nationalist background that I was put forward under. Part of it was that I was away in Australia for one of the weeks when all of this was going on and things happen in your absence!

Liz: You got nominated in your absence?

Monica: I got nominated as the leader of the Coalition. Even though we don't use the titles of leaders they had to fill in somebody's name on the electoral papers and they nominated mine. One of the things we have done is to try and get away from this notion of leader. When we went into the talks each of the parties had a room and alongside each of the party rooms there's a leader's room and we couldn't believe it. So I

took snopake and snopaked out the word 'leader', because it said 'Leader — Women's Coalition'. Of course somebody thought our door had been vandalised and reported it and I said no it was me who did it because we don't believe in these titles. To this day, everywhere we go, people have difficulty with that. They still can't accept that we're a collective, that there are two of us elected with equal rights not one of us as a leader and the other as a follower. In fact everything we do in terms of media coverage or visits or anything we take turn about to do and to delegate as widely as possible the media stuff so that the coalition doesn't become seen as one or two people.

Naming, blaming and shaming

Liz: Tell us a little bit about the experience of the talks, I know the more recent stuff will be more current in your head but maybe thinking back to the beginnings?

Monica: The beginning was incredible. I mean the first day was intense — it was a very historic occasion. The world's media were there

and incredible crowds of people. We were walking into this room which had a negotiating table in it and we sat down, Pearl and I and the three women who were our negotiators sitting behind us. I looked around and we were the only women in the room. We had been confirmed in everything we had thought the whole way through because all the other parties had said that of course they were going to be putting women in their negotiating teams, but when it came to the crunch they didn't. So we were the only two women at the negotiating table. That was something. For me it was historical. After all the work that women had done over the 25 years we had created a space for them to have their voices heard at the table.

It's been sexist and sectarian. We are the double other and we are confusing as the other because we are coming from different backgrounds — we are not them as they see it. So we have become a target of their abuse. They threaten us, stand and shout at us, they prevent us from having our emergency motions heard. Whenever I'm speaking I have to make sure that the chairman calls order because I can't hear myself talking. They even comment on what we're wearing, if we're not wearing skirts and are wearing trousers. We've invaded their space, space that they feel belonged to them. We frighten them. They say this is radical, because when we feel that something's wrong we go out and shame them. We blame them and we name them and they've never had this done to them before. So they accuse us of running to the media all the time, but since there's no sanction on their behaviour internally and since they're not prepared to restrain themselves inside the place we've decided that the only sanction we have is to publicly expose them and we will do that at every stage of the process.

That has never happened to them before and what they've tried to do is intimidate us and silence us in the usual bellowing fashion and we've stood up to that because if we had allowed that to happen at the very early stages then they would have got their way. Now it's been extremely difficult for us and in a sense quite dangerous for Pearl as a loyalist woman because we voted against the Union Jack because they inserted a rule which should never have been there. We succeeded in getting the Secretary of State to make them take the rule out so they then had a motion and got their Union Jack up inside the chamber itself. The

reason why we took that stand was because this was a private building. We have a Flags and Emblems Act in Northern Ireland which opposes any flags or any emblems being hung in any workplaces, or in any buildings that would make it uncomfortable for a member of the other community, and it was under that piece of legislation that we were advocating that they not put up a flag and that we keep this a comfortable space. At one stage they were actually proposing that we each individually carry in a Union Jack and put it in front of our seats! One day they argued for an hour over the word 'may' fly, or 'shall' fly. I got up and started shouting at them saying, 'you people are really unbelievable that you've caught yourself in this trap of 'may' or 'shall' when the country is coming down round us'. Robinson jumped up and said how dare I call him 'you people' and would I address him in the proper fashion to which they were accustomed. I then said 'the fine members of this forum' because I really thought he was going to hit me.

It's been rough treatment. I've had fingers poked at me, pushed up against a wall, but we've stuck it and we will stick it, and believe me, Liz, we've succeeded in getting them now to stop all of that in terms of the physical stuff. Verbally they are still at it and will be but what we've now done is quoted a lot of this stuff. It's all recorded publicly at the forum in a Hansard, so we extract every week from the Hansard and quote it in different places. We've got an insult of the week notice board up at the inner offices and we just write down everything with the date. So what we're doing is letting them know they are under surveillance. That's the tactic that we'll continue to do. The press all know that we're doing this too.

Keeping up the momentum

Liz: What do you think the future looks like?

Monica: We'll be staying together for at least the next two years because the talks will go on for two years. So the Coalition will be in place in terms of the talks. We will stand in the local elections and that's where we could do well because it's proportional representation. We will be putting up candidates for the general election but know we won't do well because it's going to be a bitter election. But we will put up three candidates to continue to get across our message and highlight the lack of women in



politics. Also to get across our policies on domestic violence, on equal pay, on the issues that we feel very strongly about and that no one has bothered to raise. So we'll continue on all of those fronts but it's going to be difficult. We're going to have to get a lot of money together again because this is now a deposit election where we have to put up money and we're going to have to get an awful lot of money together just to keep that campaign going. But we will do it because we have to.

Liz: *I'm sure you will. Talk about how you've taken what's going on in the talks back out to women and how you've been building the coalition in terms of its life outside the talks?*

Monica: Let me tell you how it works. On the last Saturday of every month we hold a public open meeting which is actually a coalition meeting but we make it known that we welcome any woman who wishes to attend. Occasionally men have attended as journalists and we ask them to declare what they are there for and when they've got their bits down we ask them to leave, or if there are women journalists we ask are women comfortable and they can either stay or go. We are so open that it could be a problem for us but so far we prefer to stay open. If there are problems we prefer to let other people see how we work them out. We rotate those meetings across Northern Ireland, so they are not always in Belfast. We try to ensure that there's disabled access, there's always a creche and that every woman has transport to the meetings. Those are quite well attended, big meetings. In between we have team meetings and they are held in peoples houses.

Then we have consultative conferences that we hold every three months which are big public open conferences that everyone is free to attend and everybody gets their lunch. One was in Belfast and one has been down in the middle of Northern Ireland in Dungannon. The first one was on confidence building measures, to let everybody know what was going on at the talks, confidence building around prisoners issues, negotiations and we had somebody from South Africa speaking. The last one was on decision making so we had somebody from Zero Tolerance and somebody speaking on women in the mainstream and what we needed to do. We have made a point of ensuring that they are not coalition member only meetings, that they are meetings for other women from outside of the

coalition as well as from other parties. We also have a newsletter that we send to everybody who is a member as well as to anybody that's made contact with us and has written their name on a sheet of paper. Every week we do a mailing on something.

On International Women's Day we all went down to Harryville in Ballymena. There's been a huge picket on a church down there, the Orange Order have been picketing a church for 26 weeks preventing people from attending the church and the women down there asked if we would come down and give them some support. We're doing that and we're also doing the Roisin McAliskey protest as well. Those decisions were all taken through open meetings with women speaking for and against.

What we try to do as much as possible is to do outreach, to disseminate our decisions when they are taken to others who haven't been at the meetings, and to ensure that the meeting itself has as many opinions about what we're doing, so that no woman feels in a dangerous or vulnerable position when she leaves the meeting that she could be attacked afterwards for having taken a decision that other people would disagree with or that she feels she couldn't go back into her community and live with. Those are the kinds of reasons why we take the decisions we take.

Making compromise a virtue

Liz: *We both know that the women's movement is often fraught with conflict, but that we find it difficult to openly disagree with one another, and then continue working together. How have you managed to build this atmosphere that enables this?*

Monica: That's a good question. I know that it's something that burns people out. So far I think it is because women feel there's a space where they can really make their voices heard. But when you get a different viewpoint coming in there's a listening going on and maybe that's because we have worked out of such a terrible struggle and because it's been dangerous for us not to listen. Women know what happens when there's too much grandstanding and so there's a preparedness there that this thing has to work. Also I think it's facilitated by the process. I think if decisions were taken that people felt they hadn't been involved in then maybe there would be an awful lot of ill feeling. It's also because there's such honesty. Some of it is so

honest and so blunt that it goes right to the jugular but that's not a bad thing because it then means the person has said it and we've got to work out of that position towards a position in which that person may end up saying well I can agree with that but I couldn't have agreed with what we started out with. That's why we end up with compromise. Compromise sounds like a terrible bloody word, in Northern Ireland people are told not to use it because it's seen as such an extreme word, can you believe that. We try and use the word accommodation. For us it's the most difficult thing to arrive at but we're determined when we get there that it's something that people actually do feel comfortable around.

Liz: *Can you give an example that would illustrate this happening?*

Monica: The issue on the flag is a perfect example, we chose not to insult anybody's culture, but we said it was because of attempts to create that as a neutral space that we were taking this stand on the flag. Had it been a public building in Northern Ireland the Union Jack flies in public buildings, but you are not allowed to have flags in private buildings. So that's a perfect example. The Roisin McAliskey case is another, where because of her particular mother's name that was a real difficulty for some women who were coming out of a more Unionist tradition, because Bernadette was not just Republican but she was perceived to be anti-ceasefire. That was a difficulty for women because of her background. But we said look forget the background, forget the name, this is a human rights issue, this is about a woman who's pregnant, this is about prison conditions, this is about health and human rights issues. Since we opposed strip searching all those years ago we can take a stand on this from the Coalition's viewpoint. There was debate over that but in the end women were resolved that was the right thing to do, that we needed to make a strong statement and we made it before the bandwagon was created.

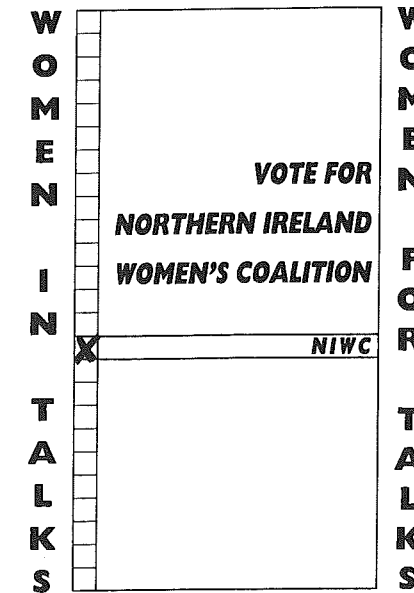
Creating credibility

Liz: *When we talked last year you mentioned opposition from women in other parties to the idea of the Coalition. I get a sense that some of that has shifted?*

Monica: It has, it has. There was some opposition from Republican women at the very

start. Interestingly not from Sinn Fein but from women who would have seen themselves as Republican sympathisers of Sinn Fein. Sinn Fein have been quite supportive because they argued that since we took the principle of inclusion then they supported that, but also they think it's a good thing to have more women in politics. In fact the day that we walked into the talks we had a letter in our hands that we walked out to the gate and gave to Sinn Fein letting them know that we had asked for them to come inside.

There was some antipathy towards us from the Republican women at first. They press released a protest without actually calling a meeting with us. We discovered afterwards that a couple of people whose names were on the press release hadn't even been asked to sign it and were furious. But all of that has gone and the antipathy has gone because they now realise that we have been the brunt of sectarianism and in some senses have acknowledged the stand that we have had to take which has been a fairly tough stand. I think they were worried that we were only going to take a stand on women's issues and not stand on constitutional issues. We said from the very start how dare anybody be so patronising to think, first, that women's issues weren't constitutional issues and secondly that we wouldn't have a strong say on anything like police reform, prisoners, and the list of things like that. We said look we have



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policy statements on every one of these things and by the way when we say reform the police we say reform the criminal justice system of which the police is only one part, we want the whole criminal justice system to be reformed. We have produced papers to that effect. They obviously had not read any of our documents. Now that has changed a bit.

The other parties, the mainstream parties, had their noses put out of joint. The Unionist party was totally opposed to positive action and said that women would get there in their own right, (they've done such a good job that they have one woman out of 35 men). The SDLP argued that we were opportunistic and that we had engaged in a cult factor and when it grows in on itself it becomes unhealthy. They began to change their views a bit but because an election has started they are actually going out saying don't vote for the Women's Coalition they are single issue and don't have a stand on the constitution. They do us down again because we are entering an election. I've been on TV that much that people now know that we have stands on everything, that we're not one of these that say we don't know the answer to that.

Liz: It sounds like the women in the Coalition are fantastic!

Monica: They are just wonderful. Every time you turn around somebody's got a press statement, a policy statement, a speech, they've got ready for you. There's a terrific team atmosphere in the place. The women who are quietly working in the background are the strategists who don't seek media attention, who people don't even know belong to the Coalition and yet have probably taken the most important roles. For some there is the difficulty that because the Coalition is seen as a political group they can't publicly let it be known that they belong because their jobs would be in jeopardy, or because their centres wouldn't get any money, the women's centres in particular. Councillors have threatened to close down the centres if they find out that any single one of them has been involved with the Coalition. They can't do it publicly so they do it privately either through financial donations or by writing speeches or by giving us whatever support they can, and they've been brilliant.

Liz: For me it's an example of just what women can do if they set their minds to it.

Monica: Oh absolutely, absolutely right Liz. We never thought that we would be where we are and it has made such a difference to politics here. People say they'll never behave like that again because we've exposed the culture and the TV keeps repeating the ritual humiliation of me and Pearl and people say look, that's working because if they are doing that to women what must they have been doing over the years to the political negotiations. As I said we never stood for election simply to be humiliated but if that is an outcome of exposing 'men behaving badly' then so be it. The other thing that I think is beginning to change is that they now realise that we are serious players here and that every strategy that we've engaged in has been so effective that they are now becoming quite intimidated by us.

Yesterday for instance at the Talks after my speech Ian Paisley berated me for one hour, the guts of which was that he was going to ensure at the end of the day that his people would breed for Ulster, so that they could outbreed the likes of me and others. Everybody just nearly died and the tension was broken with the quick witted remark: 'that puts a fast breeding reactor into perspective'!

Last week we walked out in protest, we just picked up our books and walked out. We had been promised that our Emergency Motion would be heard, we'd asked for the suspension of one of the committees on the grounds of corruption and Paisley got to the chair and said 'if you dare let those women speak' and the Chair gave into him. So they wouldn't let me speak, I had to get up three times on a point of order and remind him that he wasn't sticking to the rules. When he refused to hear me Pearl and I picked up our stuff and walked out and went straight to the press and told them what we thought of what had happened.

Liz: Has the Coalition had lots of links with other women's organisations internationally?

Monica: Slowly but surely we have, we're building those up. We've got some links with German women's groups and links with groups in the States. I'm going to the States on Tuesday but it's mainly to raise funds. We've been invited to the White House and the American Consulate here is paying because we couldn't afford to go. We decided we would try and raise some money amongst various groups there. The following two weeks I'm going to Boston to do

the same. We really don't have any money. Now because the talks are in recess we don't get any administrative costs, so any money that we were getting from the talks process has all gone now. We have to fund raise to contest the general and local elections — so it's back out on the streets again.

Liz: It is difficult to imagine doing something similar in England, Scotland and Wales without proportional representation, but do you think that as a political strategy it's a good thing for women to do?

Monica: Absolutely and don't let anybody start putting you down, because it's separatist and it's single issue and nobody will be interested in you. It was really important. Our time was right, one of those times when there was a window of opportunity, we couldn't have forgiven ourselves if we had let it go by. As one of the lobbyists, advocates and researchers I know those are really important strategies but direct action should never be set aside when it's offered to you. What we did was take it on board and use it alongside lobbying and alongside the tactic of producing the research and the facts and figures. I think that's the thing that was such a threat, and it still is to the other parties. We could have waited around and they would have solved the Irish question before they would have resolved any attempts to be more inclusive of women!

Liz: What have you personally have gained most from this chain of events that wasn't what you anticipated in your life?

Monica: Well it's certainly been risk taking. I've learnt how to experience a kind of public humiliation and yet believe that I can turn that around. I now no longer feel fear in the way that I did. I felt terrible fear at the start. These guys were real bullies and I have to say they really did get to me. I did lose sleep and I ended up in despair at times. Remember it was also Drumcree. Now I am a much stronger woman, but that's because I've had to put myself in there and just get a skin and get a support system around me to ensure that when they started attacking me that I had women round me. I've learnt a lot of skills I suppose. But there are days when I ask myself what am I doing here. So there's been elements of ups and downs, joys and pain. Just finding time for everybody. Finding time for the kids. The usual things that

women experience trying to be everywhere at once. But I'm really glad I did it. I'm really glad I did it because I've learned a lot and I suppose I'm now facing a bit of a crisis in the sense that my year is almost up and I have got to work hard now deciding whether I go on for another year or whether I stand down and go back to the University.

Liz: Has the Coalition been a route for women to discover feminism?

Monica: Absolutely. There's no question about that at all. Some of the women would have had difficulty owning that label at the start but they are much more comfortable with it now. Working class women in Northern Ireland in particular would have found that a difficult label, and even middle class women. It does cross class that antipathy that existed in more conservative society towards feminism. But they wouldn't have a difficulty with it now. There are women, but they would be small in number, who would still not be prepared to say I'm a feminist but the vast majority of the women in the Coalition are there because they believe in feminism. □

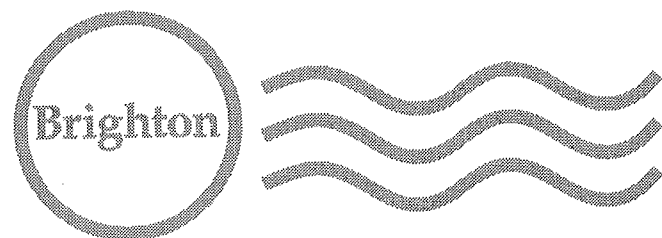


wave
goodbye
dinosaurs

Update:

The Women's Coalition have not only trebled their vote in the general election, they have also succeeded in winning a seat in the recent local council elections. These elections have cost the Women's Coalition over £18,000. They would welcome donations:

Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, 53 Elmwood Avenue, Belfast. Tel: Belfast 681 118.



Postcards from Brighton

In November 1996 over 2,500 people (mostly women) from 137 countries attended a five day International Conference on Violence, Abuse and Women's Citizenship. Ten women from several countries, with diverse histories and connections to sexual violence and feminist activism discuss what the conference meant to them. Several themes stand out: the importance of making connections between forms of violence and abuse and oppression, and the vital task of creating contexts in which feminist anger and vision can be rekindled.

Thoroughly life changing

Al Garthwaite is 49, and works for Vera Productions, 30-38 Dock Street, Leeds, LS10 1JF

This was one of the most significant weeks in my life.

Having been an active feminist since 1970, I rather dropped out in the purges of the eighties. Being shouted at in plenaries, or lectured about the early 70s movement by those who were primary schoolgirls at the time finally lost its appeal. I remained committed and active in my work and its feminist networks, organised in the mainstream and in safe spaces — small groups where I knew everyone, could work and feel secure from lies and blame. But I would not join an open group or campaign.

Friends persuaded me to attend the conference, nervously I accepted, delegated by BECTU, my union. I organised the video programming at lunchtimes and evenings every day, and was thrilled to discover the range of powerful and inspiring, as well as distressing videos on male violence made by women from many different countries. From 'Russia, War, Rape' and FGM to 'Women in Bosnia' and

domestic violence in Turkey, the activist-influenced, often low-budget videos give a very different picture from that put over on broadcast television. I now wish to compile as comprehensive as possible a list of such films and videos (not Hollywood features), with details of distributors, and circulate it; let me know of any you'd like to see included.

And yes, we have all moved on in the nineties. Sessions kept to time. Distressed women could see counsellors. Appropriate anger was (mostly) constructively voiced by the women feeling it, and dealt with by the hard-working and under-resourced organisers and volunteers, without being allowed to destroy the whole conference. Media coverage was almost entirely positive, skilfully controlled by the press officer and her assistants.

I met with women I'd been in groups with over 20 years ago: still feminist, still out there fighting. Over 2500 women from 137 countries, aged 17-70, spent up to six exciting, informative, by turns overwhelmingly upsetting and immensely enjoyable, ultimately thoroughly life-changing days in Brighton. I am delighted to have been among them.

The five 'p's'

Ailbhe Smyth is a long time activist in Irish feminism and is director of the Women's Education, Research and Resource Centre, University College, Dublin.

The conference was a truly amazing feminist event. 'Global Strategies for Prevention, Protection and Provision' based on the Zero Tolerance anti-violence campaign was the guiding principle of the conference. Focusing on the 'three p's' gave shape and structure to the massive and extremely complex problem of male violence, in its many forms, causes and consequences, although Liz Kelly reminded us powerfully on the last day that without 'Politics and Protest' we can achieve very little.

Each day keynote panels, research paper sessions, networking and action planning workshops focused on a specific strand of the continuum of male violence: rape; sexual harassment and domestic violence; harmful cultural practices; trafficking of women and children; child abuse and child protection.

Many of the keynote speakers were 'the sort of women you collected photographs of' as Lepa Mladjenovic (Belgrade) said in her hilarious introduction to her otherwise very serious keynote about women's experience and resistance to the terrible violence of the war crimes perpetrated against them in former Yugoslavia. Christine Delphy, Beatrix Campbell, Liz Kelly, Charlotte Bunch, Andrea Dworkin, Kathleen Barry, Janice Raymond — it was wonderful to hear these women, to be stimulated and challenged by the clarity of their thinking and the continuing strength of their feminist commitment.

It was also crucially important to learn of feminist resistance strategies in places, and in ways that we in Europe are desperately (shamefully) ignorant of. Although the majority of the participants were white British and Western European women, I heard powerful keynotes and papers by women from former Yugoslavia, Russia and Afghanistan, Fiji, the Philippines, South Africa, Trinidad as well as the tiny Pacific island of Belau/Palau when Cita Morei and Isabella Sumag spoke inspiringly of their struggle to introduce a nuclear-free constitution in the face of massive resistance from the USA.

But so many of the speakers were inspiring, powerful and impressive. Beth Ritchie gave a strong and thoughtful keynote on the particular



vulnerability to violence and abuse of young women of colour in the USA, while Teboho Maitse spoke about the connections between nationalism, violent conflict and men's violence in the private sphere. On the final day Hilary McCollum from the North of Ireland gave a brave and very moving personal account of the acute pain of child sexual abuse. Earlier Mimi Ramsey (Ethiopia/USA) had spoken of her experience of female genital mutilation and her struggle to oppose it, while Norma Hotaling (USA) had talked about prostitution — again based on her own experience — and the difficulty in enabling women to move out of prostitution work.

Despite its scope — or perhaps because of it — there were omissions in the conference programming. At one stage, it seemed as if bitter controversy over different political analyses of prostitution might dominate the conference although — despite protests in plenary sessions — there were in fact few structured opportunities for women unfamiliar with the bases of the dispute to debate the issue with those centrally involved. Incomprehensibly, and curiously, there were no Black keynote speakers from Britain, and very curiously, since many of the main speakers were lesbian, none of the keynote sessions dealt with violence against lesbians. Lesbian issues were on the agenda, certainly, but not on the 'big' platform. Sheila

Jeffreys discussed trafficking in women from a historical perspective in her keynote talk — while her paper on the lesbian sex industry was scheduled for a 'parallel' session. I went to some great research and networking sessions focused on lesbian issues globally. I heard about work on homelessness amongst young lesbians in Australia, citizenship issues for lesbians, lesbian pornography and much more. I also met and was stimulated by the work and reflection of both lesbians and straight women working in the area of violence and disability, which was really inspiring.

I learned an immense amount, as I think everyone must surely have done. Whatever the omissions, tensions and controversies, it was a remarkable conference, and I was proud to be there alongside so many Irish women who are doing so much, and so innovatively, to make sure that the 5 'p's — Prevention, Provision, Protection, Politics and Protest — make a real difference in the lives of women and children.

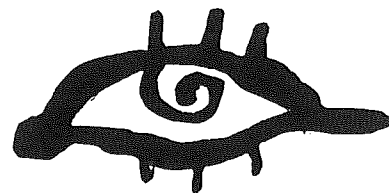
Reassuring rage

Angela Beausang is chairwoman of ROKS, the National Organisation of Battered Women's Shelters (refuges) in Sweden.

The Brighton conference was a great experience. It was my first big conference abroad. A city full of women and feminist as well, it was a dream come true.

It took me a couple of days to get the hang of finding time for as much as possible. Once I found the location for a session, it was often overcrowded and sometimes you had to turn back — I missed some lunches in the process. You had to plan your participation very carefully the night before, but on the third day it worked!

What became so evident was that we all face the same problems and to fight against sexualised violence we need to stand united. The view on prostitution is particularly important. Several keynote speakers stressed the fact that we have to struggle to include all prostitution in our fight. Kathleen Barry, like many others, expressed her concern about the UN Declaration on violence against women excluding prostitution, which means excluding millions of women.



The fact that some countries and even some women talk about the difference between 'free' and 'forced' prostitution is appalling and very disturbing. We have to have a new declaration that includes *all* women.

The fact that experts are trying to take over and make their own definition of male sexualised violence against women and girls is something the shelter movement in Sweden has too much experience of! That is something we have to fight every day. Louise Armstrong told us what is happening in the United States and we know that the international male movement are copycats. We have to be aware of this and fight for our right to define male sexualised violence as we are the real experts.

The war against women everywhere became painfully clear. Afghan women being forced to stay in their homes, with no way of supporting themselves and their children, it being dangerous for them to walk the street without fully covering themselves, not being able to hold jobs, is womanhatred.

The fact that so many women came together with the same experience and with the same feeling of rage is reassuring. There is no way to silence us. We will unite and fight as long as we have to. The conference makes me sure of that. The next time there is a gathering of this kind, I hope lots more sisters who could not come this time will be there.

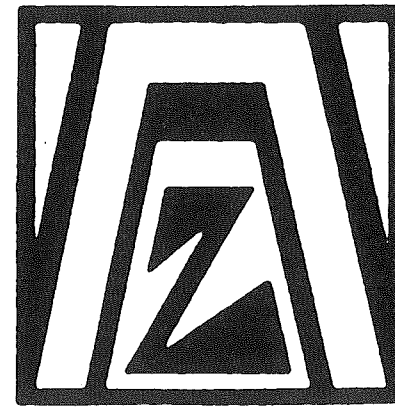
Not victim or survivor, but resister

Anne Richardson is in her early 20s, and involved in local activism and campaigns in the North of England.

I had never attended a conference before Brighton but would again without hesitation. I arrived feeling quite nervous about what to expect and left feeling motivated and enthusiastic about my feminism.

I have always associated conferences with professionals, academics and 'famous' feminists, being none of those I thought I would be out of place. I was pleased to discover that there was a wide spectrum of women from all walks of life who attended. It was great to be at an international event involved in actively challenging and fighting to change the many forms of violence and abuse suffered by women throughout the world.

For me personally some of the most important changes are happening around feminist responses to ritual abuse. The Brighton



conference not only included it on the agenda — pretty radical for some — but also encouraged women to look at ritual abuse in a feminist political context: one that doesn't define it as different, weird or 'other', but as another form of violence against women and children by men. Talking to feminist survivors and supporters has given me hope that there is an alternative to therapy when leaving a satanic cult, and that more women will be encouraged to understand their experiences within a radical feminist framework.

I thought the best speaker at the conference was Hilary McCollum because she spoke about child sexual abuse as a 'resister'. She spoke about personal experience of abuse, not as a status of pain or trauma, but to highlight the political context of male violence and to draw out links between the experiences of women. Too often we are separated into boxes as 'survivor of child sexual abuse', 'victim of domestic violence', 'rape survivor' — the list goes on. Hilary was also important to me because she was introduced and presented herself to the conference as an activist, not a survivor/victim who needed to speak out in order to 'heal'. I hope I was not the only one motivated by this speech and the conference as a whole to become more active in feminist politics.

Sharing global perspectives

Patricia Connell is an activist, and is currently doing her PhD on African-Caribbean women's experiences of domestic violence.

The tone of the conference was set by the first keynote speaker, Kathleen Barry, whose contribution addressed some of the serious

issues around the conceptualisation of violence against women. She touched on the way much of the debate is filtered through Western liberal individualism, which limits a more holistic understanding. A good point of departure for an international conference, such an opening set the agenda for ensuing discussions, both recognising current work and calling for an expansion of its scope. One key to this expansion, which directly tied in with aims of the conference, lay in recognising the international linkages underlying the problem, and the diversity in the position of women globally.

The conference also presented an excellent opportunity to share global perspectives on violence against women. There were many informative sessions with much cross-fertilisation of ideas. It was particularly important to learn about the many initiatives by women in various social and national contexts, and diverse strategies operating outside the criminal justice system. Some serious challenges were also highlighted, like the complexity and dilemmas surrounding the issues of female genital mutilation and prostitution. The diverse backgrounds of participants also provided an excellent opportunity to engage in debate that would link theory and the work of activists; these are useful connections that are not always explored.

This conference departed from the usual pattern of discussion and one of the highlights was the contribution of Beth Richie. She highlighted what for me is one of the underlying problems in the area of violence against women — the need to contextualise the problem, and incorporate the various ways in which women bear intersecting and multiple oppressions, and how this limits choices. Not taking this into account results in some groups of women receiving inappropriate services, which works directly against their interests, but also against the wider interests of all women. Beth highlighted the silences within the feminist movement which collude with and feed into the marginalisation of some women, and ultimately serve neo-conservative interests which see women as a public policy problem.

I sometimes see a failure to recognise the links with wider connections in struggles to end oppression, alongside a failure to challenge oppression in all its forms. This results in an unwillingness to address the plight of marginalised groups, and a failure to recognise that



attacks on them are often the vehicle for wider attacks. The almost simultaneous protests of some disabled and Black women early in the conference served as pointers to lost opportunities to push the boundaries of current debates, and to ensure that the issues were not seen as a matter of special group interest.

The planning of other international networks was one positive offshoot. The conference highlighted the excellent work being done, and the global connections being tapped, but it also illustrated the gaps in the struggles against violence against women; these must also be addressed.



A radical edge

Norma Hotaling is Executive Director of SAGE, a project in San Francisco 'organised by and for survivors of abuse, prostitution and trauma'.

When I was invited to be keynote speaker for the Brighton conference I was excited, but at the same time I thought: 'one more conference and nothing will change. I will be the token survivor and we will hear intellectuals deliver well scripted papers and the result will be women and girls dying and hurt'. The dying and hurting is still going on at rates unimaginable, but there is a radical organised community of women coming together with survivors to speak of the harm that is perpetrated against women and girls and to strategise on ways to combat what is happening. Why is this radical? I heard women

speak of the horrors they deal with on an ongoing basis, survivors came up to me throughout the conference with beautiful faces and knowing eyes. We shared a bond. The conference organisers enveloped this experience in safety, comfort, support, sisterhood, and yes a radical edge.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to find an environment that is safe in which to speak about the harm of prostitution. This was a large conference and it was totally safe for me. That safety enabled all of us to layer information, create depth and come to a greater understanding of what the systems of oppression are, and what the impact of violence, sexual exploitation including prostitution and pornography has on women and girls' lives, and how these issues control our ability to fully function in the world. There were a few disruptors and out of their mouths fell statements like 'this is the most man-hating conference I've ever attended'. To which I replied, 'I guess the answer is to love men more. That will solve things!' It is interesting to see the dynamics of the oppressed doing the dirty work for the oppressors. As long as women are promoting prostitution and protecting men, the customers, pimps, traffickers and abusers don't have to do anything.

Creating a world that is safe for all women and girls, a world that enable women to live self-determined lives free from abuse involves speaking about the abuse, naming it, but it also involves changing the status of women. This conference was a step in that direction. We need women to create more programs for women and girls that assist in prevention and healing from harm, develop vocational and educational programs so that women won't have to be dependent. The media has a responsibility to be involved in the education of the public and not to advance negative stereotypes of women. Men have to held accountable and encouraged to adopt the feminist model and become involved in the world in more positive ways.

Passionate politics

Jane McMahon was a teacher, and now organises education training on sexual abuse for an Area Child Protection Committee.

From the moment of seeing the sign outside the Conference Centre to the end of the conference party the week was a rollercoaster of experiences: witnessing the conference hall filled with

so many women from across the world was a powerful political statement in itself. Despite real divisions there was a feeling of commitment to radical feminist agendas. There was political insight that made me giddy with excitement, personal testimony with analysis that left me emotionally and intellectually in awe. Making the links between forms of sexual violence mixed with feelings of engaging with the issues was, for me, positively mind-blowing.

It seems incongruous to edit the whole experience, but here are some of my highlights:

- Kathleen Barry's analysis of prostitution provided me with the words and concepts to make sense of issues in ways I have never thought before.
- Beth Ritchie confronted delegates with the scope of the issues feminism needs to address and the contradictions and dilemmas that must be faced. Making links in order to address the differing realities of women's lives is vital to radical feminism.
- Ellen Pence developed the theme of inclusive resistance to all oppression as well as entertaining and 'deconstructing' the idolisation of the women speakers by us 'mere' delegates!
- Hilary McCollum's speech exposed the difference between theory and practice in personal relationships in relation to sexual abuse. I acclaim her courage, honesty and presence.

The experience of Brighton has both empowered and unsettled me. It was empowering to be among other radical feminists — that validated my politics and increased my sense of collective integrity.

Since returning my resolve to challenge attacks on that integrity has been strengthened. I am prepared to take more risks and less willing to accept compromise at work and in my personal life. This is also frightening. The downside to being inspired is the realisation of just how far we have to go.

To conclude, despite the difficulties, Brighton was a celebration of feminists defining our realities. We must refuse to enter debates on the terms dictated to us, we can use the wealth of analysis to change the debates altogether and inform our activism.

So much to follow up

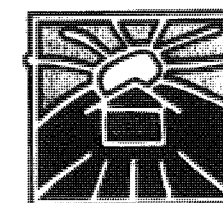
Purna Sen is writing up her research on women's resistance to domestic violence in

Calcutta, and has just completed a project on domestic violence and ethnic minority women in Camden.

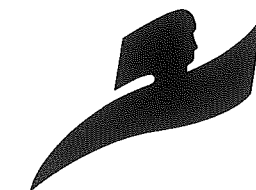
Over three thousand people attended this conference; they came from all over the world to work on the elimination of male violence against women — how inspiring. The organisers and volunteers did a fantastic job. But meeting and talking to so few was frustrating. For me the tension between so many different interests is a strong memory of the conference.

A year and a half after leaving Calcutta, where I had gone to do some research on domestic violence, it was good to meet the women from Calcutta again. Talking to others was the highlight of the conference — other Asian women from the UK and elsewhere, colleagues, old friends and new friends. Discussions about papers and speakers always seemed very intense, with people who seemed to have either very deeply held views or reactions. One of the strengths of the conference was the way in which time was found for policy makers, activists and survivors on the platform. There were times when it seemed the whole Conference Centre was tearful in response to the personal testimonies of women who shared their lives with us.

The discussion at the South regional caucus, or rather the debate about what should be discussed, was for me a disappointment as it became exclusionary for women from outside South Asia, although this did not seem to be the intention of the programme. There certainly was a large and vocal demand for a south Asian caucus, for which there was definitely a need, but it need not have displaced the one for the south. We might take more care not to be unnecessarily exclusionary in our ways of working.



STÍGAMÓT





The papers and meetings were so many and varied that it was simply not possible to arrange to get to all, or even most, of those that were of interest. Even arranging with friends to spread out between us still left much we could not attend. There is so much to follow up.

Bringing it all back home

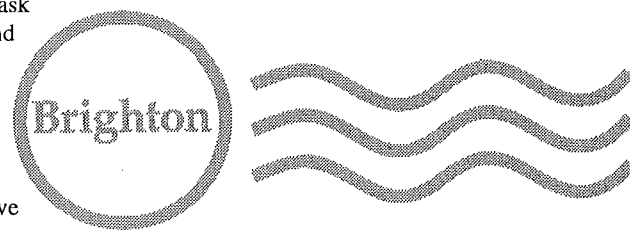
Gudrun Jonsdottir is a researcher and worker at Stigamot, a feminist collective of survivors who run the only counselling and information centre for survivors of sexual violence in Iceland.

Three of us from my workplace, Stigamot in Reykjavik, Iceland participated in the Brighton conference. We were looking forward to the conference and were not disappointed. We learned a lot from all that was offered and from many women we met who we had discussion with about our work. We came back home encouraged and filled with enthusiasm. As proof of that we have now organised, with women from other organisations in Iceland, a conference on different forms of sexual violence.

The only thing that went wrong was to us a funny mix up of names in the workshop I had intended to give about our work. It so happened that a woman from Norway bears the same name as me, so Iceland and Norway became one and the same country and we one and the same person.

We appreciated very much the book market and information leaflets from various women's initiatives against sexual violence. The conference and all that went with it was inspiring and has given us many new ideas, deeper understanding of different forms of sexual violence. We also came home with an increased sense of solidarity among women working in different corners of the world.

At the same time the enormity of our task, to overcome all forms of sexual violence, became also clearer for us. It seems to me that we have to know, map and connect convincingly, through our research and work all these forms to patriarchal social relations. The task to hand is to collect, document and publish different forms of feminist actions world wide against sexual violence. We have to renew our struggle constantly, and we have much to learn from each other in this respect. We have to write our history of struggle



otherwise it will soon be forgotten. Finally we want to express our warmest thanks to the organisers for an informative and good conference.

Time to fight back

Bub Mackay is 19, lives in the North of England, and intends to get involved in feminist activism.

I went to the conference thinking that I was quite aware of women's rights issues and of the abuses that woman all over the world face from male violence. I can definitely say the conference was an education. It opened my eyes to many things I had no idea were going on, and highlighted the significance of everyday oppression I had got used to ignoring.

I came out of the conference with a 'super sense' and every sexist advert, every degrading poster seemed to leap put at me. This was pretty depressing and upsetting at first, and then it made me angry and that made me stronger. I felt more motivated than ever to get involved in campaigning with women's organisations.

The conference also made me realise how crazy it is when women today say we have equality. Too many women here in Britain have had to blinker themselves to the oppression and exploitation we face in a patriarchal society. I think that women have settled for less in order just to have something. Women have had to try to fit into a man's world instead of endeavouring to change that world to a better one.

Coming home to the real world I felt like a war was being waged against all women. Now I have accepted that and, as Andrea Dworkin said, I think it is time to fight back. I'm sure that all women there felt like this and that together we will keep doing all we can to work towards liberation, because what women started many years ago is not over yet.

The conference made me feel part of a huge, strong group of women who have power to change things and it has given me great hope and inspiration. □

Raging Against Rape

Feminists exposed rape as a violent crime against women in the 1970s and took to the streets to protest against it. Since then there has been less feminist activity around rape. Kate Cook makes the case for giving rape a higher priority and discusses a new campaign for changes in the law.

Once upon a time, when women were raped, it was assumed that the rapists were perverts, who jumped out of bushes (or alleyways), wearing dirty raincoats (or anoraks) and needed to be locked up (or perhaps have their tackle chopped off).

Then, along came the Women's Movement, and said STOP! Rapists are just men, nothing else. They operate in women's houses, in cars, in pubs, in fact anywhere. They have wives, daughters, girlfriends, sisters, mothers and aunts. And often these are the women they rape. They also know women who are their friends, neighbours and colleagues. And sometimes these are the women they rape.

We said, rape is not just a sexual act, but an act of violence, we talked about links between rape and other forms of violence against women and girls; domestic violence; sexual abuse and sexual harassment. We said, these are not isolated crimes, these are parts of the fabric of women's lives, and they all act to keep women,

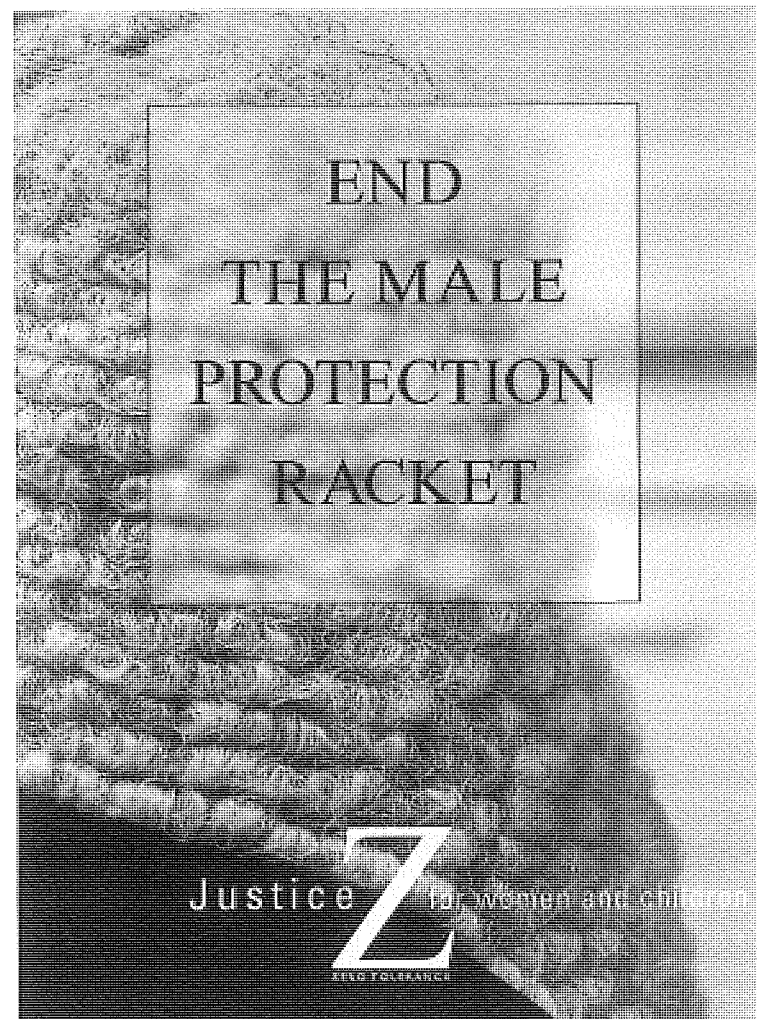
individually and collectively, under men's control.

Then along came the 1990s, Camille Paglia, post-feminism (post-everything), the men's movement and inter-agency domestic violence working parties. Domestic violence has hit the big time. Local councils know they must take action against it, so do the police, and they are all busy setting up committees to discuss joint working. Admittedly the rest of the criminal justice system is lagging some distance behind. And some of these working parties do not seem to achieve very much. However, domestic violence does now have a high public profile, and there are still feminist groups, working for change — Justice for Women and the Women's Aid Federations are just examples.

But, what happened to rape and sexual assault?

In November 1996, on the eve of the national march for the International Day of Action to End

Campaign to End Rape, c/o 28
Eaton Road, Sale, Cheshire,
M33 7TZ (donations welcome
— the campaign has no cash,
but does have a bank account!)
Rape Crisis Federation, St
Thomas's Centre, Ardwick
Green North, Manchester, M12
6FZ.



Violence Against Women, I spoke to a local radio journalist. We were talking about the march, and she suddenly interrupted me: 'but your march isn't just about violence against women, is it?'. I was thrown, I paused, and then the light dawned. Rape, sexual harassment, sexual assault and sexual abuse, were not 'violence' in her mind. It became apparent to me then that something had gone seriously wrong. In the months that have followed, I have realised that this is a common perception, that for much of the media and many individuals domestic violence is domestic violence; rape is rape; sexual abuse is sexual abuse; and they all live in separate places, never meeting and never connecting. Where is the feminist voice to put this right?

Meanwhile, the last year has seen a number

of high profile rape cases and plenty of media comment about women getting a raw deal in court. Last summer there was an outcry when a woman was cross examined for days on end, by the man who raped her, wearing the same clothes as he had when he raped her. By the time you read this, there may well have been other atrocities.

What strikes me, on each of these occasions, is that there is a sad lack of a radical feminist organisation who can take the issues up, and ensure they're not forgotten. I ask myself again, what has happened to campaigns about rape?

So, it seems timely to revisit rape, to look back at earlier campaigns and at the changes women called for in the past, to review how much has been achieved, and to try to find a way ahead.

Now, I wasn't involved in activism until the late 80s, but I know that in the 70s there were lots of feminist actions on rape. Concerns about rape were part of what motivated 'Reclaim the Night' marches (and come to think of it, why don't we have those any more?) and Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) groups. Courts were picketed when judges made offensive comments — now, we just seem to shrug our shoulders. And this happened sometime in the 1980s, somehow rape stopped being a priority.

In the early years of the 1970s, women began to get together to set up rape crisis centres (RCCs) around the country. The women who set these groups up knew that attitudes and legal responses to rape needed changing, and in the early years many undertook some form of campaigning and/or public education work. Funding has been an ongoing problem, some local authorities have provided (limited) funding to their RCC, but others consistently refuse to, and there is no statutory requirement to provide support to rape victims. Consequently, most RCCs have become dominated by the effort to support women. In 1984 the London Rape Crisis Centre published *Sexual Violence: The Reality for Women*, in which they list 'what we do' (pp.122-126), noticeably campaigning is not on the list. Since then, of course, London RCC have had severe funding problems, and the continued existence of the group is a tribute to women's determination to provide support to other women, no matter what.

I worked in a rape crisis group for five years, and I know that women in rape crisis groups

work very, very hard. However, women contacting us often complained about how long it took to get through on the phone, and were very (reasonably) disappointed when they heard that there was a waiting list to see someone face-to-face. The group I was part of always wanted to have a campaigning profile, but it just never seemed possible to spare the time.

Until this year, British RCCs were entirely autonomous, with no national office or national workers. However, a national federation has recently been launched covering England and Wales, and co-ordination is developing in Scotland. It would be wonderful to see that federation take up the task of campaigning for change once again, and the initial signs are encouraging.

For most of the 1980s (and into the 90s) virtually the only consistent voice in debates about rape has been Women Against Rape. WAR are a small group, part of the Wages for Housework network, based at the Kings Cross Women's Centre. Unfortunately WAR have never been interested in making links with other groups or organisations and from the stories women have told me, I gather that their actions destroyed the emerging Marital Rape Campaign, in the early 1980s. Looking back it is particularly sad that the Marital Rape Campaign group folded, since it had the basis for forming a powerful coalition between Rape Crisis, Women's Aid and other groups such as Rights of Women.

Whatever the exact causes, by the end of the 1980s rape had become an 'unfashionable' issue for campaigners, and it is clear from the success of Justice for Women that these days campaigns work best when one group of women dedicate themselves to it, and others (those providing services) can link in. The only exception to the feminist silence around rape in the 1990s has been the Zero Tolerance (ZT) Campaign, which has made rape a central theme in their public education materials. But even here many local authorities have tried to persuade ZT (unsuccessfully) to let them run only the domestic violence elements, and some who have run the campaign have publicly represented it as a 'domestic violence' campaign.

And now for the good news — in November 1996, at the International Conference on Violence, Abuse and Women's Citizenship, a new campaign on rape began to emerge. This group (provisionally called Campaign to End

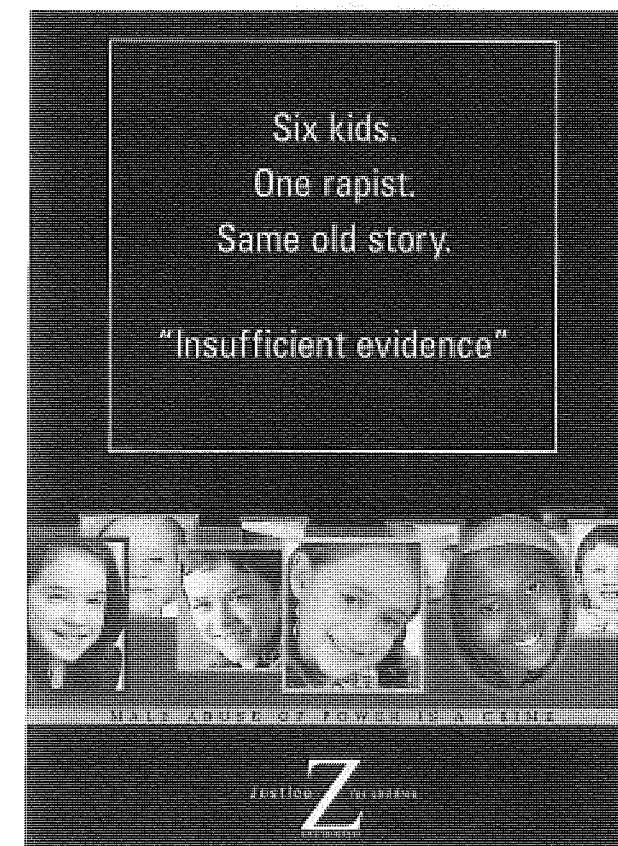
Rape) have decided to begin by focusing on the law and so, in what follows, I will concentrate on the legal process; because that is where the public (or at least media) focus is; and because there is so much scope for change and improvement.

Changing the law, changing the world

It is easy to see that changing the law does not change the world. We have an Equal Opportunities Act, but we surely don't have equal opportunities. To get real equal treatment we need to see a major shift in attitudes to women and work. To get justice for women who have been raped, we need to see a similar shift in attitudes about what rape is, who rapists are, and who can be raped, where and in what circumstances. In short, we need to change the world.

But how do we change the world? That, of course is a vexed question, and I am not going to discuss the likelihood of revolution in the foreseeable future. However, even discounting an armed struggle there may well be as many answers to the question 'how?' as there are T&S readers!

Some of those answers might include things



like: lobbying political parties, trade unions and employers; public education and education in schools and colleges; getting the media to cover the issues responsibly and so on. Changing the law in itself does not necessarily achieve any of these other things, but a public campaign around the law on rape could influence each of these other areas, in the same way as Justice for Women's work has, for women who kill abusive men.

In 1989 Rights of Women published an excellent book, *Sexual Violence and the Law*, which explains how the law works, reviews it (as it was then) and discusses possible reforms. An updated version would be an invaluable resource for everyone who cares about rape and the law. In looking at possible changes, the authors acknowledge they are drawing heavily on Jennifer Temkin's *Rape and the Legal Process*. Both books look at piecemeal and radical reforms, and before we see what those reforms were, I want to consider these different approaches to law reform.

In one leap or bit by bit?

There can be a real tension amongst campaigners interested in reforming the law (in various areas) between those who think that it is best to proceed little by little, in a piecemeal fashion and those who want to throw out the rule book and start again, with radical rewritings. So, we have returned to the same question of how to change the world, and to the same tension between gradual change, and revolution.

Piecemeal reform is arguably more achievable as it does not involve any fundamental change in the legal process, and this has been strongly argued since, in England and Wales particularly, we have a legal process and institutions which are adept at resisting radical change. Yet we have seen radical legal changes this century, most clearly in our membership of the European Community, which has meant that (admittedly only after over 20 years of membership) the English courts have had to admit that final legal authority (in limited areas) has now been handed over to the European Court. So, it seems reasonable to ask, what creates radical change? In the case of membership of the EC, the answers seem to be economic and political pressures, including (initially) public opinion.

It seems possible then that radical change can, at least in part, be created out of public opinion. However, if we keep in mind the broad

aims of a campaign to change the law, which I have already discussed, then a campaign for radical reform has a further advantage. It enables campaigners to open up a wide-ranging debate about what is wrong with the current system, and thus enable the public to know just how different the geography of real rape is from the myth laden version they have been led to believe from childhood.

Having said this, maybe we need to reconsider the definition of 'piecemeal' reform. The liberalising reforms of the 1960s included the legislation on abortion and homosexuality. Both those laws made immense differences in many women and men's lives at the time and since; they can be said to have changed the world, albeit in a limited way. Debates about when and how to address the law form one of the major themes in feminist jurisprudence. Some women argue that to create and enact laws which reflect women's interests and experiences is a form of feminist activism, which whilst changing the law, transforms it at the same time. Making feminist law challenges the power of men to define and regulate women's lives and experiences.

Rape in Marriage

One of the piecemeal reforms which the ROW book discussed was that 'husbands who rape their wives should no longer be exempt from liability for rape' (p51). This of course was an area where what Professor Glanville Williams has termed 'our warrior feminists' (which I think he imagines to be an insult!) fought long and hard — and won. The rule was that married men could not rape their wives, since marriage took away the woman's right to withhold consent. This was defended by men like Glanville Williams with arguments such as that, 'a charge of rape is too powerful (and even self-destructive) a weapon to put into the wife's hands' (p206). At the culmination of a long line of cases, which gradually eroded the old rule, the House of Lords eventually decided in 1991 that rape in marriage was indeed a crime. This has since been enshrined in statute, within the new definition of rape in the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act. So, radical feminist campaigning did create a (piecemeal) reform of this part of the criminal law.

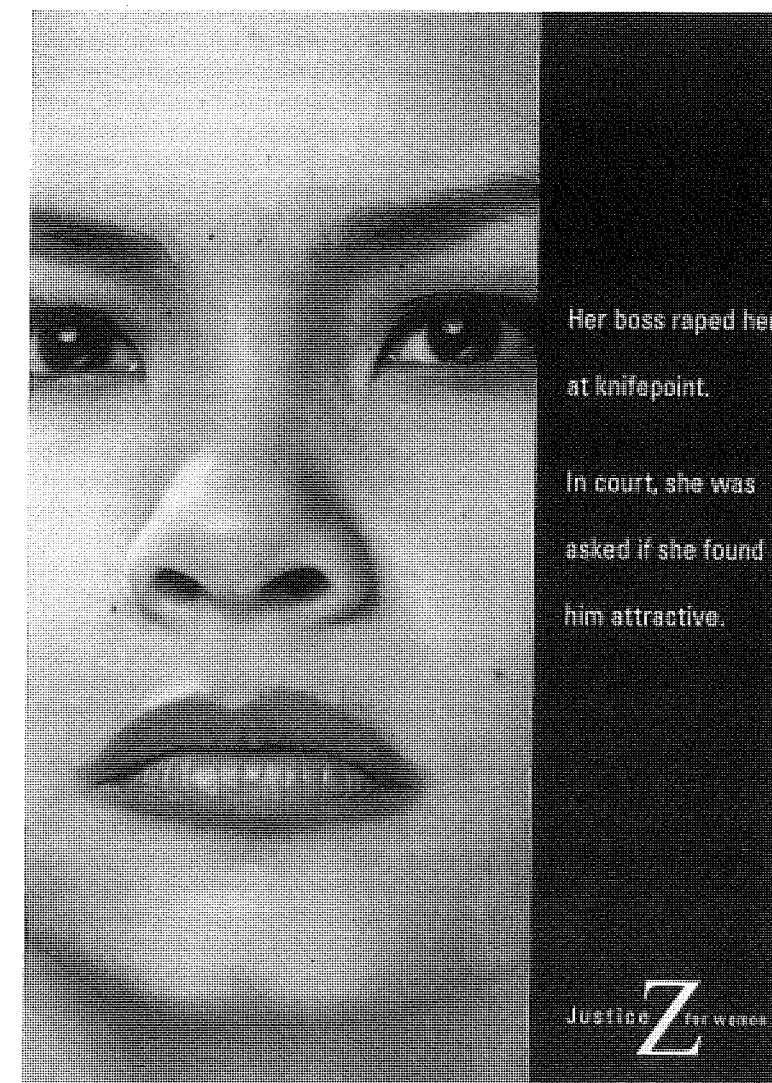
Does this matter? Has it made any difference to women? It certainly has not meant that women are flooding the courts with cases

against their (rapist) husbands. It is well documented that very few women report rapes, even fewer actually get to court and fewer still actually see their assailants convicted. And finally, even where there is a conviction, a number of these successful cases are overturned on appeal. It is also well documented that the closer the relationship between the rapist and his victim, the less likely he is to be convicted. The law still imagines that rape is a myth, where a (virginal, pure) woman is attacked by a (perverted, 'strange') stranger. This being so, it is far from easy for a woman raped by her husband to consider going to court. Nevertheless, women have, and on occasions they have been successful.

But, for radical feminists, increasing convictions is not the only point of legal reform. It matters that women, and men, now know that rape in marriage is a crime. It can help a woman see the reality of an abusive situation. It may even deter some men (an optimistic view, I know).

But could more be done? The new campaign could talk about rape in marriage, about links between rape and other forms of domestic violence, about the ways in which these can be interlinked in women's lives. About rape by ex-husbands and ex-boyfriends, and how these can form part of stalking and harassment campaigns. Discussions of this kind are what we need if we are ever to rid ourselves of the continued mythology of rape. In fact, I believe that we need to see the rape in marriage battle, as ongoing, because whilst we have a law that says it is a crime, the courts are still reluctant to take it seriously. Just one example is a report of a 1995 case I came across. Here, the man had appealed against his conviction for *four specimen counts* of rape and assault on his former wife, during their marriage. He won his appeal, because 'special care was needed when considering general allegations of sexual misconduct by an estranged spouse because such allegations were easy to make but difficult to refute'. So, the courts are, it seems, tempted to believe that merely saying rape in marriage can (sometimes) be a crime, is enough. It is not.

The most recent stage in the rape in marriage story happened this year when the man who had been found guilty of rape in 1991, by the House of Lords, went to the European Court of Human Rights. He claimed that his human rights had been violated as he had been convict-



Her boss raped her
at knifepoint.

In court, she was
asked if she found
him attractive.

Justice
Z
for women

ed of a crime which had not been unlawful, at the time he committed the act. Thankfully the court rejected his appeal, saying that the change in the law had been reasonably foreseeable, and that the abandonment of the old rule was 'in conformity... with a civilised concept of marriage'²¹

These two cases however raise another issue which crops up time and again in relation to the reform of law on rape, and which has various implications: civil liberties. The justification for comments such as the one in the Mayer case, that rape allegations are easy to make, is that it is seen as crucially important that a defendant's civil liberties are not infringed (as they are where a wrongful conviction

takes place). The traditional role of law reformers (on the political left) in this country has been to uphold those accused of crimes. However, for feminists seeking reform of the law around sexual and physical violence, the crucial issue is to ensure that prosecutions are conducted rigorously. In this respect, the Justice for Women campaign has been unusual for feminists, as it supports the civil liberties of defendants, making it more palatable to liberal legal minds than a campaign on rape could ever be. In fact those who are currently calling for the law on rape to be tightened up are, the police, the Home Secretary and Victim Support — not the allies which a feminist campaign would seek. The police and the government are, of course, coming from a law and order perspective, which differs fundamentally from a feminist one and neither (even if we have a Labour government by the time you read this) will be interested in radical legal reforms.

The New Campaign

The new Campaign to End Rape is aiming to strike at the heart of rape law with its demands for change. There are three issues which the campaign intends to use to open up discussions. These are:

- A demand for an investigation of the attrition rates in rape;
- A radical change of emphasis in the meaning of consent, in rape law;
- The introduction of 'Special prosecutors'.

NO WITNESS,
NO CRIME,
NO ACTION,
NO JUSTICE.

Justice **Z** for women and children

Attrition Rates

The attrition rate is the fall-out rate in the legal process. So, whilst official statistics now show that around 5,000 rapes are reported each year, only around 8% (400) of these result in the man being convicted. And if we look at the trend in recent years then it becomes clear that this attrition rate is worsening. Back in 1977, only 1,000 or so rapes were reported but over 300 resulted in conviction (30%). The increase in reporting is the result of feminist campaigns to enable women to name their experiences and feel entitled to redress, and efforts by the police to improve their treatment of women. But that increase means there are, in fact, now more women being badly let down by a criminal justice system.

There are problems at each stage of the process. Research reported in Sue Lees' *Carnal Knowledge: Rape on Trial* shows that 40% of rape reports are still 'no-crimes' by the police, that is, no further action is taken. Police detection rates are abysmal, so most stranger rapists are never found. But an increasing problem is with the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) who are under increasing pressure to screen out cases where the likelihood of conviction is below 50%. Many cases which the police think are strong evidentially are dropped by the CPS, and never get to court. Then there is the acquittal rate in court.

Towards the end of last year the Home Office announced that there was indeed going to be an investigation into these trends (how's that for successful campaigning!) but we need to keep on talking about this issue, so that those in power know that just saying they're doing something about it isn't enough.

Consent

Perhaps the best outcome of the attrition rate investigation would be the setting up of a panel to look at rape law in general. This was the route through which radical reform has been achieved in parts of Australia and Canada. One reform of particular interest is the redefinition of consent in Victoria, Australia. Consent is the issue which many rape trials turn on since, if it can be shown that intercourse took place, and the man has been identified then he has no other defence left but to say 'she wanted it'. And it is because of the way consent is defined in law that women's past sexual history is often used by the defence — to try to suggest that she

would have consented, and she's not trustworthy. So, the reform in Victoria is interesting because it turns consent around, so that the man has to prove that he sought and got consent. He has to be able to show that something the woman did or said positively made him believe she consented, and the law expressly says that her sexual history is not to be taken as evidence of whether she consented. The Campaign to End Rape will demand that this model of consent is introduced into English law. This would reverse the way in which coercive heterosexuality has been legitimised in rape law.

Special Prosecutors

What is also clear from the attrition rates is that cases still fall out of the system at all stages. Many women still report rape only to find that the police don't believe them, or the CPS say there isn't enough evidence to proceed. For other women the case goes ahead alright but they don't hear any more, until they see in the local paper that it's due to come to court; or they find out that the man has been released on bail by bumping into him at the bus-stop. There is no one whose statutory responsibility it is to keep women informed (despite this being considered a right under the Victim's Charter), and women reporting rape have no right to meet the CPS lawyer preparing the case or the barrister the CPS instructs to prosecute the case. Then, when they get to court, the prosecuting barrister more or less ignores them, and doesn't seem to defend them when the defence suggests that they did consent after all. In short, there is an awful lot wrong with how women are treated by the people within the criminal justice system and the best that women can hope for is support from someone who's willing to try to stand up for them, perhaps from Rape Crisis.

To the criminal justice system, the woman is just the 'complainant', a witness, not a party to the case (that's between the man and the state) and once she's reported, and had a medical, and made her statement, then her part is over, until the trial. One way of changing this might be to enable women to have their own lawyer at trial. This was suggested back in 1987 by Jennifer Temkin, and it apparently works well in a number of Scandinavian countries. But their legal systems are very different to our own, which could be one reason why it's never been taken up. The Campaign to End Rape is choosing to prioritise a call for another change, which should improve conviction rates, and

mean that women are treated with more respect. In the US (and other countries with similar legal systems to ours) some district attorney's offices have what they call 'special prosecutors' who concentrate on crimes of violence against women and children. If these lawyers were introduced, within the CPS, they would need training in the reality of rape (and other sexual violence) but once that is achieved, they could fight for justice for the state, whilst working with the women complainants.

A contrasting example will illustrate the difference this might make. Last summer I was doing a piece of work tracking a case where charges had been laid. This meant spending time in a local CPS office studying the case files. One day at about 4pm one of the lawyers rushed into the office, saying 'Who's free tomorrow, we've just remembered this rape case!' Compare that with the accounts of Alice Vachss in *Sex Crimes*. She was a special prosecutor in New York, and her account illustrates the lengthy contact they always had with women and children when preparing cases, and the importance that was accorded to allocating a prosecutor who would build confidence in the woman or child before the trial. The 'performance indicator' which she set for the Sex Crimes Unit was the number of so-called 'unprosecutable' cases where they got convictions.

Another advantage of special prosecutors, if we can influence how they are selected, would be that it would enable more feminist lawyers to prosecute. Traditionally 'radical' lawyers have eschewed prosecution in Britain, but this would provide a route to prosecution which would not be perceived to compromise integrity in the way it currently does.

Where to now?

So, where do we go from here? The new campaign is getting started, and anyone who wants to be involved should contact the address at the end of this piece. Hopefully the Campaign to End Rape will lead public opinion in the way that Justice for Women continues to do, and eventually achieve some legal changes. But we all need to learn from the lessons of the past, the rape in marriage story shows that campaigning doesn't end with legal change. We need to stick around, and monitor the implementation so that things don't just slide back down to the level of the rape myths. □

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Notes

¹ R v Maher, *The Times* 17.2.1995, as reported in *Current Law Digest*, March 1995.

² SW v UK and CR v UK cases 47/1994/494/576 and 48/1994/494/577, as reported in *Family Law Today* January 1996, p.9.

This Article Degrades Advertisements

Why has there been so little apparent feminist response to the deliberate revival of blatant sexism in advertising? Has the focus on the relationship of representation to 'real' violence made us lose sight of the need to protest against the 'symbolic' violence done to us by sexual objectification in the media? Delilah Campbell calls for women to arm themselves with spray paint and stickers.

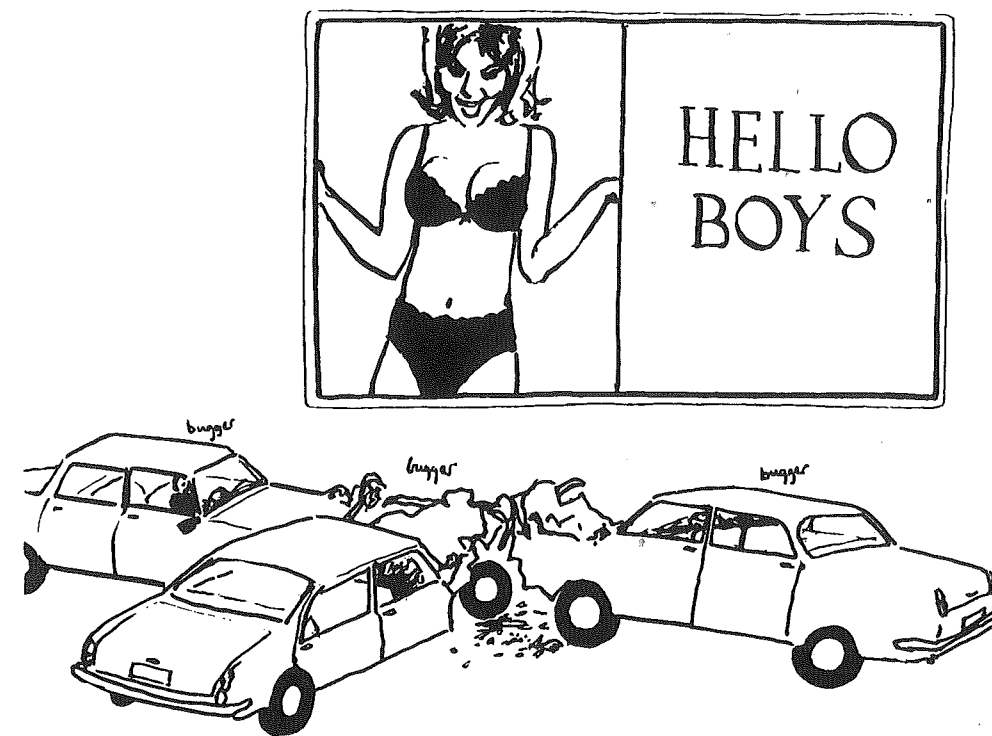
When I first saw the infamous Wonderbra advert with a semi-naked supermodel posed over the line 'HELLO, BOYS', I thought it might be a parody. It was certainly offensive, but at the same time it was ludicrous: the unfortunate woman was posed in such a way that she seemed to be addressing the line to her own pneumatic breasts. Others saw comic potential in it too. The makers of Kaliber alcohol-free lager bought up advertising space next to the Wonderbra ad, where they displayed a poster showing Billy Conolly clutching two bottles of Kaliber over the line 'HELLO, GIRLS'.

British advertising, at least the high production values stuff that you see on TV, at the cinema and on street hoardings, is widely admired for its subtlety and cleverness. The Kaliber piss-take is one example of this tradition. What temporarily confused me about the Wonderbra ad was the very fact that it was not clever, not witty, not ironic or a joke. I was looking for a subtext that wasn't there. With

'HELLO, BOYS', what you saw was what you got: essentially a pair of larger than life-sized breasts. It was just straight-down-the-line sexism, yet the advertisers and the trade press judged it highly effective in 'raising brand awareness' and increasing sales. There were even reports of traffic accidents as male drivers passing the ad found themselves unable to keep their eyes on the road—though since men are at best a small minority of the bra buying public, it seems odd to claim this as a commercial triumph.

Effective or not, the crude and blatant 'tits out for the lads' approach—especially to a product with an overwhelmingly female market—is something I had thought was obsolete in British advertising. It's not that sexism per se had disappeared, more that it had become less overt, less (forgive me) transparent. Feminism, expressed both in organised campaigns and individual complaints about advertisements which degraded women, had

All cartoons taken from Jacky Fleming *Hello Boys* (Penguin, 1996)



Jacky Fleming

contributed to a perception that straight-down-the-line sexism was no longer acceptable, and even worse, no longer 'cool'.

Back with a vengeance

Yet as we hurtle towards the millennium, crassly sexist advertising seems to be back with a vengeance. A few months after 'HELLO, BOYS', there was a new bra on the block: you couldn't walk down the street without encountering ads for the Gossard Glossies range of underwear, whose poster showed a woman in black lingerie reclining in simulated ecstasy in what appears to be a haystack, over the line 'Who says a woman can't get pleasure from something soft?'

This does gesture towards the hallowed traditions of British advertising: if 'HELLO, BOYS' is for Sun-readers, the Gossard slogan requires at least the intellectual capacities of an Express-reader to make any sense of it. Unfortunately, a number of readings make sense, and you are left wondering if the advertiser could possibly have intended any of them. I passed this ad in the company of several women

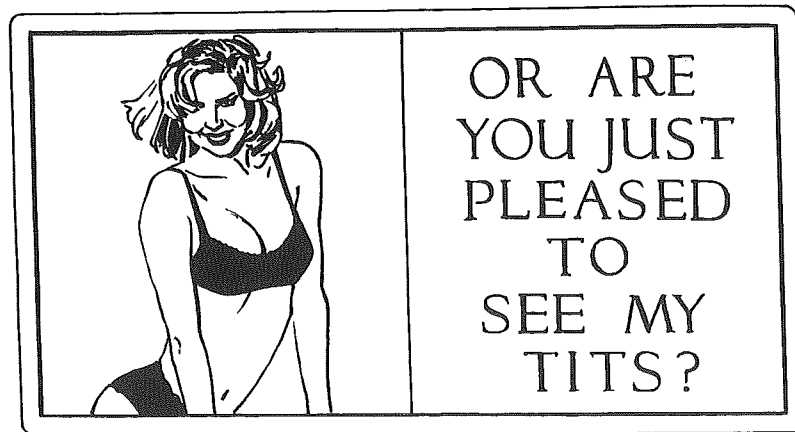
friends, whose (spontaneous) comments were instructive. One said that whoever devised it had obviously never had sex out of doors: haystacks were a particular non-starter in the comfort-and-pleasure stakes. A visiting American friend was astonished by the ad (nothing so risqué would appear on a billboard in the USA), and drily remarked that it would be bound to attract complaints—not just from feminists and Mary Whitehouse types but also from the Male Impotence League.

This last comment might well be on target, for at one level the text presumably is intended as a sly dig at the male member. True, the idea that women are turned on by their own underwear is not much less offensive than the idea that only a rock-hard willy can satisfy their desires. But there is an element of 'men: who needs 'em?', which the advertisers doubtless imagined would appeal to post-feminist chicks. The visual image, on the other hand, is unambiguously for the lads. If the slogan is a failed attempt at subtlety and wit, the scantily-clad-woman-in-a-haystack shot has all the wit and subtlety of a brick through a window.

The Wonderbra and Gossard campaigns attracted comment in the media and financial pages under the vaguely amusing heading of 'Bra Wars'. The makers of women's underwear were seen to be battling it out, not merely for dominance of the market, but for recognition of their 'daring' in mounting controversial advertising campaigns. In that context the question is not who can sell more bras, but who can go furthest in terms of sexual explicitness and female objectification. Certainly the attempt to create controversy met with some success, in that both campaigns triggered a significant number of complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA). It is discouraging, however, to discover who these complaints were from, and what they were about.

Taste and Decency 1, Feminism 0

It needs to be said at once that the ASA is a pretty feeble institution from a feminist point of view. If it thinks a complaint has some foundation it will ask the company responsible for the ad to reply to the complaint, and then adjudicate between the contending arguments. This is most straightforward when the complaint alleges that an ad is making false claims (there has for example been an ongoing saga about men challenging the factual accuracy of statistics on child abuse which appeared on Zero Tolerance posters in a number of British cities). However, most ads offensive to feminists are not making factual claims at all ('HELLO, BOYS' is not a 'claim') and in these cases there's a lot of to-ing and fro-ing about 'community standards' and whether complaints are 'representative' of public opinion.



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Quite often when ads are withdrawn or modified in response to complaints, it's not because the ASA has exercised its powers to demand this kind of action, but because the company, or the industry lobby it is part of, has recognised a potential public relations problem and decided to back down before the ASA can censure them. More cynically, one might point out that a media furore about a controversial ad is such good publicity for the product concerned, the company can well afford to withdraw the ad (thus getting not only a lot of free media attention, but also points for being 'responsible').

On its own, it is unlikely the ASA's censure is a major deterrent to anything: but it does seem that companies use their awareness of what issues people are raising with it as a sort of litmus test for how far they can go before there's a public outcry, and there is peer pressure within industries (which would always rather regulate themselves than risk stricter independent regulation) to stay on the 'safe' side of the line. For instance, companies are aware that they will not get away with advertising alcohol and cigarettes in ways that are likely to appeal to children, or with using sexualised images of children (as Calvin Klein was censured for doing). These are cases in which the ASA believes 'community standards' are very clear, and where they have some history of being enforced.

Sexism, however, is a much greyer area. With the notable exception of concerns about child pornography, feminist concerns are not often thought to represent the concerns of the community at large. And while one obvious reason for this is of course ideological—anti-feminist prejudice—another, regrettably, is that there aren't enough feminist complaints.

In the 'bra wars' case, for instance, the ASA received more complaints about the Gossard 'haystack' ad than about 'HELLO, BOYS'—800 as opposed to 53. I find this depressing, for it is clear the perception that one is 'worse' than the other has nothing to do with feminist politics. What gave Gossard the edge in perceived offensiveness was its use of verbal innuendo—that is, the veiled reference to penises. Some complainants said it was 'embarrassing' to have to explain this to children.

The ASA did not force Gossard to withdraw the ad, since it took the view that most of the

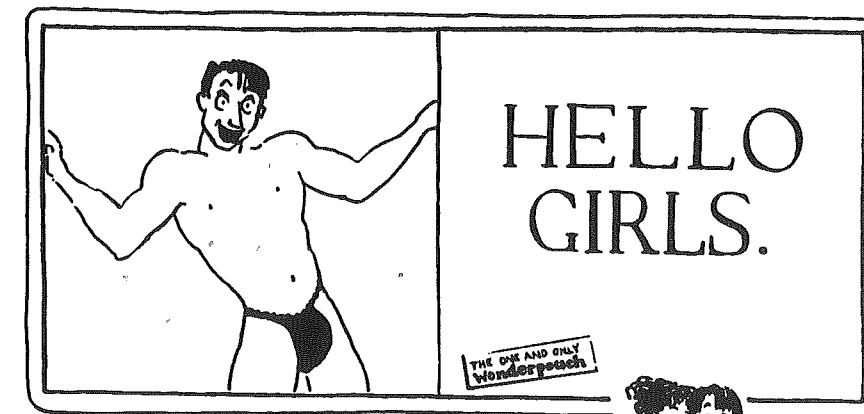
complaints had been 'orchestrated by the press': specifically, the right-wing columnist Lynda Lee-Potter had urged readers to complain, and some of those who did so apparently hadn't even seen the offending poster. However, in view of the public outcry, the company decided to change the slogan to 'When a firework is smouldering, stand well back'. The sub-pornographic image remained exactly the same.

Not only do I think that the complaints achieved nothing from a feminist point of view, I find it ironic that the penis-allusion should have been singled out for criticism, since it was the only feature of the ad which departed even minimally from the straightforwardly sexist script, by poking fun at the lads and their idea of sexual prowess. Personally I would find it 'embarrassing' to explain to a child, especially a girl, why a woman in her underwear should be equated metaphorically with a smouldering firework. The two slogans have equally offensive implications regarding women's sexuality, and these are also blatant in the visual image.

Double Standards Agency

Whereas the ASA took a relaxed approach to the 'bra wars' ads, the idea that similar techniques might be used to sell men's underwear got their knickers in a right old twist. In the autumn of 1996 the Authority's Advisory Committee on Advertising Practice issued a warning to the Brass Monkeys underwear company about a campaign for men's briefs that was clearly inspired by the success of the Wonderbra posters. The offending ads featured a male model wearing the product alongside slogans like 'LOIN KING' and 'FULL METAL PACKET'. Brass Monkeys protested that the committee was operating with a sexist double standard. If 'HELLO, BOYS' was OK, why weren't their ads? A logical enough question, to which the 'official' response can only be described as a load of old bollocks.

The committee replied that the campaign 'focus[ed] on the groin area' (no, really?) and objectified the male model by not showing his face. By contrast, the committee explained: 'Eva Herzigova [the Wonderbra model] is shown in full body shot, and the copy lines [i.e. 'HELLO, BOYS'] endow her with a particular personality and sense of humour'. Pressed to elaborate, the committee's spokesman [*sic*] said: 'The authority reacts to prevailing standards. To some extent we live in a sexist society, and to some



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extent we reflect that'. What this really means is: 'we think it's acceptable to show women as sex objects, but comparable representations of men really upset us'.

There could be no clearer demonstration of the problem with taking 'community standards' as a measure of offensiveness. Only in a community where sexism is wholly unremarkable could copy lines and facial expressions that make a woman complicit in her own objectification be seen as endowing her with 'personality' and a 'sense of humour'. The committee not only denied the obvious parallel between the Wonderbra and Brass Monkeys campaigns, they also overlooked the sense in which the two cases are *not* parallel: the depiction of men as sex objects is exceptional whereas the sexual objectification of women is pervasive, and not confined to media representations. For feminists, that's a reason to be more concerned about 'HELLO, BOYS' than 'LOIN KING'; for the ASA, apparently, the exact opposite is true.

This was another case where the ASA stopped short of demanding the withdrawal of the ad; a compromise solution was reached whereby the modern media equivalent of a figleaf was superimposed on the model's genitals—to wit, the Brass Monkeys company logo. Since the function of a logo is to draw the viewer's eye, it is unclear why this would be the logical solution to the problem of 'focusing on the groin area'. Nor does it seem logical to address complaints about objectifying the model by figuratively branding his genitals. One can only conclude that the ASA are not very knowledgeable about the medium they police: more generally, to judge by the inanity of their comments, they're a few rivets short of a full me(n)tal packet.

A new media sexism?

These bra adverts could be seen as part of a new media sexism, which is marked not only by the return to degrading images of women, but also by the celebration of 'laddish' behaviour in many popular media genres. It is deeply depressing to discover, for example, that one of the most popular television comedy shows at present is the repellent *Men Behaving Badly*. If you've never seen this programme, the title tells you everything you need to know about it: *Men Being Sexist* would be equally accurate. And again, what's novel about this is not the sexism in itself—the past ten years or so have hardly been a golden age of nonsexist television—but the crudity of it. It seems frankly amazing that sexism could become the central theme of a 1990s sitcom. It's as if we had suddenly gone back to the days when racism featured as the 'comic' premise in shows like *Love Thy Neighbour* and *Mind Your Language*. It is unimaginable that those programmes could be conceived and produced today. But sexism, it seems, is still fun for all the family.

Is the 'new sexism' any different from the old sexism? I would say, yes: it is more self-conscious and knowing. Two decades of feminist influence on culture cannot be simply erased, and the new sexism, therefore, is always in some sense a deliberate reaction against feminism. This is explicit in another notable example of the new sexism in advertising: one of a series of Guinness ads using the slogan 'Not everything in black and white makes sense'. This appropriates the feminist slogan 'a woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle'. It begins with a scene showing a world in which women have apparently taken over men's roles: then there's a scene showing an empty maternity ward (feminism means there will be no more babies and the human race will die out). Finally, a large fish peddles by on a bicycle, and the 'Not everything...' line comes up on the screen.

This ad is an example of the 'clever' type: it makes the viewer work for the meaning. The sales message of all the ads in the campaign is that Guinness—which is black and white—does make sense, but that has to be inferred by contrast with a different proposition, that some other black and white thing does not make sense. In this particular ad it is feminism, and especially its claim that women do not need men, which is pegged as not making sense.

Thus: feminism is black and white (polarised, extreme, lacking in sophistication and balance) and feminism does not make sense. Clearly the new sexism does not have to be as crassly presented as it is in the bra ads or *Men Behaving Badly*. In the Guinness ad the medium is sophisticated, but the message, once you 'get it', remains crudely sexist and anti-feminist.

The fish on a bicycle ad also shows, as I said before, that the new sexism is not simply a return to the days when sexism in the media was normal and unremarkable. When sexist companies or advertisers produced sexist images and slogans 25 years ago, it was just something you did to sell products; early feminist objections were received with bewilderment by the industry, for the concept of 'sexism' had yet to sink into public consciousness. That is not the case today. The new sexism is highly aware of itself as sexism. It deliberately sets out to be offensive to feminist sensibilities, and expects to get brownie points for daring to depart from the po-faced orthodoxies of so-called 'political correctness'. That knowingness is what I find most objectionable about it. Another objectionable feature is the selectivity: not even the most daring advertiser or sitcom producer would dream of challenging 'po-faced orthodoxies' about disability or race (a Guinness ad showing some multicultural event like the Notting Hill carnival over the slogan 'Not Everything in Black and White Makes Sense' would never get off the drawing board, and if it did it would risk prosecution). In other words, this phenomenon is not just about pushing back the boundaries of taste and received opinion: it's specifically about making misogyny OK again.

Who sets the trend?

Advertisers say that they follow public opinion rather than leading it, which would suggest that the new sexism is a trend they have identified, and to which they are merely responding. Certainly they do extensive market research before launching a costly campaign. But I have to wonder who they do this research on; because to me it is striking—I will even admit to being quite surprised by it—how much a lot of very 'moderate' women detest the kinds of advertisements they are constantly bombarded with. My 18-21 year old women students, for example, generally shy away from the label 'feminist' and on many traditional feminist issues they are pretty apathetic, if not actively hostile to

feminist arguments. Yet the sexism they perceive in the media, and particularly in advertising, is the one issue capable of rousing them to fury. They hated the Wonderbra campaign; they also seem to loathe certain ads which are less crudely objectifying, like the 'Papa/Nicole' campaign for Renault cars. They resent the idea that the cutely vacuous 'Nicole' might be considered a role model for women of their age, and those who notice it are also uncomfortable with the hint of father/daughter incest.

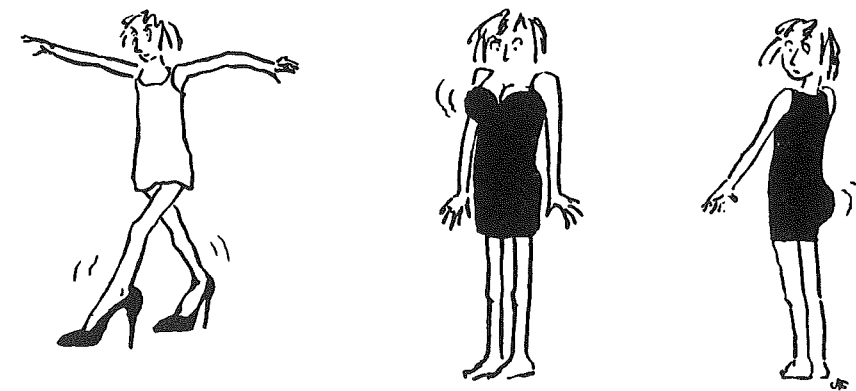
Survey after survey shows how typical these women's responses are. Women find the representation of their sex in advertising patronising, unrealistic and stereotypical, and they object to the way women's bodies are used to sell products. And yet the sexism continues in defiance of women's opinions. If advertisers are as responsive to market forces as they claim, why have they apparently got the female half of the market so wrong?

One possible answer is that advertising has very little to do with the 'real world', and certainly much less than it claims. Advertisers live in their own rarefied world: in that world, the new sexism/ antifeminism really is part of a trend, but it's a media-led or even media-created trend, which may not necessarily go very deep or last very long.

Where do such trends come from? Increasingly, from the fertile imaginations of so-called

'trend forecasters'. In the US, for example, one of the leading trend forecasters is a strange woman with the even stranger name of Faith Popcorn. Ms Popcorn (or she may be Dr Popcorn for all I know) has for some time made a handsome living out of advising companies and other people willing to pay for her predictions on what we will all be doing and feeling over the next decade, so that companies will be able to guess what kinds of things we will be wanting to buy. As a result, of course, we won't be able to buy anything else—it's rather like the weird and wonderful world of 'colour forecasting', whereby a group of international experts 'predicted' several years ago—or rather, decided—that all the clothes in the shops last summer would be orange or acid green. If that wasn't what you wanted to wear, tough. This kind of 'forecast' can never be wrong: the only question is how much orange and green clothing the consumer can be persuaded to buy on the grounds that it's 'in fashion'.

Emotions, identities and political positions can also be commodified and marketed as 'trends' (this is one thing I think the post-modernists are right about). In the 1980s, for instance, Faith Popcorn coined the term 'cocooning'. She predicted that yuppies would be so exhausted after their 14-hour days making six-figure salaries, they would want to 'cocoon': instead of going out they would stay at home, rent videos and get pizza delivered. (Good news,



The Multi Million Turnover Perpetually Shifting Female Erogerous Zone

then, for Pizza Hut and video shops.) Now, Faith is predicting something she calls 'the new hedonism'. Apparently we are all sick of being told that everything is bad for us, physically, spiritually or morally. It's going to be cool to eat huge steaks, drink alcohol and smoke cigars. It's also going to be cool to reject the idealistic and egalitarian philosophies that used to get in the way of enjoying full-on hedonism. So it's OK to admit that homeless beggars annoy you, and that your idea of heaven is ogling a 12-foot picture of Eva Poriskova in a Wonderbra. In fact, it's more than OK: it's a trend. And even if the vast majority of us remain untouched by the wisdom of Faith Popcorn and her ilk, those industries which live and die by their trendiness, advertising pre-eminent among them, will Faith-fully reflect what they read in the Popcorn Report.

Before we get too steamed up about this, and start muttering darkly about the 'backlash', I think we should remember that what it's really about is consumerism. It's about shifting steak and whisky and cigars and frilly knickers. As an indication of how people are really feeling or thinking, it may not be all that significant or profound. In a couple of years time we may all be encouraged to discover the 'new puritanism' or even the 'new feminism'—labels which will be as meaningless as 'cocooning' or the 'new hedonism'. What consumerism really requires is not that people should think or feel anything in particular, but that there should be continuous and fairly rapid change in what it's supposedly cool to think, and more importantly to buy. In other words I'm suggesting that the new sexism may not be as all-pervading and deeply rooted as it looks: perhaps it is just an invention of the media, with no firm foundation in the 'real world'.

Even if this is right, though, it's not a reason why we ought to just put up with it. On the contrary, the ease with which very crude forms of sexism have reasserted themselves in the media suggests to me that we have recently been putting up with far too much. There's another side to this story, which is about the decline of organised feminist campaigning around issues of representation. That is just as much a sign of the times as the new sexism itself.

Where have all the stickers gone?

There has never been a time when sexism wasn't pervasive in media representations. What has varied is how visibly this was contested.

Many T&S readers will remember when it was common to see sexist ads plastered with stickers which were public comments on their sexism: 'This ad degrades women', and suchlike. Spray painting feminist graffiti on ads was a similar if rather more risky form of direct action, the best results of which are immortalised on postcards that still sell well today.

What has happened to this kind of action? Did it come to be seen as trivial and pointless? To be sure, it didn't eradicate sexist ads (though graffitied billboards often embarrassed advertisers, and the offending image was usually removed at least temporarily). What it did do, though, was send a message, a bit like the recent Zero Tolerance campaigns: there are women out here who don't like this kind of shit and won't put up with it in silence. It was an attempt to create a climate of intolerance for something objectionable. At the same time it had a more playful side, displaying feminists' wit and ingenuity; as well as making the serious point that the ads were offensive, it often made them look ridiculous. Here was a kind of guerilla action which used the advertisers' own technique — the publishing and broadcasting of words and images to a mass audience — to oppose the advertisers' message. There was something very satisfying about this turning of the tables, and its 'unofficial' status enhanced its popular appeal.

Going out with a spray can to engage in illegal property damage was not the only option. Once upon a time there were feminist organisations whose members did the work of monitoring ads, systematically complaining about offensive ones and sending out newsletters to other women's organisations which encouraged them to add their own complaints to the pile. It was because of these feminist activities that watchdog bodies like the ASA and the Broadcasting Standards Council eventually recognised complaints of sexism as a possible cause for action against advertisers and media producers. As I said before, though, the volume of complaints these bodies receive about sexism nowadays appears to be depressingly small. It seems a pity that, having established the principle that sexism can be subject to official censure, feminists are no longer sufficiently organised to produce the complaints that might activate the mechanism.

I have no idea how many of the 53 people who complained to the ASA about 'HELLO,

BOYS' were feminists deploring its sexism; but even if they all were, 53 is a paltry figure. It compares badly with the 800 who were moved to complain about the Gossard 'something soft' poster, many of whom did so at the instigation of a right-wing tabloid and on nonfeminist grounds of taste and decency. I hope and believe that it also compares badly with the number of feminist women who must actually have seen the ad and found it offensive. Our spirit is willing, but our organisation is weak. Why? No doubt there are many reasons, not least the difficulty of sustaining any and all activist projects in the current economic and cultural climate, but it seems to me there are two points in particular which merit discussion among radical feminists.

Academic obfuscation?

One point concerns the move in recent feminist theory away from what's become known in shorthand as 'images of women' criticism. The politics of representation are still on the syllabus of your average women's studies or media studies course, but they are discussed by academics nowadays at such a rarefied level, it seems crude and unsophisticated to be saying things like 'this ad degrades women'. (All women? Which women? What does 'degrade' mean? Is there only one reading of a representation?) It isn't radical feminist activists who have made the move I am talking about, but many women new to feminism, particularly if they've encountered this topic in an academic context, may have trouble reconciling their gut feelings about, say, the 'Papa and Nicole' ads, with any kind of theory they believe to be intellectually respectable. This tends to reduce their objections to silence.

As it happens, I myself disagree with the idea that analysing representations is a straightforward matter of reading off the meaning (for every reader/viewer) from the overt, literal content. But the new media sexism is itself so crude, it does not require a massive theoretical apparatus to analyse how it works: on the contrary, this often amounts to mere obfuscation, the use of a sledgehammer to crack a nut. If I wanted to use the language of media studies, I might point out that the 'what you see is what you get' approach of the 'bra wars' ads deliberately solicits a crude and literal reading: it's a reaction against clever-clever, difficult-to-decode traditions of advertising. To say that is



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already, admittedly, to go beyond simple content analysis: part of the meaning lies not in the image itself, but in the contrast with the more 'sophisticated' images we have come to expect of the genre. But for exactly that reason, we might just as well call a breast a breast. By refusing to state the obvious, we are falling into their trap: applying high theory to a text like 'HELLO, BOYS' merely allows the boys at the advertising agency to have a bloody good laugh at pretentious academics and humourless feminists who always miss the point. In Wonderbra's case, two of them. (See what I mean?)

Anyway, analysing how representations work is not the same thing as taking issue with them. 'This ad degrades women' may not get you a Ph.D, but it still has resonance as a political slogan. Politically speaking, the point is less to explain media sexism than to mobilise the widest possible resistance to it. You choose the strategy that works.

No violence = silence?

The other point which I want to raise as a

possible contributory factor in the decline of 'this ad degrades women'-style campaigns concerns the question of violence against women. For all that there is much still to do, raising public consciousness about the prevalence and seriousness of male violence is one of the achievements of the last 20-odd years that feminists can be most proud of. As well as having effects in such obvious areas as courts, policing and social services, it has profoundly affected the way the politics of representation are talked about, not only among feminists but also in the wider public sphere. But if this has been in one way an important feminist gain, in another way, I want to suggest, it has had unforeseen negative effects.

The precise relationship of 'real-life' violence to sexist (and especially pornographic) representations is, obviously, a contentious issue, within feminism as well as outside it. But the point is, it is an issue. It is something which now has to be considered routinely by mainstream media, and by the bodies which regulate their output. It has also become the most obvious ground on which particular representations — advertising campaigns, TV shows, films — may be vulnerable to feminist objections. Because of our success in getting violence against women on the agenda, the easiest feminist argument to win when it comes to offensive representations (which is not to say it is easy in absolute terms, or that we've always won it) is the argument that a representation incites, or at least condones, sexual violence and abuse. The broadcasting watchdogs do quite regularly censure graphic or titillating depictions of rape or battery; the ASA has forced the withdrawal of some posters and

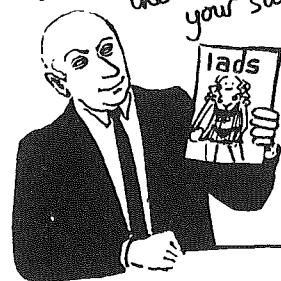
slogans which sexualised young girls.

So far, so good: but there's a downside. Success in getting people to take the problem of violent representations seriously seems to have had the effect of taking the heat off what we might call 'lower level' sexism: images and words which objectify and demean, which are 'only' offensive, not putatively dangerous. To some extent, this is because the establishment types who dominate regulatory bodies are not very bright: they can only keep one feminist idea in their heads at a time (I base this conclusion on having once had a conversation with the British film censor James Ferman, who showed a clear understanding of and concern about the 'inciting violence' argument, but total incomprehension in relation to sexist representations more broadly defined). I suppose that if they really can't deal with more than one idea, that idea might as well be that depictions of eroticised violence against women are unacceptable and indeed dangerous as public entertainment. But while we may not be able to legislate against other people's stupidity, I think it's worth asking how far we ourselves might have unintentionally contributed to the perception of 'non-violent' sexist representations as not really much of a problem.

Killing Us Softly: Symbolic violence

That might seem to be a rather unfair question. More than a decade ago, in the days of the so-called 'Sex Wars', a version of it was often put to feminist anti-pornography campaigners by those who called themselves 'pro-sex' and defended porn: 'why are you so obsessed with a few dirty mags when the "respectable" mass media are awash with the most insultingly sexist images?'. One answer to this was that on the

You seem to have hit on the right formula for a new men's magazine in the 90s. What's the secret of your success?



Well, I just had a HUNCH that pictures of women with no clothes on would capture the imagination of men today. It was a risk but it seems to have paid off

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contrary, anti-pornography feminists made a point of demonstrating the connections between porn and other genres: in the various consciousness-raising slideshows that circulated, it was standard practice to have a slide showing an image from 'hard' pornography along with one showing how that same image had been slightly toned down and translated into, say, an advert or a record cover.

An even more pertinent answer was that sexual objectification was itself typically analysed as a form of violence: symbolic violence. A Page 3 pin-up or a Wonderbra ad is not going to inspire a copy-cat attack, but such images contribute to a climate where attacks on women are commonplace; they also damage women by confronting us with the fact that we are perceived and treated as objects rather than people. The pervasiveness of objectifying representations, the fact that (unlike the more extreme forms of violent pornography) they appear routinely in public space and are accepted as normal, naturalised, makes it hard to avoid internalising that perception of ourselves. As Susanne Kappeler asked in her book *The Pornography of Representation*, 'what [does] it mean to turn a person into an object?' Symbolically, it means killing them.

One 1970s film about sexist advertising, which I used to show on women's studies courses when I lived in the USA and which was not especially radical, was titled 'Killing Us Softly'. No-one found this title shocking or hard to understand. I mention this to underline the point that feminists had an analysis of sexist representations as a form of symbolic violence quite early on, and that this analysis was common ground for different tendencies within feminism—there was nothing 'fringe' or obscure about it.

Since then, however, for many complicated reasons, feminist arguments around representation have gravitated more and more towards the issue of its relationship to the commission of violent acts in reality. Symbolic violence is less talked about than it used to be, and I suspect many of the students I teach now might find the concept obscure, at least initially. I think that's a pity, not only because it deprives us of a language in which to complain about offensive images that aren't obviously violent, but also because it removes what I would see as a significant line of argument about pornography itself: the argument (Susanne Kappeler's

argument) that it is an objectionable form of representation whether or not it can be shown to affect real-life behaviour. I am not saying radical feminists have lost their understanding of this, but I think we may well have lost any wider public understanding of it, because we have not said it often and explicitly enough.

Picture This

Sexist representations, however inane, pathetic and apparently lacking in menace they may be, pollute public (and in the case of TV, private) space. The violence they do to us may be symbolic, but it is not insignificant: it belongs on a continuum with more obvious threats to our integrity and our safety. And with this kind of symbolic violence on the increase again, retaking its old position as a normal, unremarkable and indeed acceptable part of our lives, it is time for feminists to voice their objections, repeatedly, loudly and if possible inventively.

I do think we ought to use the official channels of complaint available to us, albeit with an awareness of their limitations (not merely the fact that they are weak, but more importantly the fact that they do not represent our interests). It should not be possible for regulatory bodies to say that nobody cares about sexism per se and that respect for women's status as people is not a genuine 'community standard'. But if they never hear from us, they can go on saying this with impunity. So let's send them a message, or better yet, several thousand. 'HELLO, BOYS, THIS WON'T DO'. (Maybe someone could design a satirical postcard for this purpose.)

I also think, however, that more direct, unofficial guerilla-style action has its merits, and that we should be doing everything we can to press our own claims to public space and public utterance. At a time when half the population seems to have a degree in media studies, and solemn analyses of popular culture clog every newspaper and magazine, piss-taking, humour and ridicule are weapons whose effectiveness we shouldn't overlook. The people who brought us the 'comical' Men Behaving Badly should be shown that women can get laughs out of behaving badly too. And who says a woman can't get pleasure from something wet and sticky, like the contents of a can of paint?

Let's put the new media sexists on notice: when a radical feminist is smouldering, stand well back. □

Susanne Kappeler *The Pornography of Representation* (Polity, 1986)

A Suitable Job for a Lesbian

Gillian Dunne's book, *Lesbian Lifestyles: Women's Work and the Politics of Sexuality*, examines the interconnections between life experiences, employment and possibilities of being a lesbian. Through life history interviews, women discuss how and when they became lesbians and how their work and social lives intersect. Jill Radford reviews this interesting and important book.

Lesbian life and lesbian lived experience have traditionally been neglected as subjects of research, even in Women's Studies. More recently, the growth of queer theory has put the clock back even further by representing lesbians solely in terms of sexuality and sexual practice. Within this hostile cultural and political climate Gillian Dunne's study of lesbian lived experience is particularly welcome. Drawing on feminist theoretical perspectives, it provides a useful reminder that lesbians are women too. It demonstrates that living as lesbians in modern Britain involves balancing acts, since lesbians, like our heterosexual sisters, often have to struggle to integrate work and social life with domesticity and relationships, and further that this juggling of commitments is played out in a society characterised by heterosexism and anti-lesbian discrimination. The events at Kingsmead School (*T&S* 32) and the recent (Feb 1997) suspension of a lesbian feminist lecturer from a University Near London, are two recent examples which illustrate that anti-lesbianism in education is thriving in the 1990s and has reached the point of threatening lesbians' employment rights as well as academic freedom. A glance at the *Daily Express* this week (March

1997), which featured a renewed attack on 'lesbian feminist separatists' by Erin Pizzey in the guise of an autobiographical account of her life since Chiswick, shows media heterosexism continues to be central to the right's attacks on 'political correctness' in the run up to the General Election.

In this academic study, Gillian Dunne initially sets the scene by taking us on a relatively accessible journey through feminist theory. In over-viewing socialist feminist analysis of women's relationship to employment, she highlights one of its major limitations, i.e. its failure to engage with sexuality as an organising principle in society. This, she points out contrasts with its central role in radical feminism. However she argues, albeit with some significant exceptions (Lisa Adkins 1995), radical feminism has given less attention to the role of employment in women's lives. Gillian Dunne's aim in studying the material realities of 'non heterosexual' women's relationship to work, social life and relationships is to add a vital new dimension to our theoretical understanding, by bringing together insights from both socialist and radical feminism, and to add to the knowledge of lesbian life in the 1990s.

Gillian A Dunne *Lesbian Lifestyles: Women's Work and the Politics of Sexuality* (Macmillan Press, 1996)

'Non-heterosexuals' and other lesbians

As I discuss below, I do think this book is very interesting. It traces some common threads in UK lesbian experience, and makes some unique connections by questioning what makes it possible for women to live as lesbians, outside heterosexuality and male control, in a society which continues to discriminate against women, including specific forms of anti-lesbian discrimination. However, I do have some difficulty with the naming of the women in this study as 'non heterosexual women'. While accepting that heterosexuality within patriarchal societies is defined as the 'natural', 'normal' and only acceptable form of sexuality for women, and consequently that living outside heterosexuality is a form of resistance, I remain uneasy with this negative naming, particularly as it is a form of naming which ties lesbians directly back to the patriarchal norm. I recognise the author's concern to be inclusive of women who, while living outside heterosexuality, do not define as lesbian. However the flip side of this seems to be that lesbians are expected to give up or suspend lesbian identities, in deference to those preferring to be 'non heterosexual'. In the context of lesbian history, Sheila Jeffreys' question 'Does it Matter if They Did It?' (*T&S* 3) points to the complexities of 'lesbian' as a political and social as well as sexual identity. Gillian Dunne, however, is not constrained by the historical problems associated with retrospectively applying a 20th century identity to women of an earlier era, but by the inclusion of subjects in her sample who, while living outside heterosexuality, are reluctant to define as lesbians. While it is necessary to respect the standpoint of subjects in researching women's lives, it does seem that as a consequence no women are allowed to identify as lesbians, as lesbian identity is subsumed within a wider notion of 'non-heterosexual'. The author's own unease on this point is reflected in the disjuncture between the book's title *Lesbian Lifestyles*

and the text itself where the L word is rarely used.

Having got this first gripe out of the way, I will return to identifying the positive contributions the book makes to understanding and theorising lesbian lived experiences. The study is based on life history interviews, organised round the themes of: 'continuity, change and choices', with 60 'non heterosexual' women from a range of backgrounds and at different stages of their lives, living in the 1990s in a town in southeast England. She collected this sample by networking and snowballing, so its findings are particular to the women involved, rather than representative of lesbians in the UK in the 1990s. As it's not really possible to construct a representative sample of lesbians from any listing, whether from the census or a lesbian listing, this is not a criticism; and while there are significant absences, notably black and minority ethnic lesbians and lesbian mothers, it is a large sample and diverse in terms of age, educational achievement, employment and coming out histories.

The ethics of research

As the anonymous small town is also the author's home and where she lives as an out lesbian in the lesbian community, the study is enriched by her own insights and knowledge. Writing about your own community is a brave and quite a tricky thing to do. It clearly involves high levels of trust between the author and the women interviewed and a clear sense of what it is possible and safe to publish and what has to remain confidential. Mistakes here could make for difficulties in terms of her own continuing involvement in that community. Given the importance of lesbian friendship and lesbian community in the lives of lesbians, risk-taking in this context can have serious repercussions.

Anticipating a later point, as more and more of the 'high achieving lesbian community' are getting degrees, more and more studies of lesbian life and lesbian history will be written and more research into the lesbian community



will be undertaken. This promises to be an exciting period for the writing of lesbian feminist history and scholarship, although my thoughts are that such research needs to be conducted with care. Not on this occasion, but sometimes, through working at the Lesbian Custody Project, and as a women's studies tutor, I find myself, my friends, my community either in the shadows or the full gaze of academic research. From the standpoint of being researched as well as a researcher I suggest it is timely for us to think about developing and negotiating codes of lesbian and feminist research ethics. The writing of lesbian feminist history is too important a responsibility to leave to academic researchers alone. The question of how we represent lesbian mothers to outsiders' worlds — the judiciary, social workers, the media, as well as research students — was an issue of discussion and strategic thinking at the Lesbian Custody Project because we knew that representations matter to lesbian life in the real world. Gill Dunne's careful discussion of and approach to questions of ethics and accountability in researching in a lesbian community and publishing for wider audience would be a useful starting point for this work.

Becoming a lesbian

The aim of Gillian Dunne's study is not to rehash those tired debates in sexology or psychosexual theory about the causes of lesbianism, but to identify what makes it possible for some women to live as lesbians, or outside heterosexuality and male control.

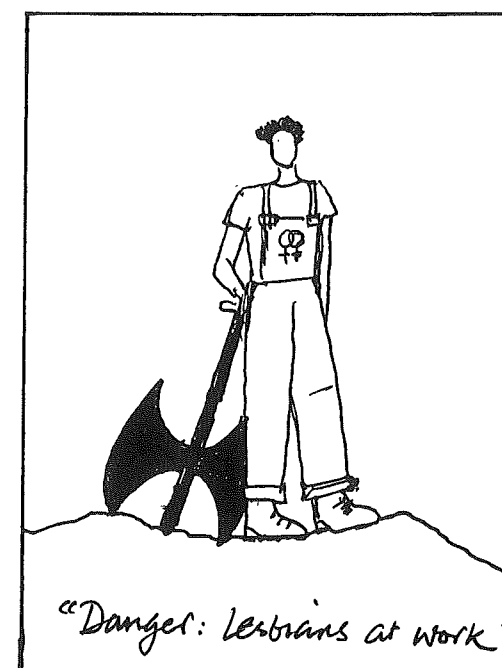
The intent is not to *explain* lesbianism *per se*, or to outline predictive categories of social construction. Rather it is to explore some of the meaningful experiences, and social and economic influences and processes, whereby a questioning perspective on conventional accounts of social reality, and in particular gender relations, may come about. While a critical perspective may be shared by many (lesbian and non lesbian) women, it is interesting that the decision to move beyond heterosexual relations is only taken by some. (p 21)

In exploring what facilitates some women's choices to live beyond heterosexuality, Gillian Dunne follows a life history approach. Recognising that economic self-reliance and financial independence are necessary elements of living as a lesbian, she explores the complexities of their inter-relationship: is it financial independence that enables some women to make the choice to move beyond heterosexuality or is the

recognition that a 'lesbian life is the life for me' that motivates women to achieve economic and financial independence through their choices in relation to available educational and employment options? The analysis presumes that both discontent with normative heterosexuality and financial independence are necessary for a lesbian. Gillian Dunne encouraged her subjects to reflect on their childhoods, educational options and choices, employment opportunities and their questioning and choices in relation to sexuality.

It is this approach which makes for the interest of the book. In relation to childhood, Gillian Dunne encourages women to reflect on whether in childhood they questioned normative sexuality and femininity: for example, Were they 'tomboys' and was this encouraged or discouraged by their mothers and fathers? What was the significance of being a daughter of a working mother — did it disadvantage their childhoods, as pro-family lobbies assert or did it widen their horizons in relation to employment possibilities and so put them on the road to getting the type of job which was to provide a (lesbian) living wage? Or did they grow up thinking boyfriends, heterosexual courtship and marriage were inevitable? Later, at secondary school, was it the 'intellectual pose', becoming 'sporty' or taking up of a particular hobby, like music, horses or the girl guides which enabled them to escape 'the cult of romantic heterosexuality'? Did being at an all girls school help? In the case of those in school in the 1950s, was it the 'innocence of girlhood' — prior to the 1960s (hetero)sexual revolution that facilitated an escape out of the traps and trappings of compulsory heterosexuality? How significant were these early escapes to the development of lesbian identity in adulthood?

What of women who didn't break out until later? How did those who drifted into the conventional norms of femininity, boyfriends, stop-gap jobs, marriages and motherhood subsequently escape? Was it the chance meeting of other lesbians that made the difference — and was this more likely for women in some jobs than others? What did choosing to be lesbian later on in life entail in terms of changing their lives? Did it mean going back to college and retraining for a more secure and well paid job? Was the choice to put men out of their lives more possible for those women, who by not having husbands or career breaks for



motherhood and childcare to hold them back, had been able to work themselves into positions of sufficiently security to get by?

Lesbian choices

Reading the accounts of how women negotiated these choices was fascinating and for me the definite centre of interest of the book. Gillian Dunne's sample of 60 women provided for a diversity of responses on all the questions above. I was, however, disappointed that so few black women participated in the study. Also given my own background as a lesbian mother, who for a long time worked to support other mothers make the shift out of heterosexuality without losing their children, I was disappointed that the struggles of mothers to move beyond heterosexuality to live as lesbian mothers were not represented in this study — although I understand Gillian Dunne is going to explore their routes out in a supplementary study.

In a society in which women are trained for a subordinate role as wives and mothers, Gillian Dunne's study of how her subjects accommodated, negotiated and ultimately rejected the norms of their times is very interesting. Is it simply coincidence that lesbians are generally high flyers in educational and employment terms, as this book provides the evidence to suggest that mostly we are? Or is it that as

lesbians we just have to be? Perhaps, it was because we preferred even doing our homework to messing about with boys, that we did better in school. Or was it the opportunity of living away from home by going to college that made for the freedom to think and move ourselves beyond heterosexuality? — an opportunity less available to women growing up in the 1950s and 1960s than for women today. How significant was meeting like minded women or women who identified as lesbian? How far did these childhood strategies help to open doors to higher education, jobs with prospects and life beyond heterosexuality?

Lesbians at work

Gillian Dunne also asked women to reflect on the choices they made on leaving school and college and entering the world of paid employment. As at every other transition point, the women in the study had different options and choices. Those with good qualifications were better positioned to enter the white collar professions with prospects for career development, equal pay and opportunities for living independently, i.e. outside heterosexuality. Questioning dominant representations of femininity and heterosexuality, some women looked to non stereotypically women's work, the manual trades and the armed forces as a way of expanding their horizons and opportunities for a more unconventional life. While those entering the manual trades experienced discrimination, sexual harassment, pornography and serious levels of heterosexism, many also found this work rewarding and, without husbands or breaks for mothering and child care to hold them back work-wise, progressed to secure and more senior jobs, allowing them more choices in other aspects of life.

The army, despite its militarism and institutionalised heterosexism (being lesbian is grounds for dismissal) was a choice for some women, including two of the three black women in the sample. Its attractions seem to lie in the perception that it offered prospects for developing technical and craft skills, career prospects and job security (provided you're not found out), possibilities for travel and opportunities to develop sports interests and for physically demanding work outside the confining atmosphere of the factory or office. All five women who spent time in the army spoke of its lesbian networks and suggested that lesbians in the

armed services were more achievement-orientated than their heterosexual sisters, to the point where, as one of them put it, 'the Women's corps would be unable to function without the lesbians'. At the same time they had experienced high levels of heterosexism. Anti-lesbian purges were reported to be commonplace, and the life in the army included the constant fear of exposure — one of the interviewees had been discovered and discharged.

Other women had drifted through conventional routes from leaving school without qualifications, into dead-end jobs, marriages, motherhood and part-time low income stereotypically female work. For these women, giving up on heterosexuality in adulthood meant either living precariously on the low wages of casual work or restructuring their lives by retraining to qualify them for better paid work. Other women were fortunate enough to find challenging work in the voluntary sector, often in the arts, welfare, health sectors or in women's movement type jobs. These jobs offered non-financial rewards and job satisfaction and more autonomy, regarding how they dress and in the ability to combine radical politics with their working lives, but remain relatively low paid and without pension rights, for example. The achievements of the women in this study provide a very positive image of lesbians as hardworking, achieving women. It is also well known that lesbians are well represented in all areas where women are reaching the top, but whether such high levels of achievement can be claimed for lesbians in the UK more broadly is less certain. Having lived in both Lambeth and Hackney during the 1980s and 1990s, I know for example that unemployment was a significant reality in the lesbian communities there, and that it disproportionately affected black lesbians and lesbian mothers. This seemed less of an issue for the lesbians in the south east town, a more affluent community perhaps.

Towards the end of the book Gillian Dunne explores the fascinating issue of how lesbians' working lives and relationships impact on each other. As she points out, one of the many attractions of lesbian relationships is their potential for an equality unachievable within heterosexuality. Many of the women in long term lesbian relationships made this point and commented positively on how their partners supported them both practically as well as emotionally in terms of their work responsi-

bilities and ambitions. For those who had previously experienced heterosexual relationships, this made for a marked contrast; within heterosexuality they found male partners resentful of the demands and commitments of their working lives and jealous of any successes and promotions. Gillian Dunne points out that perhaps because lesbians tend to be serious about their employment and (if her sample is in any way representative of lesbians more widely), amongst the higher flyers, lesbian relationships tend to be equal in terms of the women's employment and earnings status. She also questions what happens when women partners are unequally positioned in relation to the work they do and the incomes they bring home. From the small number of women reporting experiences of living in unequal relationships they were short lived; she tentatively concludes that inequality and difference presents real difficulties in lesbian partnerships.

Making a different sense

While reading women's accounts, I found myself reaching into my own memories and writing myself into the script. Reflecting on my own childhood and early years of adulthood and the choices I made in those days, brought back powerful memories, some treasurable and others less comfortable. It led me to reflect on dilemmas, strategies and choices in my own journey to a lesbian identity in ways which made a different sense of them. Once begun, in my experience, remembering can also be a disturbing business, as painful and unwanted memories can assert themselves. I also found this in working with adult women on autobiographical assignments for women's studies courses. So I was surprised by what struck me as absences in this book. Because men's abuse of women and children is a damaging factor in the lives of so many women, it does seem surprising that it has so little presence in the life stories as recounted here.

In making the links between education, employment and sexuality, Gillian Dunne is forwarding the project of developing a materialist feminism, but the absences prevent its being the fully inclusive theorising aimed for in contemporary radical feminism. Having said this, I also need to say I did appreciate reading the women's stories and tracing the clues to lesbian identity from earlier stages of life (if clues they are and not herrings after all). □

Secret Slavery

Slavery is alive and well in Britain today. Women migrants employed as domestic workers have no right to change their employer, to receive regular wages or to keep their own passports. Often they are subjected to violence. Paddy Tanton interviews Sister Margaret Healy about the situation and about Kalayaan, which supports and campaigns on behalf of these women.

Paddy Tanton: *Can you tell me when and how Kalayaan started?*

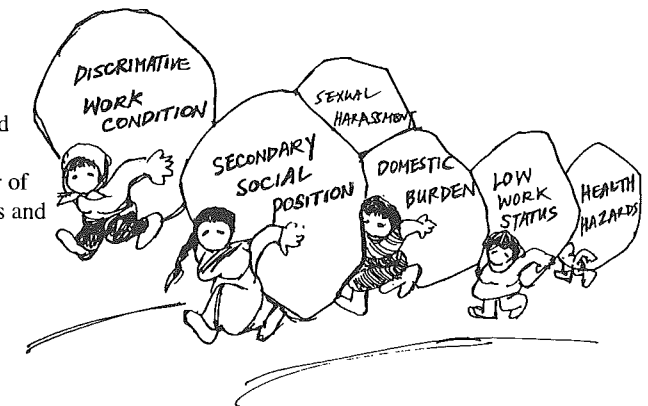
Sister Margaret Healy: It was established in 1987. By then the Commission for Filipino Migrant Workers had realised that there were much bigger numbers of migrant domestic workers who had left brutalising employers. They had no money, no passport, had not been paid a salary for 6-8 months, longer sometimes. We also realised that we couldn't continue responding on a day-to-day basis because when there were a few individuals it hadn't been a problem but we began to get more and more. We also discovered around that time that there were women from other nationalities who were in a similar situation, so in one household you might have two Filipinos and two Indians and when the Filipinos escaped, they would take the Indians as well or the Sri Lankans, for example. So we realised it was a broader issue than just a Philippine issue.

Also in that same year, 1987, Face the Facts approached us to do a programme but at that time we were very concerned about the women's security and apprehensive about the Home Office or police being involved. So in order to protect the women and the work, we had to have a stronger organisation. By 1987 we already had a fairly strong group of migrant

domestic workers organised — they had their own organisation, but we couldn't do public campaigning. So we had discussions with a number of organisations and decided that we should establish a group that would campaign specifically on the issue of migrant domestic workers which would be for women of all nationalities, and men also (there are some men domestic workers). So that's how it became established.

Paddy: *The women that come to you, do you find most of them are from the Philippines or are they from a range of countries?*

Margaret: I think about 70% are from the Philippines, but there could be a reason for that in the sense that this is a Filipino centre and that Filipino women workers in general speak English because the system of education in the Philippines is the American system, so anyone who has had a secondary level or third level of education would be English-speaking. In recent years the number of Indians and Sri Lankans and women from African countries is increasing.





Paddy: *How is contact made with the women? Do they contact you or do you have a network?*

Margaret: They contact us but that's done through a network. They access each other through contact with each other. For instance, people who have escaped this year, if they go to Hyde Park in the summer months, they will see many women who are in similar situations and sometimes they give them telephone numbers or whatever and then they'll contact us.

A number of women, when things get really bad, will just escape without knowing anyone. They'll go on the street and hope they meet somebody, which in many cases they do, or they just call a taxi which brings them here if they've heard of the Centre before.

Paddy: *From the book Britain's Secret Slaves, I got the feeling that a lot of those who had run away were working for Middle Eastern families who were here on a visit. Do you think the women use the opportunity to escape at the point when they come to this country?*

Margaret: No, I don't think that at all, and I say that based on our experience, because we have a number of women who have come to us who have been in the UK five, six or seven times and would never have thought of escaping. But when I say, 'Why did you leave?', they say, 'She hasn't paid me my salary for the last three months and always before they paid the salary but this year they haven't'. One woman I met said, 'It's a big lack of trust for me; I worked for these people for nine years, I've travelled all over the world with them and just this year she didn't pay my salary'.

I don't know whether I'm right or not, but we think it's because the employers now know that the women don't have any rights in this country and if they do leave they live in a very insecure situation. Some of the women tell us that when they had asked for their salary, the employers said, 'No I'm not going to give you your salary till we go back to Kuwait (or back to Dubai or whatever) because you might run away'. They actually say that to them. And a lot of the women who come actually don't know anyone in this country. They literally have run from a brutalising situation without thinking. And that contradicts the Home Office position which is that if we allow them to have rights, allow them to change their employers, it's a back door into the country. That's ridiculous.

Paddy: *It used to be that there was a period before you could gain residency rights.*

Margaret: Yes, four years. You came with a permit for that and you had a right to change employers; at least, you could change employers with the permission of the Department of Employment. After four years, provided the conditions were kept you could get residency. That changed in 1979 when they abolished the work permit system here.

Paddy: *In general, what sort of support do the women need when they come to you?*

Margaret: Often they are very demoralised because they have been shouted at constantly. What you mostly hear about is constant shouting, calling them derogatory or racist terms like 'donkey', 'dog', 'slave', 'very poor' and things like that. What they need is knowledge. To know that they are not the criminal, but it's the employers who are. They very often think that they have broken the law or that they have broken their contract, when in fact their contract has never been kept by the employer. Bad as it is, or minimal as it is, on a contract that is supposed to offer \$250 a month they might only be paid \$150 a month, and still they feel that they are the one who has done wrong by leaving this situation. So information about the reality of their situation, why they're in this situation — that's what they need. It's the system that creates their 'illegality', if you want to call it that.

Paddy: *So a lot of your work is explaining these facts to the migrant workers?*

Margaret: Also, in a practical way we always will let them see a solicitor. Everybody gets that, and the solicitor will then explain to them about retrieving their passport if the employer has it, or, if there have been unpaid wages whether it's possible to retrieve them. Sometimes all their belongings are still in the house or with the employer so maybe the solicitor will help them retrieve them. Then, through the community they are helped because here's a Centre that's open seven days a week from 10 until 6. There are always people here so if someone new comes and they don't know anybody, then somebody from the Centre will give them a place to stay for a few nights until they find work, or help them to find work. If they really have nothing at all, someone from the organisation will give a small amount,

maybe £30, for their travel allowance and to buy some food for themselves.

Paddy: *Do they manage to get redress from their employers? Are they successful?*

Margaret: Very often they don't. We've had a few cases, especially if they've worked in this country for a long time and didn't get paid, where the solicitor has been able to get maybe £1,000 or £2,000 for them in unpaid wages, but that doesn't happen often. To retrieve their passport is very difficult because the employers very often send the passport to the Home Office or the police station or the Embassy or back to the country from which they have come. But the point about them seeing a solicitor also is to give them reassurance that if ever they are in conflict with immigration or police here, they do have a named solicitor they can call or that we can call to try and get them out of detention or out of the police station.

Paddy: *Do you think that the women who come to you on the whole have put up with long-term abuse? You mentioned some women have been here for years.*

Margaret: They do put up with long-term abuse. Not only that, even after they have left these abusing employers and they get jobs with other employers in this country, they will sometimes put up with bad treatment from the second employer, even from the third employer. Of course we try and get them to understand that they don't have to, and they shouldn't put up with bad treatment from anybody. But sometimes they're quite desperate. For instance, a person might be three or four weeks before they can find a second job here. Now during that time they may not have been paid anything for five or six months before they came to us. They literally have nothing; they're dependent on either the organisation, people they've made friends with who give them five or ten pounds or whatever. It's an awful situation to be in. Their families at home are needing money. So they do take bad jobs the second time round and they even stay sometimes in bad situations. But once they find their feet they know what their situation is, and the longer they're here the better they know and the less they will put up with bad situations.

Paddy: *Are domestic workers in bad situations with British employers as well?*

Margaret: Yes, I could tell you plenty. Some British women don't pay, tell the person to work five hours today, five pound an hour. She'll work five hours and she'll pay her for four. And that can happen over a period of time.

Paddy: *Physical abuse too?*

Margaret: Physical, not so much. I mean, you don't often hear of British women actually hitting people. The other, which to me is just as bad — not paying or not allowing them to change their day off or saying 'I need you to babysit tonight, sorry if you have to go out but I can always make one phone call to the Home Office' — that to me is just as bad in a sense.

Paddy: *Obviously the women are trapped and isolated which is one reason why they put up with long-term abuse. Would you say the experience of abuse is more common than not? Of course I wouldn't think you know how many domestic workers there are, but would you say that the abuse is extensive?*

Margaret: All I can say is that we have interviewed more than 4,000 domestic workers in the last few years and that every one of those has experienced abuse. Now that can be either not paying their salary, constant shouting, working 18 hours a day — that is common — sleeping on the floor, children kicking and beating them, pushing and spitting at them, that type of abuse. Of that 4,000 I would say practically 100% have suffered. But they are the people who have escaped. Out of that 4,000 we've had people coming as well who are still with the employer who brought them here and have just chatted because it's the Centre here. They are very happy with their employer, they treat them well, the salary is \$250 a month, they pay them regularly, they get home very two years, so they are happy to stay with them.

Paddy: *Have you got a theory as to why this abuse happens?*

Margaret: I don't know. It's something to do with having someone in your household, I think, because it happens more with women who have live-in jobs. The family vary from wanting you to be a member of the family, a member of the household, and then the female employer treats you nicely so she expects you to be part of the household and do more work, and there's blurring of the relationship.

Paddy: *The boundaries are not set at all*





whereas in most jobs they are?

Margaret: Not at all. And I think that for a domestic worker in a household of another woman, I mean it is a peculiar relationship, no matter how you look at it. But I think historically, calling domestic workers servants, maids, household helps, all helped to keep that bad relationship. In other words to keep it as a subservient kind of relationship. And then it's something to do with the human psyche, if you've somebody under you, so to speak, which they are, living in such close proximity in your household. I know it happens but I can't understand why, these are all factors I suppose.

Paddy: Also an element of racism I would have thought.

Margaret: It's more class. It's more classism that race. I do think that. Because you have all nationalities brutalising. No, I think it's class. There is racism in it as well, of course.

Paddy: The other thing that interests me is the Western view of Asian women that they are passive and subservient. Do you think in the case of Asian domestic workers that's part of it too?

Margaret: Yes the attitudes are there, the stereotypes are there, but it's far from reality.

Paddy: And it's not internalised by the women themselves, they don't see themselves like that?

Margaret: No in fact the domestic workers here have their own organisation which is very strong and well organised, and the majority are members of the Transport and General Workers Union. They organise their own meetings, they have their annual general meeting, they elect their officers, they organise their outings and entertainment, support for each other, education classes, and they are very strong, I would say. The very fact that they survive within this inhumane society where someone can die — for instance a child back home — and the mother must decide whether she is going to go home to her family and attend the funeral or whether she is going to have to stay here in order to support her family. A person who can do that is not a passive person.

Paddy: The word slavery is used to describe the experience of many women domestic workers. What is it about the work that makes it slavery?

Margaret: It's the total control the employer has over the person. The employer, as a general

rule, holds their passport. In fact the name of their employer is written into their passport; it states that employment is strictly prohibited other than with that employer. The employer can actually lock them in the house, which is not uncommon. The wages are withheld. And in this day and age I think the whole emotional and psychological control the employer has over the person because that person is in their household and totally dependent on them is tantamount to slavery.

Paddy: It has a resonance of domestic violence. Are there parallels?

Margaret: Yes, oh yes.

Paddy: Are there parallels with the sex industry as well — the advertising, the way it's done is very similar — seeing women as a commodity?

Margaret: Yes. And it's male organised and male controlled and male dominated. In Sri Lanka, whereas anyone else going abroad is asked to give in two or four passport-sized photographs, domestic workers are asked to give ten photographs, four of which are postcard-sized. Now why does a domestic worker need to have ten photographs, four of which are passport-sized?

Paddy: Do you think the women see any positive aspects to them being migrant domestic workers — being able to send money home, for instance?

Margaret: Yes, I could tell you about several women who have come here as migrant domestic workers and lived underground in very difficult situations, but if they earned enough, they are actually going home to their families, having earned enough, say, to build a house and even to set up a small business. Several have done that. So there are very definitely positive aspects to it. Otherwise the system would stop, wouldn't it?

But the point is the hypocrisy of the West. I'm not just talking about the UK; it's all over Europe that migrant women workers are used for care of the elderly, for care of the children, which leaves other women to go out to work. They are making a wage contribution to the economy of the country and they have no rights whatsoever. I do think myself that it's state organised, because otherwise it couldn't work, and it does work very well. You can keep the whole system going without any cost to the system and without any benefits to the worker

except that they can survive and they can send money to their families. But it's big price to pay to keep your family; it's big price from the women's point of view.

Paddy: And it's to do with women as well. It's the women in the West and also the richer Asian countries who are going out and finding the jobs; the workforce has become much more female, but there's no childcare facilities.

Margaret: That's right. But you see the women also have a responsibility — it's not that easy to get support from women's organisations. Not really, not the full-hearted support you'd expect. If I had a domestic worker in the household then I should have a responsibility towards her welfare.

Paddy: Do you know what the women's experiences were with the various agencies that got them their jobs? I have read that there is a lot of abuse and that a lot of money is made.

Margaret: There is. There is a massive number of agencies. When a person presents themselves to an agency, they have to pay for so many things: a medical checkup, a dental checkup, to get their papers processed, to get their passport secured. They have to pay a massive amount of money. The agency fees in the Philippines, for instance, can be as much as £500 to £1,000, which would be equivalent to two to four years of a teacher's salary. And then they very often sign contracts saying that they will be paid \$250 [£170] a month.

Very often they will sign contracts saying they will work in a hair salon or in shops and they end up as domestic workers, although it was never their intention to do that. Some who applied as civil engineers to go abroad to work as civil engineers and they were just told, 'We don't let women work as civil engineers in this country. You can work in my household or you can go back to the Philippines'. They haven't a choice.

Paddy: I was going to ask you about that. Can generalisations be made about the background of the Filipino women. Are they from the poorer sections of society?

Margaret: They are not from the very poor. I suppose because if you're from the very poor you can't even get to Manila to get out. So very often they are middle sector people, people who are educated themselves. By that I mean that they would have two years in college or further

education; some would even have finished. As I said there we've worked with civil engineers, teachers, nurses, whatever.

Paddy: So you would say that on the whole they are over-qualified for the work?

Margaret: Absolutely, for domestic work. Except I don't want to run down domestic work because there's the whole thing of organising it and for mothers who look after the children and look after the household, that's quite professional.

Paddy: But it's not seen as skilled.

Margaret: Yes.

Paddy: So a lot of them are over-qualified.

Margaret: Yes. Especially from the Philippines. From Sri Lanka and India and Africa, not so much. Some who don't read or write English would be more disadvantaged. We established a literacy class to help them read and write English, to give them a better chance of a good job.

Paddy: So, given that some of the women may be duped into taking on more so-called 'menial' work, do you think there are any other explanations? Are there qualified women who actively take on domestic work?

Margaret: Yes there are. First of all I will take issue on calling it menial work. We have to stop calling it that because it keeps being used. It's very hard to get anyone from the Home Office to say that these women are workers, because once women in private households are seen as workers then it has to be considered that they have rights. That's what is so important to us. Domestic work is low paid and it's low regarded, but the work in itself is perfectly all right — it's the low status that's the problem. There are professional women from the Philippines who go abroad to work in domestic work in private households on the understanding for themselves that they are going to stay, say, for two years and they are going to be paid a certain amount of money and they really go with the intention of doing a good job in that household. That is the hope, but the reality doesn't work like that.

Paddy: Earlier you were saying that the women here were quite well organised. Do you think that finding each other and becoming aware that there are others in the same boat is a kind of consciousness-raising experience?

Margaret: It is. And I think it's very good. I think especially the whole internationality of it is very good. It's really nice that when somebody comes here and they're from Zimbabwe, for instance, and a Pakistani woman will take her to her place and share the room with her and help her find a job, or a Filipino woman will take an Indian, or whatever. I do think that's very good in terms of learning about other people's cultures and other people's countries and backgrounds and seeing that by coming from many different backgrounds, their experiences as women are quite similar.

Paddy: *What I'm looking for here is a glimmer of possibility out of a rather horrendous situation that there are things emerging that are very positive. That out of the oppression comes the solidarity towards change. Do you think that's being too optimistic?*

Margaret: Signs of change amongst the women? Yes. Kalayaan and Solidar jointly organised a round table in Brussels last June. We brought together migrant domestic workers from Spain, Italy and Greece. And prior to that, in preparation for that, we met here with about 12 or 13 women domestic workers from different nationalities. We discussed with them how they felt about being domestic workers in private households and how their employers related to them and how they related to their employers, the attitudes of employers and all of that. That was very enlightening because it was just a marvellous meeting to be part of. All the women expressed in their own way the similar feelings and experiences they had, and they were actually putting things together and saying, 'Oh yeah, that's what my employer does as well' and, 'I wonder why that happens?'. So it was very good for making connections.

Paddy: *There have been suggestions in some of the literature that I've read that a migrant worker's union would be a really good idea. As far as I know there isn't one. How feasible is it?*

Margaret: I'm very much in support of it because I think that's where they get their strength. Now with the domestic workers here I think maybe about four to five hundred are paid up members of the Transport and General Workers Union. The TGWU would really like them to form their own branch of the union. But they have discussed it and they have made a decision that they won't do it because of their

situation.

First of all in terms of work you would have officers, maybe you could have part-time officers, but then they all go through periods of time when they need to earn more money to send off to their families, or their employers change, or they change their employers. Their whole situation is so volatile so they have made a conscious decision that they will stay simply as members of the TGWU. But they do collect the money, they have their own trade union officers who collect the money every Sunday, who write out the chit and send it to the head office and things like that. But a union would be great.

Paddy: *How supportive is the union?*

Margaret: We had to struggle with them but now they are extremely supportive. Probably the best way they can support us is through the campaign and they have taken a very active role in it. If, for instance, an employer doesn't pay a domestic worker her salary or her wages and the worker decides to leave her because that's all she can do, then we will get the trade union to write a letter to the woman. But even with that, very often they won't pay it because they know there's no action really the person can take. Especially if it's for £100 or £200.

Paddy: *But you have to constantly keep making the point to employers.*

Margaret: Yes. And also for the workers.

Paddy: *What do you think should be done? Especially in the light of the fact that the 'maid trade' as it's called has become such an international big business. Have you got a voice at the UN?*

Margaret: Well, we made a presentation to the UN working group on contemporary forms of slavery this June. It was the first time Kalayaan's been invited. But for me it's a question of investing rights in the workers as workers. So the government has to recognise and acknowledge that there is a need for domestic work in private households, whether it be to care for the elderly or for children or whatever. The majority of those who come to the Centre who have escaped from their bad employer, will find a job in a very short time, which shows the need. The ones who have more difficulty are the ones who don't read and write English, but even those eventually find a job.

But from the government's point of view, if you acknowledge the need is there then you have to set up the system to ensure the need can be met. They know that the need is there, but they won't recognise it or acknowledge it so that they can have this underground for workers to do the work.

Paddy: *What do you think the fear is? Is it a kind of misogyny, that women do housework and therefore it's unpaid. Is it part of that, that it's unrecognised work? Or is it because they fear migrant workers staying in this country? What do you think is the root of the lack of ability to see this problem?*

Margaret: Well, I don't know what it is. I just can't comprehend it because for instance every time we meet with the Home Office, they say, 'We have a strict but fair immigration policy, and if we allow domestic workers to change their employer then we're opening the door to thousands flooding into the country'.

That's so far removed the reality that it's hard to know how you can even counter it. Up until 1979 there was a work permit system which was very restricted and it had many conditions attached to it, but at it did allow for people to change from one employer to another within the same category of work. You could move from being a domestic worker in a private household into a hotel or a hospital, for instance; as long as you stayed within the same strata, you were still a domestic worker. But after four years, having kept the conditions of that work permit you then could apply for residence and normally you got it.

At that time the government knew every single individual that was here. They knew exactly where they were because they had to get permission from the Department of Employment before they could change their job. They abolished that system in 1979 and they introduced the concession which allowed the employer to bring in domestic workers without any rights for the domestic worker and what do they have? They have all those women and men escaping from their bad employers staying in the country, living and working clandestinely. And they have these employers going home and coming back in six months' time bringing two or three more domestic workers who then go underground.

It's obvious to anybody that it's a peculiar system. While under the work permit system the

government was very much in control over who was here, under this system they have no idea. Even in questions to the House of Commons they don't know how many. All they know is they issue approximately 12,000 visas or entry permits a year for domestic workers in private houses. They issue them but they have no idea how many stay in the country or how many leave the country again. I think that the present government [John Major's government] is very hypocritical. They want to give the impression that they have a strict immigration policy. Actually what they have set up is a brutal and cruel system.

Paddy: *What's your opinion of the idea that the remittances the women send back to their families (which I think they usually send through the national banking system) have substantially helped to improve the balance of payments in the Philippines and therefore helped to alleviate the massive foreign debt?*

Margaret: In 1982 Marcos introduced the Executive Order 857 which was intended for migrant domestic workers to remit 50% of their salary back to their families through the Philippines banking system and that was to bring in massive earnings to the government. The remittances do bring a lot of income into the country. In the Philippines it is the number one dollar earner. Because the bank withholds the money for a period of time and only lets the family take a certain amount out each month. The bad aspect about it for me is that the women make such a contribution to the economics of this country without any rights. They also make such a contribution to the economy of their own country with out any benefit to them as major contributors. The Philippine government even makes all Filipinos abroad pay a tax of 3% of their earnings. And who suffers? Their children, their husbands, whichever partner is at home, their parents. And then there are many broken marriages because of it. It's unbelievable the damage it's done to children both in the sex tourism industry and in drugs because there's no parent; the mother is abroad working and the father is out working or trying to get some sort of life together, subsistence for them.

Paddy: *Do you think a Labour government will bring any change?*

Margaret: They will. We've had many discussions with Labour, and at least they are more socially conscious. □



URBAN AMAZONS

The late 1980s were a period of intense debate, conflict, challenge and change within feminism and for feminists. Here Sarah Green reflects on the differences between then and now, and tries to do justice to the complex lived history of lesbian separatists in London.

I glanced across the House of Lords gallery at a small group of women gathered in one of the visitors' boxes on the other side. I recognised them from Lesbians Against the Clause meetings, and I was enjoying the contrast between this wood-panelled bastion of the Establishment and those women. But I also suspected they were up to something, as they looked more nervous than the rest of us when they had passed the security people earlier on, and although it was warm in the gallery, they had all failed to remove their heavy coats.

It was February 2, 1988, and the Lords had just finished debating Clause 28 of the Local Government Bill, which prohibited the 'promotion of homosexuality'. They were now voting on the Clause. My attention was drawn away from the women opposite and back to the floor tens of feet below, as the vote was being called. In their wisdom, the Lords decided that the Clause should remain in the Bill as it was.

All the quotes in this article are from taped extracts which appear in Sarah Green *Urban Amazons: Lesbian Feminism and Beyond in the Gender, Sexuality and Identity Battles of London* (Macmillan, 1997)

Seconds later, a commotion broke out, and what has now become a famous event was unfolding before me. The group of women opposite had tied ropes to the rail and were abseiling down them into the floor of the House. The ropes were a bit too short, but they managed to get on to the floor anyway, and one of them even managed to get half way to the Queen's throne (she later explained she wanted to denounce the Clause from there) before being grabbed by one of the liveried security guards and, securely held around the waist, dragged kicking and yelling out of the chamber.

The good Lords were stunned; some of the gay men in the Visitors' Gallery were appalled, and one of them rushed into my visitors' box to complain that this kind of behaviour would ruin the reputation of the campaign against Clause 28. The Stop the Clause campaign and the Organisation of Lesbian and Gay Activists (OLGA) had made similar complaints against a

Lesbians Against the Clause demonstration at Piccadilly Circus, and had told their own members to boycott it. These organisations knew that Lesbians Against the Clause had a considerable number of lesbian feminist separatists amongst its members. Such women argued against the Clause on the grounds that lesbianism should be promoted, and for the same reason as those in favour of the Clause sought to pass the law: promotion of lesbianism might help to undermine the 'fabric of British society', which, as far as many separatists were concerned, was oppressively patriarchal and needed to be undermined. Stop the Clause and OLGA were arguing instead that Clause 28 was against the spirit of civil rights, and anyway, the

idea that you could 'promote' homosexuality was ridiculous. The lesbian feminist separatists were once again getting in the way. On May 28 1988, they would also get in the way of Sue Lawley as she tried to read out the BBC's Six O'clock News and four women chained themselves to her desk and shouted anti-Clause 28 slogans from around her feet. The Sun later faithfully reported two of the women's names as Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, not having read up on their lesbian history.

Researching lesbian separatism

That's how my eighteen months with lesbian feminist separatists in London started. The idea of doing the research began in 1985, while I was



Royal connection . . . the protesting women chained to the gates at the Palace yesterday

● FIVE lesbians were arrested yesterday after chaining themselves to the gates of Buckingham Palace in a gay protest.

The women, who dressed as suffragettes, had to be cut free by police.

● They were demonstrating over the controversial bill to ban councils from promoting homosexuality.

The protesters were at-

tached to the gates for half an hour while 12 other lesbians paraded on the pavement.

● The five were taken to nearby Cannon Row police station for questioning.

The demonstrators said their action coincided with the 70th anniversary of suffragettes chaining themselves to the Palace gates in their votes campaign.

Five lesbians nicked in gay Palace demo

Cath Jackson



living in Islington for a short while. I met separatists for the first time then, and while I was intrigued by what they had to say, I didn't understand, and I wanted to. Not that I understood anything much about London or Britain either at the time, as I'd grown up on a small island in Greece, and since leaving it, I'd first lived in small parochial towns and then regularly shunted between Britain, the USA and Italy. As a result, I was confused about most things that people did and said. Oh, I'd read about various feminisms, and labelled myself a feminist if anyone asked, but I was an intellectual feminist. I never stayed anywhere long enough to get involved in any organisations or movements. I was always on the outside looking in.

The combination of coming across separatists and realising I knew little about either them or London more generally, and the fact that I'd recently finished an anthropology degree, led me to decide to do the research. Books weren't enough; I'd read so many books about feminist theory and sexuality that they were coming out of my ears, and they didn't make me understand what was going on in London, which was clearly about much more than just feminist theory. I wanted to know about living it, about the experience of it in daily life. My own experience was too all over the place to make any sense.

I was constantly plagued by the ethics of what I was doing, despite my being as open as possible with women about the research. Simply advertising yourself doesn't change the fact that you're poking around in other people's lives. I was so troubled by this problem that I delayed publishing anything on it for several years after I finished the research. Three things eventually made me break my silence. First, I'd promised a lot of women that they weren't wasting their time sharing their thoughts and lives with me,

because I would, as faithfully as possible, write them down and publish them. Second, I'd read so much that I felt misrepresented separatists, except from separatists themselves, that I wanted to try and even the balance a little. And third, I had learned such a lot from these women, not only about separatism, feminism and lesbianism, but also about London, about being a person in the late modern age, about what is going on around us all, that I thought it was worth sharing, even though I could never replace the things they themselves have said and written. The following is my small contribution.

Awkward cusses

The years I was doing the research, 1988 and 1989, was a strange time for London in general, borne of a backlash against everything the Greater London Council (GLC) under Ken Livingstone had done until it was abolished by Thatcher's government in 1986. This included a GLC-led 'positive images' campaign on behalf of lesbians and gay men, and Clause 28 was a backlash against it. The events surrounding Clause 28 showed me two things I would carry with me over the next months: that separatists were as much a part of London as anyone else; but also that a lot of people, even those with whom separatists shared some public spaces in London (the wider lesbian and gay community, other feminist groups) found separatists to be awkward cusses and wished they would just be quiet. Separatists were many things during my time in London, but quiet was never one of them. Such women had a reputation, especially among people who'd never met any, of being the 'shock troops' of feminism, of being man-hating, bad-tempered, loud-mouthed, 'urban amazons' with no sense of humour and who had a tendency to rip your head off if you said the wrong thing. To me, that meant separatists were

strongly committed to what they believed in and were therefore liable to express their opinions loudly and often. Frankly, I admired that; women haven't made many gains over the years by being polite and popular. Anyway, the abseiling incident proved well enough that they had a fairly good sense of humour given the right circumstances, but I'm talking about reputations here.

It was also a strange kind of time for separatists. Repeatedly, women I spoke to said they felt something was changing, but they weren't quite sure in what direction, except that it felt like a fragmentation of something, that things were cracking at the seams somehow. Some spoke of a 'siege mentality', referring to the ongoing battles around identity politics, particularly concerning race, but also about lesbian sexuality and sexual desire, prompted by an increasing number of women whom many separatists labelled 'libertarians'. The name was intended to indicate that such women were profoundly anti-feminist and were promoting forms of sexual expression amongst lesbians which were pornographic and 'pro-S/M'; that is, 'libertarians' were promoting precisely the kinds of sexual relations which separatism, based either on radical or revolutionary feminist ideas or a combination of both, argued were the foundations of heteropatriarchy.

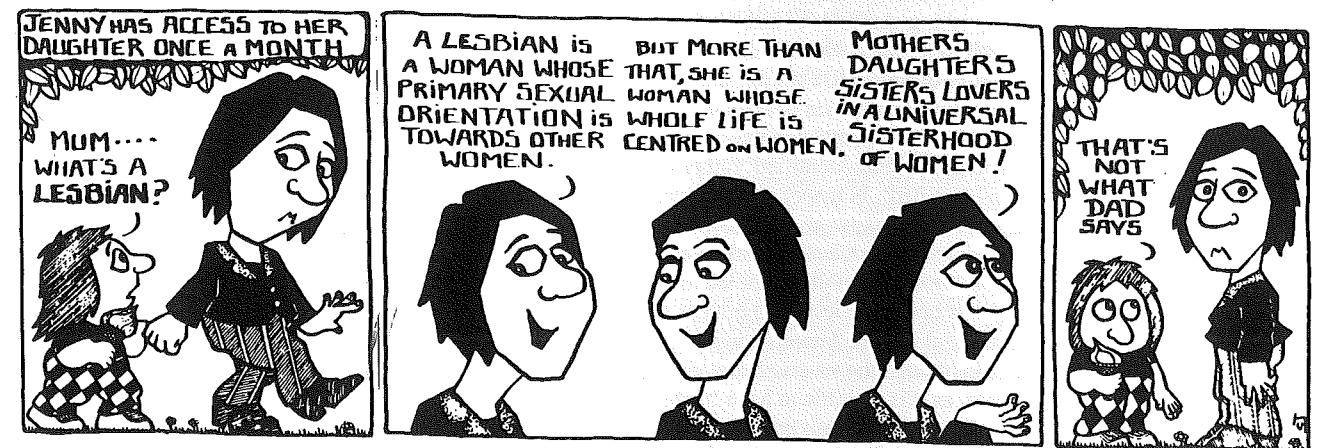
And while separatists were battling against a 'libertarian' invasion of their space in London, others were challenging separatists' approach towards differences between women, particularly in terms of race. One of my life-history interviewees, whom I call Nicola, a separatist at the time, put it this way:

there was a strong tendency that if you put one foot wrong, you were damned for the rest of your life. And of course that's very frightening. It always was like that, there always was an element of that. But when we're talking about 'hey, you white fucking racist', that's an awful lot heavier, being called that, than another white feminist saying, 'gee, I think you're anti-feminist.' There's a huge difference.²

I myself experienced a great deal of this 'siege mentality', most especially through a collective dispute at the Lesbian Archive and Information Centre (hereafter called the Archive). That dispute, which centred on issues of race on one side and sexual desire on the other, became so bitter that eventually one half of the collective sued the other half in the High Court of Justice. And that lawsuit was only possible because the Archive was officially registered as a limited company, a condition of receiving grant aid from ex-GLC inspired policies to help disadvantaged and minority groups in London. As a result, the Archive was subject to company law, which the two sides of the collective — a lesbian feminist and largely separatist collective — used against one another once the dispute got out of hand. All of this taught me a lot about how a particular place, London, came together with a particular historical moment, both in feminist debate and in the city, and led a group of politically committed women to painfully fight out a transition towards a different kind of perspective, one that reflected today's time and place.

Exploding myths

That's what *Urban Amazons*, the book I wrote on all this, is really about: the way in which 'the personal is political' changes through being



Cath Jackson

lived in practice, day to day. I wanted to understand how all aspects of women's lives affected their politics, and not only the moments when they were wearing their political identities on their sleeves. I also wanted to explode the myth that separatists lived in some dark, mysterious sect-like commune in London, a place that no one else knew and which had no contact with the rest of the world. It was so far from the truth that I decided the reason people believed in it was because they wanted to think that separatists were something totally 'other', totally alien to the women they knew, so they mentally placed separatists somewhere enclosed and inaccessible, in a timeless zone unaffected by what happens in the wider world. This is plain wrong.

The time I spent with separatists was a period when the radical and revolutionary feminisms on which separatists based their beliefs were being seriously challenged in a way that affected separatists themselves. Those strands of feminism, which took shape during the 1970s Women's Liberation Movement, developed into many different perspectives, even though, just to confuse matters, most still carried the labels 'radical' or 'revolutionary' feminism.¹ The variety was partly due to the fact that these approaches are based on personal experience as being at the root of feminist understanding of oppression, and most especially experience of gendered and sexual relations: so one woman's understanding of radical feminism, for example, will never be quite the same as another's.

Amongst the many perspectives which developed was lesbian feminism, and there are many strands of that as well. However, the main distinguishing character of lesbian feminism (as opposed to lesbians who are also feminists of some sort) during the 1980s in London anyway, was a political definition of lesbianism: lesbianism was equated, amongst other things, with being 'woman-identified' rather than 'male-identified'. In theory, any woman who had managed to expunge male-identification from her head was a lesbian and, in effect, a feminist. One of the things that led to controversy was that some lesbian feminists suggested women could not be feminists without being lesbians (though the reverse is not necessarily the case, as it is possible to have 'male-identified' lesbians), but that's by the by.

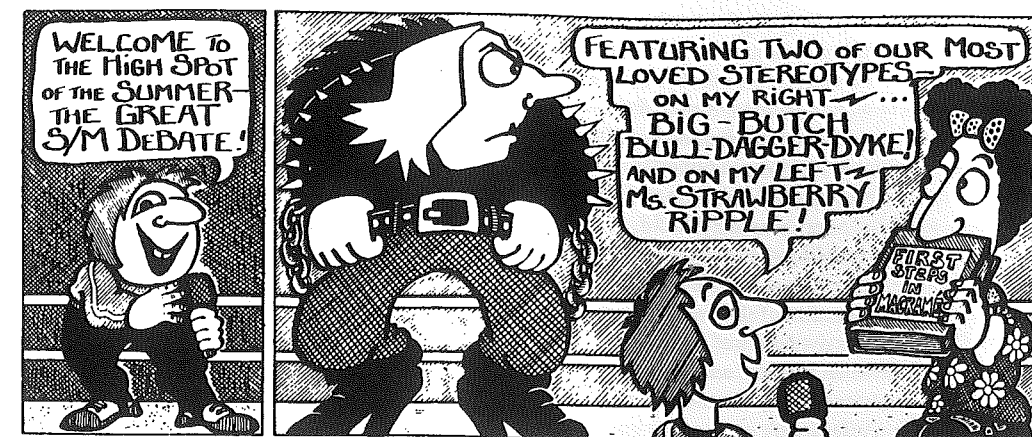
And finally, one of the strands which

developed from lesbian feminism was separatism, a position which argued that withdrawal from any involvement with men was an essential part of the battle against (hetero-)patriarchy. Again, there are a variety of perspectives within separatism, but one of the main features is the argument that having personal relations with men both helps to maintain patriarchy and prevents women from having the 'space', symbolic as well as physical, to become woman-identified. Therefore withdrawal from relations with men is essential to the feminist project.

This position led some women to attempt to carve out a separatist-informed women-only space out of a corner of 'alternative London' during the late 1970s to mid-1980s. However, when I was there, everything they had built for themselves seemed more than usually under threat. The challenge was both from the 'inside', from internal and interminable battles between women, and from the 'outside', from the swing to the right in Britain, from the loss of so much funding from the abolition of the GLC and the impoverishment of the inner city London Boroughs known as the 'Loony Left' boroughs by the Tory press. Or rather, it was all part of the same time and place, it was all happening simultaneously.

Doubts of one's own

More than that, most of the women involved in these battles could no longer be neatly divided into different political camps. Many previously committed separatists were beginning to have doubts of their own. Many had accepted the idea that differences between women sometimes mattered more than their commonalities in the way people experienced oppression. A good number had even begun to explore tricky issues surrounding lesbian sexuality which had previously been little discussed: having given lesbianism a political definition, the relationship between that and lesbian sexual practice became somewhat problematic. Was it a complete answer to say that any objectionable, oppressive, domineering and even violent behaviour in lesbian relationships had resulted from a failure to remove 'internalised heteropatriarchy'? And while separatist approaches had much to say about what was wrong with heteropatriarchal sexual practices, there was not a great deal of concrete practical advice about how to do it differently, except to say that it should not be oppressive. Nor was there much comfort in the



Cath Jackson

thought that if your own personal lesbian relationship seemed to express some of the same problems identified as heteropatriarchal in separatist debate, then you were guilty of internalised heteropatriarchy and were therefore not a good feminist. In practical terms, it didn't help too much.

During my eighteen months in London, these kinds of issues swirled around the debates and disputes women were experiencing, and they started to shift the goal posts. The focus on differences between women, rather than the differences between men and women, was making the unity of 'woman' look particularly shaky - an important practical matter in the spaces built to be part of a unified 'woman-only community'. As one woman, Alice, put it:

I guess the otherness, the difference, always seems to be a problem, because it's almost like... because we're a community under siege, to admit difference sometimes makes it feel insecure, and seems to weaken our resistance.

This was especially so when it was suggested that the notional 'woman' upon which that unity was built was in fact modelled on a white, middle-class, north American or northern European, young, able-bodied woman, and did not fit anyone else particularly well. Alice was commenting on her experiences of being a black woman in the lesbian feminist community.

Not the summer of love

Apart from the Archive dispute ending up in the High Court of Justice, these debates led to some extraordinary events during those eighteen months. *T&S* readers may recall the Lesbian Summer School held in July 1988, which brought together more than 250 lesbians and

lesbian feminists of various hues for four intensive days of workshops, lectures, discussion groups and shows. In one course of workshops, entitled 'Lesbian Sexuality', so much upset was caused that women left the room weeping and the presenter of the series was so distraught by reactions to her presentation that she refused to give the fourth and final workshop, being replaced by an extremely brave stand-in at the last minute.

The main cause of the trouble was that many of the audience, particularly younger women, had been expecting a 'safe space' in which to openly discuss aspects of their own lesbian sexual experience. In contrast, the course presenter, a committed revolutionary feminist, wanted to give a talk about the nature of 'male supremacy' and show how the emergence of 'libertarianism' was bringing heteropatriarchy into the lesbian community in London. That misunderstanding made both sides feel thoroughly intimidated by the other.

A snippet from a member of the audience during the third session, to give a feel for the atmosphere at the time:

I'm really tired of being marginalised in this meeting. A woman here has just walked out because she's intimidated. She's too frightened - don't 'tut' at me - she is too frightened to stand up and say why she is feeling marginalised and I think a lot of women are feeling like that here. [...] I don't want to be told that what we are doing is projecting our pornography. [...] We should be able to come here and talk about ourselves, and not be told that we're not proper feminists [...] Why are we continually being put down and silenced?

Another incident involved a controversy over showing a newly-released film, *She Must Be*

Seeing Things, which is about the troubled relationship between two women, one black, one white, in which the black woman suspects her partner of really wanting a man. Some of the women at the conference felt the showing of the film was an example of 'creeping libertarianism', mainly because of a scene involving a sex shop, and tried every way they could, including almost toppling the projector, to stop it being shown. Others, including the tutors who wanted to present the film, felt it was a chance to discuss the power dynamics of mixed-race relationships between women, and they were completely dumbfounded by the reaction they received at the conference.

Those four days were probably a nightmare for almost everyone concerned. Although looking back on it, those events were extreme, what lay behind them were emerging changes in the lives of much of the audience: the women who were not presenting courses or films, who did not generally stand on podiums to say their piece, but who were committed to their politics in one way or another and were being troubled by the way things were going. Younger women had not experienced those earlier years and were coming at the issue from a completely different perspective, borne of a different era. Many of the older women were no longer satisfied with the feminism of the 1970s and early 1980s, mostly due to the unresolved issue of differences between women. But with these raging battles going on, they were not sure how to revise their position either. Many I spoke to complained that the debate had become too polarised between extreme viewpoints and did not address their own experiences, problems or daily life at all. A few quotes from life-history interviewees to give a taste of the confusion this had all caused:

I used to call myself a radical feminist, but I think these terms are outmoded now, because there's been too much fighting over the demarcation lines... Now I'm so often told that I'm a libertarian that I get too personally distraught... I don't really know how I would define myself. I'm not sure that I want to. (Ruth, 47)

For me, being a separatist has got to be being a lesbian... But of course, different women have different reasons for being separate - for example, black women - and I do involve myself in mixed anti-apartheid campaigns. But I only compromise my politics so far, otherwise I'd lose my integrity, you know. (Clara, 33)

You see, I went through a big crisis... because revolutionary feminism doesn't take into account

things like racism and classism and anti-Semitism and that sort of thing... I mean, there was a time when I was a strict, strict feminist separatist... Now I think, where was my head? (Nicola, 30)

With the emerging feminist theory of the time seeming increasingly obscure and wandering off into the realms of postmodernist and psychoanalytic abstraction, these women weren't getting much help in practical terms from that quarter either.

As the year drew on, all of this started to filter through into groups, meetings, new workshops held by both sides, and people just having conversations with each other over a cup of coffee. Some of the women who had been labelled 'libertarians' at the Summer School organised a series of meetings to explore 'lesbian taboo' topics, including butch-femme, fantasies, mixed race relationships and so on. One of the organisers, who had in the past been a revolutionary feminist separatist, explained to me that as she had been labelled as 'one of those women' at the Summer School, she had nothing to lose and these issues needed discussing. On the other side, separatists organised a Lesbian Sexuality Day in order to explore and promote their very different perspectives on sexuality, something which many felt was no longer being heard as a result of the accusation by 'libertarians' that separatists were 'anti-sex'.

Minorities of one

By 1989, however, although the debates rumbled on in meetings and groups, there had been some important shifts. For one, the separatist approach was no longer dominant in public women-only spaces, and there were fewer and fewer of those. But something else more important had happened in my view. While the 'identity politics' period fiercely debated differences between women, in which groups identified by some difference (e.g. race, class, ethnicity, disability) sensed a common oppression which they felt was not recognised by others, as the 1990s drew on, the debate increasingly became an issue of diversity. Diversity doesn't identify groups based on a common difference; diversity emphasises the individual as unique, and argues that the individual is composed of a mosaic of influences from all kinds of sources, a mosaic which can and does change over time. Everyone becomes a fluid and continually changing minority of one. Looking around the lesbian scene today in 1997, it seems a completely different world. When I

was spending time with separatists in London, the rainbow flag was hardly known; only the trendiest had ever heard of queer theory; Diva didn't exist; the words 'transgendered' and 'spansexual' didn't pass anyone's lips; email was used mostly by computer scientists and the Internet had hardly emerged from its original use as an aid for the US military in controlling its global operations. It would have to wait for the next decade before the dykes of cyberia started to install modems and digitally surf round the net.

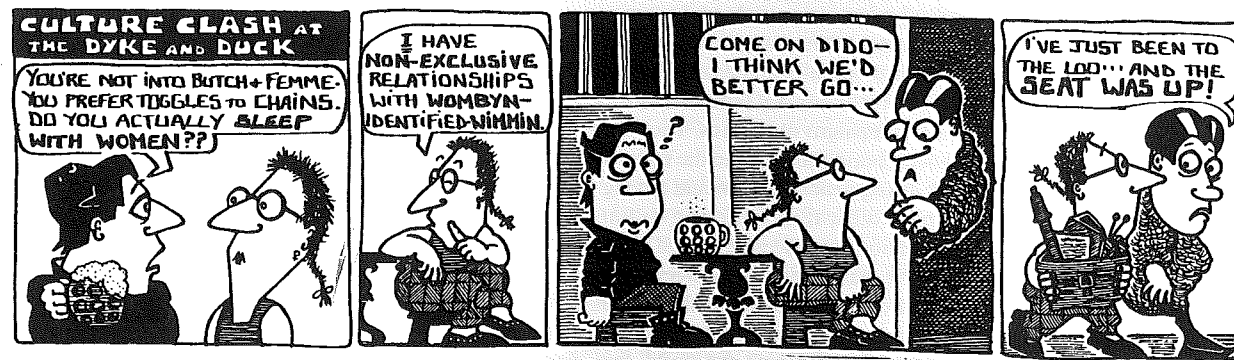
Times do change. Propping myself up at the bar of a trendy new queer joint in Manchester's Gay Village and flicking through the *Pink Paper*, I decided that *Urban Amazons* has truly become history. I wondered how many of the young women in this bar knew anything about those days, about the radical and revolutionary feminism which had dominated so much of the lesbian scene during the early to mid-1980s; about the battles that were fought in collectives, groups, conferences, meetings and women's own homes. But most of all, I wondered how many knew anything about what those women had been fighting for, what they believed, hoped and feared about the world in which they lived.

I immediately admonished myself for being a patronising git, told myself that I was feeling old because I'd found my first grey hair recently, then promptly finished my beer and rejoined the conversation of the friends I was with, reminding myself that I was no longer writing a book about lesbian feminist separatism.

But those thoughts returned when I received the proofs of the book. As I've described, *Urban Amazons* spoke of a time when the changes clearly visible today were just beginning; of a time when lesbian feminist separatists in

London were struggling with those changes and trying to make sense of them, at the same time as living with the lesbian feminism they'd inherited from the 1970s and early 1980s. Nowadays, we all know what happened: queer happened; all the national TV soaps decided lesbianism was trendy, for a time; drag kings emerged; Della Grace is no longer a shocking photographer, or at least no more shocking than others who have begun to emerge; politics, in its old guise of fighting for a cause as opposed to some issue that personally concerns you, has become boring and old hat; even postmodernism has become old hat; and somehow, lesbianism has been reduced, in the public scene at least, to being one lifestyle amongst many. In the old days (and I am talking about the 1980s here, not last century), lesbianism was all kinds of things, but it was not just a lifestyle: for some, it was a fundamental part of their feminist practice; for others, it was a central part of their personal identity; for many, it represented a continual struggle with a world which discriminated against them in all kinds of ways, especially at work. For most of the women I met in London in the late 1980s, it was all of those things, and more. For all I know, it may still be all those things for many women, but that's not reflected in public spaces much anymore.

I'm not saying that we should go back to the 1980s, that today's lesbians have lost their political drive. Frankly, Goddess forbid a return to the days when it was possible to destroy a woman's reputation in separatist circles by simply implying that she was pro-S/M or, just as damning in many ways, that she was a 'liberal' feminist. I'm not one of those feminists who moans on about the loss of a true feminist politics in amongst all the objects of consumer



desire which are sent to tempt poor unsuspecting lesbians and feminists. Many of today's younger lesbians, in their own way, are as politically minded as older lesbian feminists ever were, even if the politics have shifted somewhat. In fact, both the abseiling incident and the invasion of the Six O'clock News studios were carried out by young women, the age group that was being accused by some separatists, particularly revolutionary feminist ones, of losing their political vigour in the late 1980s through being tempted by 'libertarianism'.

What I am suggesting is that the public spaces through which we move today have changed; the spaces which used to be available and visibly represented a lesbian feminist political stance have virtually gone, leaving us with a much-expanded lesbian, gay and queer scene, which always reflected lifestyle more than politics anyway. The anger, and the understanding of the how oppression works still exists, even if it's a bit more complicated than it once was; it's just that there aren't many spaces where these things can be publicly expressed anymore. The book I wrote about how some separatists in London in the late 1980s struggled with the transition is an attempt to make sense of how we got to this state of affairs.

My conclusion was that although separatists did have their particular perspectives, they did not belong to some enclosed communal subculture or counter-culture. They were and are as much a part of London and their own cultures as anyone else. During the late 1980s, they were particularly struggling with the legacy that the abolished Greater London Council (GLC) had left behind in the city, ongoing battles about race and racism, the influence of postmodernist thought which suggested that 'women', let alone 'lesbians' don't exist as such, and a generation gap which meant that younger women arriving in London had virtually no personal knowledge of radical or revolutionary feminist, let alone separatist, campaigns or politics. They were also dealing with boring things like the right-wing backlash, being generally poor and having to deal with the difficulties in finding decent accommodation at a price they could afford in London. The real difference between these women and others in London is that they had strong feminist separatist beliefs which they not only used to try and change the world, they also used them as a guide to their personal practices,

the way they lived their everyday lives, in the same way that most other kinds of radical feminists did and do.

If I learned anything from that period I spent in London, apart from a deep respect for the strength of character of many of the women I met, even those whose politics I personally did not share, it was to read feminist theory which speaks of the personal being political in a new light. There was a continual interaction between those women, the city in which they lived, the groups with which they mixed, and changing trends in their feminist beliefs. What worries me about the way things are today is not so much the apparent lack of political verve, but the tendency for a belief in 'diversity' to lead to naivety. If people concentrate on what makes them individually different from everyone else, and turn themselves into a construction project, releasing themselves from being chained to any particular pre-packaged identity, it's easy to forget that the world is, after all, constrained by some fairly hefty power structures, ones which still affect us all daily. If we are going to make of ourselves anything we like, from where do we get the ideas about what we like? Divine inspiration? I think not. □



Notes

¹ Revolutionary feminism, a term coined in 1978, developed from certain strands of radical feminist-based lesbian feminism, but that's a longer story than I have room for here. One main distinction between them which women mentioned while I was in London was that revolutionary feminism focuses much more strongly on male sexual violence against women as the underlying characteristic of heteropatriarchy than does radical feminism.



Against Our Will

Susan Brownmiller's classic history of rape, Against Our Will, has long been the target of criticism for its alleged essentialism and racism. Stevi Jackson reassesses her own response to the book, takes on some of its critics, and asks whether others read the same book.

When Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will* was published in 1975, it was a book I had to own. I wasn't prepared to wait for the paperback, but instead spent a large chunk of my meagre income on the hardback edition. It was neither the first feminist statement on rape (it post-dates Susan Griffin's article 'The All American Crime' by three years) nor the first book — Andrea Media and Kathleen Thompson's *Against Rape* was published in 1974. It was, however, the most comprehensive feminist treatment to have been published at that time, and in its breadth and scope has yet to be surpassed.

Against Our Will is a staggeringly ambitious book, the product of four years of intensive research. It is nothing less than a history of rape and its regulation from pre-history to the present day, taking in times and places as far apart as Ancient Greece and Palestine, Medieval Europe, Bangladesh and Zaire in the twentieth century as well as the USA from the War of Independence to the 1970s. It is difficult to imagine anyone undertaking such an enterprise today. Feminists have become much more cautious

about the dangers of sweeping cross-cultural and historical comparisons, much more reluctant to stray beyond the boundaries of our expertise, and habitually anxious about the criticisms other feminists might make of our work if we fail to carefully qualify every statement we make.

That the book exists at all is a testimony to the energy of early second wave feminism, the pressing need we felt to uncover the causes of women's oppression and the confidence the movement gave women in undertaking such difficult pioneering work. The book was directly inspired by Susan Brownmiller's experience of activism. In explaining how she came to write it, she says: 'I wrote this book because I am a woman who changed her mind about rape' (p 9). She recalls her initial reluctance to see rape as feminist issue and how her views were changed through her involvement in the women's movement. From seeing rape as a 'a sex crime, a product of a diseased deranged mind' she came to see it as a political crime, a crime against women.

This is the central message of the book, giving it a clear political purpose: to explain

Rape: A Crime of Violence

why rape is a central issue for feminists, and to argue that this is not an inevitable fact of human nature, but a product and expression of patriarchal power. Rape is, according to Brownmiller, 'nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear' (p 15).

Finding Fault

Against Our Will has attracted a great deal of criticism — bell hooks and Angela Davis both accuse Brownmiller of colluding with racism and almost everyone with an interest in having a say at radical feminism has dismissed it as essentialist (seeing men as having an inbuilt urge to subjugate women), universalist (making sweeping generalisations across cultures and histories) and reductionist (reducing women's subordination to a single cause).

I wanted to write this reappraisal in part to defend Brownmiller against some of her critics — particularly those whom I felt had misrepresented her. However, I found this to be a more complex task than I had anticipated. Before I began re-reading the book I was unsure what I would make of Brownmiller's position on racism from today's perspective. I felt far more confident that I could counter those who had accused her of essentialism, that here her critics were simply wrong. What I had taken away from my early reading on the book was a strong sense of rape as rooted in social relations rather than being a product of men's natures. I found, however that my own memories of the book were not entirely accurate, that Brownmiller had not been as quite as grossly misrepresented as I had thought — but she has still been seriously misrepresented. She does, at some points in her argument, lay herself open to the charge that she assumes an inbuilt male urge to dominate women through rape. Elsewhere, however, she suggests that men are not rapists by virtue of their intrinsic nature, but that rape is a product of patriarchal power relations reinforced both ideologically and institutionally. Taking the book as a whole, its logic is on the side of the anti-essentialist position: that rape is not a natural act, but a social and political one. I suspect some of her critics actually object to

seeing rape as a political issue, but deflect their criticism to the apparently easier target of essentialism.

Re-reading the book now, more than twenty years after I first read it, I did so with a more critical eye, finding more problems with her argument than I had seen before. This is hardly surprising — it would have been astonishing if, with so many more years of feminist ideas and debate to draw upon, I could find no faults. It is always easy, with hindsight, to be critical of pioneering feminist work, to forget the context in which it was written and to ignore the debts we owe to those who first opened up new areas for feminist analysis. Whatever the flaws in this book, the research Brownmiller undertook provided us with a valuable resource for the further development of feminist analyses of rape.

Rape in history

I will return to some of the specific criticisms of Brownmiller later, but first I want to try to give some sense of the book's content. Given its sheer size and scope, this is no easy task and I will not attempt a comprehensive summary. Much of the book consists of detailed and meticulously researched case studies of rape in particular cultural contexts. These include: the history of rape in warfare and in riots; rape as a tool of oppression of whole peoples as under slavery and during the subjugation of Native Americans; rape in all male prisons and, most controversially, 'inter-racial' rape. Brownmiller also includes a thorough dissection of 'the police blotter rapist' — the rapist who comes to the attention of the police — and of research on victims' responses to rape (she uses the word 'victims'; the concept of 'survivors' had not, at this time, entered the feminist vocabulary). Finally, she discusses, briefly, strategies for fighting back, both individually and collectively.

Brownmiller starts her survey of rape from the dawn of human pre-history, speculating that rape had its origins in the earliest days of hominid evolution, when man's realisation that 'his genitalia could serve as a weapon to generate fear' was 'one of the most important discoveries of pre-historic times' (pp 14-15). It is here that her argument is at its shakiest since we cannot possibly know what happened at this time. There are no grounds for stating, as a certainty, that 'one of the earliest forms of male bonding must have been the gang rape of a

woman by a gang of marauding men' (p 14). Moreover, what we know about variations in patterns of rape in different cultures suggests that hunter-gatherer societies are the least rape-prone. Importantly, suggesting that men rape simply because, back there in the distant past, they discovered that they could undercut Brownmiller's attempts to represent rape as a social and political act, since it implies that it is an inevitable part of male human nature — a point of view she seems to deny elsewhere in the book (see pp 391 and 400-401).

Once she moves on to literate and record keeping cultures, Brownmiller is on surer ground. She charts the development of laws on rape from ancient Judaism through medieval British Law to modern times. This history is important since it reveals, very clearly, that the legal regulation of rape began with the assumption that rape was a crime against a man's property — and we are still living with the consequences of this idea of rape as a property crime.

Following her overview of the history of rape law, Brownmiller begins her careful and graphic cataloguing of instances of rape in various contexts. It makes for grim reading. At the time she wrote the book many people, including feminists, still needed the full horror of rape brought home to them. Brownmiller does this very effectively. In the process she debunks many of the myths with which feminists are now so familiar, but which we often still find ourselves having to demystify over and over again. She demonstrates very clearly that rape is not the act of a few crazed psychopaths, that 'chaste' women (including nuns) can be raped, that rape can befall any women whatever her age or social status, that women do not ask for it, that accusations of rape are not the result of women who are vengeful, hysterical or who 'changed their minds afterwards'.

Rape as a War Crime

She first turns her attention to one of the starkest ways in which rape has served as a weapon of intimidation — in warfare. Women have been fair game for conquering armies since

the beginning of recorded history. There has been a gradual change in military thinking, though, from the assumption that rape was a just reward for victorious troops to the modern idea that it is a regrettable but inevitable part of war. Rape may now be officially outlawed by international conventions, it may in theory be punishable by military authorities, but rape in major theatres of war is still widespread and it is still used as a systematic method of intimidation. We hardly need reminding of this in the context of recent events in former Yugoslavia. The deliberate use of rape as a weapon of terror is nothing new.

Brownmiller's examples range from early European wars through the American War of Independence to the World Wars, ending with two examples which were very recent at the time she was writing the book — Bangladesh and Vietnam. After the second 'world war' the Nuremberg and Tokyo tribunals recorded thousands of cases of rape. German Nazi troops raped conquered women with regular brutality, and used rape against the women of communities which harboured resistance fighters (as well as against individual women who resisted Nazism). It was estimated that 20,000 rapes occurred in the first month of the Japanese occupation of Nanking. However, 'allied' troops also raped, particularly during their advance into Germany. More recently, between 200,000 and 400,000 Bangladeshi women were raped during the nine month Pakistani occupation of their country in 1971. During the same period, American troops continued to rape and sexually assault Vietnamese women with routine, causal brutality as they had throughout the US involvement in Vietnam. As in all war situations, acts of rape in Vietnam frequently took the form of gang rape, accompanied by other forms of torture and brutality (breasts mutilated, bottles, stakes and other objects thrust into women's vaginas etc.) and finally, if the woman was not already dead, she was likely to be shot.

Two key themes emerge from Brownmiller's analysis of rape in war which recur throughout the book. First, that the likelihood of rape increases in situations where men's patriarchal power is augmented by other power hierarchies.

**NO
MEANS
NO**

Second, she is aware of the propaganda value of rape atrocity stories — but the fact that such stories are used by one side in a war to demonise the other, does not mean that real rapes do not happen. This is important because the existence of this form of propaganda has often been used to deny or minimise women's claims to have been raped in war. A similar issue arises, much more controversially in her discussion on interracial rape later in the book.

Patterns and profiles

Another feature of rape in war which recurs in other settings is the tendency for rape to be accompanied by other acts of violence. In discussing 'police blotter rapists' — the ones who make it into the official statistics — Brownmiller quotes a study on rape in Sydney which refers to 'gratuitous acts and extravagant defilements', particularly in gang rapes, where they served to emphasise the toughness of the rapists and their contempt for women. Other studies also demonstrate that rapists

frequently use more force or violence than is needed merely to subdue their victim, that they frequently act in pairs or gangs and that rapes are frequently planned.

Those men prosecuted and convicted for rape are not a random sample of rapists, but they do not conform to the stereotype of the psychopath or the man overcome by momentary lust either. Incomplete though they are, studies based on official crime statistics do much to dispel the popular myths associated with rape. The 'police blotter rapist' emerges as a man remarkably similar to other criminals. Young, working class and Black men are over-represented here as they are in other areas of the crime statistics. This does not mean that all rapists fit this profile — only those who are caught. While Brownmiller repeatedly points out that official statistics on rape are not fully representative and should therefore be interpreted with caution, she fails to point out that they are likely to include a systematic bias in the direction of those most likely to be caught, and that respectable white, middle class men can frequently rape without coming to the attention of the police. This is perhaps a surprising omission given that elsewhere Brownmiller draws our attention to the use of rape to

**A
Woman's
Right to
Refuse**

reinforce institutionalised male power.

In chapter 8 she points out that while 'all rape is an exercise in power.. some men have an edge' because they 'operate within an institutional setting that works to their advantage and in which a victim has little chance to redress her grievance'. Rape in war and under slavery fall into this category, but there are many more situations in which this occurs. Those covered in this chapter include men's rape of other men (often young, gay or 'effeminate') in prisons, rape by the police, and the sexual abuse of children.

Brownmiller was among the first feminists to raise the issue of the sexual abuse of children. At the time she was writing, there were no national statistics on this crime in the USA. From what evidence was available, she pieces together the picture that has since become so familiar to us, in particular that sexual abuse of children is far more common than is generally believed, is typically ongoing over a period of time rather than being confined to single incidents and is perpetrated by 'normal' men known to the child rather than by a tiny population of identifiable 'perverts'. She also draws our attention to the institutionalised power of fathers over their children, the reluctance of the law to interfere in the 'private' world of the family and the concealment of rape and abuse under the heading of 'incest'. In addressing this issue and the silence which then surrounded it, Brownmiller contributed to the growing feminist understanding of child sexual abuse as a manifestation of male power.

The problem of race

It is Brownmiller's desire to expose rape as both as an expression of male power and a means of perpetuating it, to demonstrate that any man can rape and any woman can be raped, which leads her into trouble on the issue of race. In my view she was actually more sensitive to racism than most white feminists writing at that time. She was willing to raise the issue and as such demonstrated some awareness of the specific forms of oppression suffered by Black women. However, she does not give systematic attention to the interrelationship between racism and male dominance in the lives of Black women today. This, along with her discussion of interracial rape, is what has angered her critics, particularly bell hooks and Angela Davis.

In *Ain't I a Woman*, bell hooks admits that

Brownmiller 'successfully impresses upon readers that white men brutally assaulted Black women during slavery', but goes on to argue that placing this abuse safely in the historical past effectively denies the ways in which this brutalisation, this casting Black women as whore continues today. Hence the continued devaluation of Black womanhood is at best concealed or at worst colluded with. Brownmiller does talk of the continued rape of Black women after the American Civil War by the Ku Klux Klan and she does, at various points in the book, indicate ways in which Black women continue to be victimised — for example their accounts of rape are less likely to be believed by the police and the courts. However, it is true that Brownmiller does not explicitly or systematically explore the historical continuity of Black women's experience. This is partly a result of her vignette style, her focus on particular, bounded periods of history. This prevents her from exploring historical continuities other than the all-pervasiveness of rape as a weapon of male domination. In her zeal to inform us of the ubiquity of rape, and the fear of rape, in women's lives, she neglects the ways in which other forms of systematic oppression intersect with patriarchy, shaping particular women's experiences in very specific ways.

The most contentious chapter in *Against Our Will* is entitled 'A Question of Race' in which her focus is interracial rape. The primary object of her analysis here is the rape of white women by Black men, leading hooks to accuse her of seeing this form of rape as more important than any other. I do not think this was Brownmiller's intention, since the main purpose of this chapter is to explore the role that the idea of Black men raping white women plays in the white male psyche. However, there is a problem here in that Brownmiller characterises this phenomenon as 'the crossroads of racism and sexism' (p 255, my emphasis). The other, equally important, side of that intersection is the continued systematic sexual harassment and rape of Black women by white men. Brownmiller thus ignores — and sometimes conceals — the racialised forms of sexism and sexualised forms of racism experienced by Black women.

Angela Davis is even more uncompromising than hooks. In *Women, Race and Class* she describes Brownmiller's arguments as 'pervaded with racist ideas' (p 178). She sees Brownmiller as fuelling the stereotype of the Black

rapist, of playing down lynchings of Black men and the continued likelihood, in a racist state, of their being falsely accused of rape. However, Brownmiller does consider, in some detail, the rough justice dealt to Black men who are accused of rape; from lynching through to due legal process, Black men who are accused of raping white women are punished far more harshly than any other rapists. This, she says, is 'an incontestable historical fact' (p 216). She is interested in the reasons for this, the ways in which white men, especially in the South, have been haunted by the spectre of Black men raping 'their' women: in other words that the oppressed might rise up and seize their most valued possessions. She calls this 'the Southern white man's property code' and argues that it has been integral to the subjugation of women (white and Black) and Black men.

Brownmiller is also well aware of historical instances of false accusations of rape against Black men, documenting cases where Black men have been charged with white men's crimes or where white women involved in consensual sex with Black men have cried rape as an act of personal self preservation. Here Davis accuses her of 'choosing to take the side of white women' and thus 'capitulating to racism' (pp 198-199). While Brownmiller certainly does express sympathy with white women cajoled or coerced into accusing innocent Black men of rape (and sometimes adopts a rather condescending tone towards the latter) she is not, in my view, taking sides in the way Davis implies. Indeed, Brownmiller's argument is that pitting white women against Black men in this way is politically counter-productive.

Davis argues that accusations of rape and the inevitable lynchings of Black men which followed the end of slavery served to prevent women and Black people from allying to fight their oppression. However, Brownmiller herself is not unaware of this. She points out, however, that this is also the effect of proclaiming white women guilty of victimising Black men through false charges of rape — the line consistently taken by the Left at the time.

By pitting white women against Black men in their effort to alert the nation to the extra punishment wreaked on Blacks for a case of interracial rape, leftists and liberals... drove a wedge between two movements for human rights and today we are still struggling to overcome this historic legacy. Yet the similarities between the types of oppression

**A
woman's
place is
everywhere**

Take Back The Night

suffered by blacks and women, and heaped on black women, are more impressive than the antagonisms between us (p 254).

She goes on to argue that lynching and rape serve parallel functions against the two oppressed groups:

as punishment for being uppity, for getting out of line, for failing to recognize 'one's place', for assuming sexual freedom, or for behaviour no more provocative than walking down the wrong road at night in the wrong part of town and presenting a convenient, isolated target for group hatred and rage (pp 254-255).

Brownmiller also makes the point — and this is what Davis finds particularly offensive — that some Black radicals seem bent on fulfilling the stereotype of the marauding rapist of the white man's nightmares and hence themselves play a part in maintaining the division between Black people and women. She suggests that one way in which Black men have expressed defiance towards white society is by threatening white men's exclusive rights over 'their' women. She takes on those Black radical men who, like Eldridge Cleaver, defined the rape of white women as deliberate 'insurrectionary act', a protest against the historical abuse of Black women by white men, an act of revenge. This critique needed to be made in an era when most of the left thought this was a right-on thing to do. It is worth noting in this context that bell hooks also criticises Black male activists who justify having sexual relationships with white women 'on the grounds that they are exploiting white women like white men exploited black women' (p 70).

I remember reading Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* when I was a student and knew I was expected to find this Black Panther theorist admirable, despite the unease I felt at his description of his career as a rapist. To challenge the prevailing view of him as an icon of Black heroism was to risk the charge of racism.

Brownmiller took this risk in drawing attention to the way in which Cleaver 'practised' being a rapist on Black women until he felt himself 'smooth enough to cross the tracks', that his grievance was against white men, yet he punished women (both white and Black) for it. In effect he was acting within the 'white man's property code', treating white women as white men's property. It 'delighted' him, he said, that he was 'trampling on white man's law...and that I was defiling his women' (p 26). Brownmiller over-states her case in implying that Cleaver and others like him were part of a trend towards and increase in 'interracial rape', and this is undoubtedly dangerous in a racist society. Nonetheless, she did feminism a major service in saying what had previously been unsayable in radical white circles: that Black men should not be valorised for raping white women in the name of a misguided liberatory politics.

The problem of essentialism

The other major criticism frequently made of Brownmiller is that her argument is essentialist, that she assumes a universal male propensity for rape, that men rape because they have the biological capacity to do so. Yes, there are enough universalising and naturalising statements to have made me wince at regular intervals while re-reading the book. It is unfortunate that the worst of these come right at the beginning of the book, in the dubious assertions about pre-history which I highlighted earlier. This makes her an easy target for critics who, having decided she is irredeemably essentialist, need read no further.

Later in the book, however, Brownmiller provides plentiful arguments for viewing rape as a social act, 'a societal problem resulting from a distorted masculine philosophy of aggression' (p 400). She notes that rape is a variable social practice, that there are some recorded societies in which it does not occur (see p 284). To say that she 'ignores the absence of rape in some societies', as Lynne Segal claims in *Is the Future Female* (p 103) is simply not true — although the direction of her polemic makes her focus on situations and cultures where rape is prevalent rather than where it is not.

Brownmiller insists, throughout the book, that rape is not an expression of male sexual needs; indeed that the idea that rape results from uncontrollable sexual impulses is, in her view part of the ideology of rape. She suggests,

rather, that rape is supported by ideological and cultural factors, that men learn rape in a culture which treats women's sexuality as a commodity to be bought sold or seized by force. In other words Brownmiller does exactly what Segal says needs doing (and what she implies Brownmiller does not do): tackles 'the dominant mythology which sees rape as an inevitable product of male needs' (p 103). An entire chapter of *Against Our Will*, entitled 'The Myth of the Heroic Rapist' is devoted to this end and it is also central to her arguments on campaigning against rape:

Once we accept as basic truth that rape is not a crime of irrational, impulsive, uncontrollable lust, but a deliberate, hostile, violent act of degradation and possession...we must look towards those elements in our culture that promote and propagandize these attitudes, which offer men, and in particular young, impressionable adolescent males...the ideological and psychological encouragement to commit their acts of aggression (p 391).

Brownmiller does not, then, see rape as a fact of human life, but believes that men could change, that men are not born to rape, that rape could be eradicated. Indeed she even calls for collaboration with men in this crusade in tones I am sure Segal (given her desire not to alienate men) would approve of: 'the approach must be long range and co-operative and must have the understanding and good will of many men as well as women' (p 404).

As the passage quoted above indicates, Brownmiller does force us to confront the hatred and contempt for women enacted through rape — and this may be what Segal would prefer not to see. Although Segal recognises that the structure of our society, 'which have allowed men sexually to abuse women with relative impunity', she prefers to account for men's motives for rape in terms of the psychological problems they have in proving their masculinity. According to Segal, rape expresses men's 'anger, inadequacy, guilt and fear of women'; it is attributable in part, she says, to 'the cultural connections which are made between "masculinity" and heterosexual performance' (p 103). It is rather ironic the Segal criticises Brownmiller for giving insufficient weight to social factors when she herself resorts to such psychologised explanations of male motives.

While Brownmiller emphasises that rape is an enactment of male power, she does not treat this power 'as reducible to direct sexual

coercion of women' as Segal (p 103) claims. Nor do I think she is intending to offer rape as an overall explanation of women's oppression — a common interpretation of her work even on the part of those who are more sympathetic to her (see, for example, Sylvia Walby's *Theorizing Patriarchy* p 134). She does, however, consider it central to the maintenance of women's subordination and hence benefiting men in general (not just those who rape). This is because rape acts as a social control mechanism to keep women in their place — a point that been frequently made since in many a sober sociological study. The only points at which she seems to be offering rape as a foundation for the wider subordination is, once again, in the problematic opening to *Against Our Will* where she suggests that marriage might have originated through women seeking protection from one man against the aggression of other men. Nowhere else in the book does she imply that male domination derives from rape: rather her argument as I read it is that rape serves the cause of male domination.

The final message of the book is a positive one. Its purpose, says Brownmiller 'has been to give rape its history. Now we must deny it a future'.

Still a classic

Brownmiller's arguments may be flawed in places, but *Against Our Will* deserves its place as a feminist classic. Sometimes it is inconsistent and contradictory, as should be clear from the contrast between Brownmiller's opening, universalising, argument and her later insistence on the social causes of rape. Many, if not all, of the charges brought against her by Black feminists are justified; but while she may have been insensitive to some aspects of racism, she at least had the courage to confront the issue at a time when few other white feminists dared to. There are other omissions and biases too — in particular her unquestioning assumption that heterosexuality is the norm for both women and men. Again this is not unusual in work from the 1970s. For all its faults, however, *Against Our Will* played a crucial part in furthering feminist analyses of rape. It provided us with a wealth of historical data on the subject and remains, for that reason, an invaluable resource for feminist work in this area. It is a book which still deserves to be read and built upon by feminists today. □

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- bell hooks *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Pluto Press, 1982)
- Andrea Medea and Kathleen Thompson *Against Rape* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1974)
- Lynne Segal *Is the Future Female: Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism* (Virago, 1987)
- Sylvia Walby *Theorizing Patriarchy* (Blackwell, 1990)

RADICAL READING

Hundreds of feminist academic books published each year, but few are written or edited by radical feminists and many are of interest only to those interested in abstract academic debates. Over the last eighteen months or so, however, there have been some books which speak directly to the political interests of radical feminists. Here are a few which think our readers should know about.

Lisa Adkins and Diana Leonard *Sex in Question: French Materialist Feminism* (Taylor & Francis, 1996)

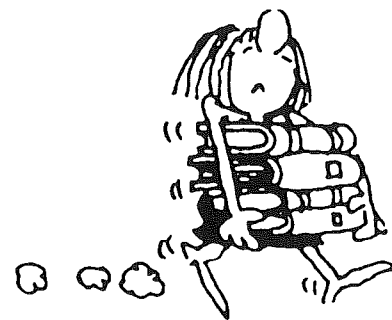
Materialist feminism emerged as a distinctive form of radical feminism in France in the 1970s, but its adherents are usually excluded from the category 'French Feminism' as it is used in academic institutions in Britain, Australia and the US. Although some of these writers, notably Christine Delphy and Monique Wittig are well known outside France, many of the others are not. This collection makes translations of their work available and provides an informative introduction to this important tradition of feminist thought.

Diane Bell and Renate Klein (eds) *Radically Speaking* (Zed Books, 1996)

A huge compendium of recent radical feminist writing, some produced for this books and some reprinted from elsewhere. This book re-establishes the centrality of radical feminist thought for the women's movement, addressing key issues for feminist activism today. The contributors also counter attacks on and misrepresentation of radical feminism and take on the pretensions of 'high' post-modernism.

Lynne Harne and Elaine Miller (eds) *All the Rage: Reasserting Radical Lesbian Feminism* (The Women's Press, 1996)

The essays in this collection examine the emergence of gay lifestyles, queer theory and identity politics. Charting the rise of a new conservatism amongst lesbians, this book confronts the backlash against lesbian feminism, challenges the relevance of popular media images to lesbians today and offers strategies for collective action.



Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott (eds) *Feminism and Sexuality: Reader* (Edinburgh University Press, 1996)

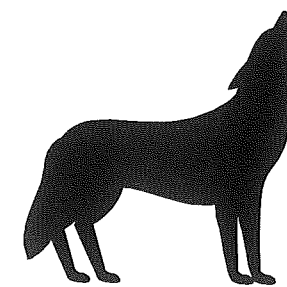
This collection of feminist writings on sexuality over the last 25 years, focusing on crucial, and often heated, feminist debates. Issues covered include debates on essentialism, pornography, prostitution, political lesbianism and sexual violence. The editors aimed to include all shades of feminist opinion, but classic and more recent writings by radical feminists (including contributors to *T&S*) are well represented.

Monika Reinfelder (ed) *Amazon to Zami: Towards a Global Lesbian Feminism* (Cassell, 1996)

The articles in this collection explore the experience of lesbianism and lesbian feminist political activism on a global scale, challenging the idea that lesbian feminism is a Western phenomenon. It includes contributions from India, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, South Africa, Costa Rica and Chile. Each of the authors discusses the oppression of lesbians in their respective countries and places their struggles in their specific political context.

Diane Richardson (ed) *Theorising Heterosexuality* (Open University Press, 1990)

The contributors to this book share an interest in developing feminist perspectives on heterosexuality and questioning the idea that it is 'natural' and 'normal'. Not all of them are radical feminists — indeed they represent a broad spectrum of feminist opinion. However, the editor is a radical feminist and has ensured that differences are aired in the spirit of constructive discussion with none of the misrepresentation of others so common in debates around sexuality.



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 Debbie Cameron takes a pooper-scooper to nonsensical rhetoric about women in Parliament.

New Labour, No Feminism?

Since the Labour landslide victory in the general election of May 1, we've been hearing incessantly what a triumph the result is for women and for feminism. One hundred and nineteen—count'em!—women MPs; an all time record in this country.

Kamlesh Bahl of the Equal Opportunities Commission called it 'an historic day for women'. And I suppose it is: a landmark in the history of British democracy, or at least a staging post, given that 119 women MPs still falls well short of 50 per cent of the total. Whether it's a landmark in the history of feminism remains to be seen, however. I am not holding my breath—though I did draw it in quite sharply when I read some of the sexist drivel that passed for commentary on the subject.

Plumbing the depths

It's predictable the tabloids should have coined the phrase 'Blair's babes' to describe the 101 Labour women now in Parliament, but the line taken by the so-called quality press has been rather more surprising. A report in the Observer newspaper (May 4), for example, solemnly told us—and it wasn't untypical—that 'Westminster will be less of a bear garden with 119 women'. Ah yes, the men will have to mind their manners when there are ladies around.

The report went on to suggest that the most obvious impact would be, quote, 'visual': 'instead of grey suits and grey hair there will be colour'. It's news to me that women are exempt from the ageing process that turns your hair grey

(or perhaps Peter Mandelson has made Grecian 2000 mandatory). I bet some of them will wear grey suits as well, though in photos so far they have tended to go for power-dressed red. But

"An array of New Women march in with New Labour" (Evening Standard)

frankly, who cares what they look like? The impression this 'news' report gives is that the main role of women at Westminster will be to civilise the place and make it look a bit more decorative. Since that was considered to be the role of women long before we got the vote, it makes you wonder why the suffragettes bothered.

It is a truism that where there are 'ladies', lavatories cannot be far behind. And sure enough, national newspapers have worried at inordinate length about where Westminster's new women are going to pee. This takes me back 20 years to the good old days of discussions about the Sex Discrimination Act, when every proposal to give women access to this or that male bastion was accompanied by ritual cries of 'but what about the toilets?'. As late as 1982 I knew a woman at Oxford University for whom a college actually had to build a toilet, which was then trumpeted—not inaccurately, I fear—as the high point of its equal opportunities policy. I'm not denying that an absence of sanitary facilities in your place of work is a major irritation and a symbolic mark of your exclusion, but on this 'historic day for women' would it not be appropriate to lift our eyes for one moment from the matter of the plumbing arrangements?

Wet, wet, wet

If it was only the papers, I suppose you could metaphorically cross your legs and try to ignore the discomfort. Unfortunately, some of the women MPs themselves have joined eagerly in the chorus of banalities. Julia Drown, MP for Swindon South, said: 'Women are more co-operative in the way they work. They're not so into scoring points, and more interested in hearing different points of view'. And according to Gisela Stuart of Edgbaston: 'What we will do is make politics more relevant to people's lives.

Democracy is about consensus rather than imposing will'. In other words, women are keener on consensus than men; henceforth, their presence in numbers will make the House of Commons a kinder, gentler place.

This seems a bit strange when you consider who was the most famous woman MP of the previous two decades. Margaret Thatcher was no more a consensus politician than John Major was a great orator. It all brings to mind that most annoying of pseudo-feminist (post-feminist?) clichés: 'of course you can be a brain surgeon/welder/ member of Parliament, but it doesn't mean you have to lose your femininity'.

Some of the new women MPs have declined invitations from journalists to parrot sweeping generalisations, urging caution instead. Usually however this is either because they don't want to be labelled feminists, or for reasons which are so wetly liberal they drip. Yvette Cooper, for example, told a journalist that 'all-male workplaces are unhealthy. But the Commons would be just as bad if it were all women. We need a balance. That is especially important now, when some of the most pressing issues facing us are about men—such as male unemployment'.

This kind of language—are all-male workplaces really best described as 'unhealthy' (for whom?), or might 'discriminatory' be a better word?—gives some credence to a remark made by Germaine Greer, who argued in a newspaper opinion piece that since the new intake of Labour women mainly owed their positions to Blairite patronage—often overriding the wishes of local constituencies—they would prove to be even more docile lobby-fodder than the men. Germaine Greer predicted that Labour women would refuse to join a women's caucus 'on the convenient ground that it would be sexist to form one'.

Anyone who thinks, like Yvette Cooper, that issues like male unemployment are simply 'about men' clearly hasn't got a clue about feminism as a political analysis. On one hand, male unemployment is *not* just about men; the economic changes which are causing men's

"Young and feisty" (Evening Standard)

"Democracy is about consensus rather than imposing will" (Gisela Stuart)

traditional jobs to disappear have huge implications (some of them, from a feminist viewpoint, potentially *positive*) for the way we conceptualise the family and for the balance of power between women and men. On the other hand, many of the most pressing issues facing feminists have always been 'about men' (their power, their privilege, the way they abuse those things). If we had looked for a 'balance' of male and female opinion on subjects like rape, domestic violence, equal pay and reproductive rights we would not have made much progress.

The 'we need a balance' comment also implies that women—and men—are somehow all the same as each other; as though a women's caucus consisting of, say, Dame Elaine Kellett-Bowman, Ann Widdecombe and Virginia Bottomley would be essentially no different from one consisting of Diane Abbott, Tessa Jowell and Clare Short. I'm sure Yvette Cooper doesn't think the House of Commons should be 'balanced' in terms of members' views on monetarism, immigration and capital punishment; I imagine she would find even one fascist in the House 'unhealthy'. But when it comes to gender, somehow the question is not what our representatives believe or how they act, but simply how many of each sex we've elected; how many women, not how many feminists.

Modernisation v. feminism

The other theme Labour women have harped on is 'modernisation'. Julia Drown declared in *The Guardian*, 'it's time to modernise Westminster', and a number of candidates interviewed before the election by (oddly) the upper class glossy mag *Harper's and Queen* made the same point: that putting more women in the House of Commons brings it up to date, rather like hooking up MPs' offices to the internet. Women also function a symbol of the modernising of Tony Blair's 'New' Labour, like the red rose logo or the decision to use people's first names rather than titles at Cabinet meetings.

In the first week of the new administration, most newspapers printed a publicity shot of a smiling Tony Blair surrounded by his new female colleagues, most of whom appeared to be gazing at their leader with something approach-

ing adoration. Handmaids of the Lord? Even if that's a bit over the top, the carefully-staged photo opportunity was, like a lot of the election campaign that preceded it, all image and no substance. What it said to me was that although more than 100 women cannot be considered tokens, they can still be used merely as symbols, representing not women's revolution but Blair's.

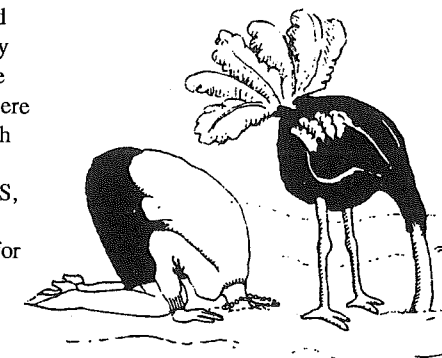
As with claims about 'an historic day for women', there is doubtless some truth in the idea that the advent of a large number of women will help to 'modernise' the institutions of government, making the Palace of Westminster operate less like a gentleman's club. But I do get a bit impatient when sexism (a word seldom on the lips of the women MPs who have been quoted in the media) is talked about as if it were an archaic remnant of a past age, and capable of being swept away by the mere *presence* of women. (Worse still is the idea that women's presence is *proof* that sexism no longer exists.)

The sexism that continues to afflict half of every MP's constituency is not going to be swept away because Westminster gets a creche, a unisex hairdresser, more women's toilets and a less 'gladiatorial' style of debate. My question is, what will this more woman-friendly Parliament actually deliver for women in the country at large?

And the answer that leaps to mind is nothing much, unless at least some of them are prepared to use the f-word and organise so that women make a difference, not only to the conduct of politics but to its agenda.

What have you done for us lately?

When I lived in the US, a feature of their legislative process I found interesting was the way women representatives, both in state and federal assemblies, would caucus across party lines to get so-called 'women's issues' on the statute books and to oppose initiatives that were clearly detrimental to women's interests (such as laws restricting abortion). One of the best-selling women's monthly magazines in the US, *Glamour*, has for several years run a regular monthly column titled 'what have they done for us lately?' in which the efforts of women



"Women MPs [will improve] the connection between people and Parliament" (Harriet Harman)

"Blair's Babes"

legislators on women's behalf are listed. There's a real sense among the kind of fairly mainstream women who read *Glamour* that women in the Senate and Congress are in some sense *their* representatives, and should be held to account as such.

With a massively increased number of women in Parliament now, I hope that we in Britain will quickly learn to feel, and act, in a similar way. I don't expect to see cross-party alliances of the American kind, since there are still major ideological differences between the two main parties. But the enormous majority now enjoyed by the Labour party puts its women MPs in a position to act as an effective caucus if they choose to do so.

Assuming that at least some of them do have some kind of feminist commitment, the first thing they need to do is wake up to the fact that their leader and his government are not going to take the feminist initiative for them.

Everyone agrees that the new administration has done a startling amount in its first days and weeks; some of the initiatives they have announced (e.g. banning landmines, signing the social chapter, ending the jailing of fine defaulters and probably banning handguns) will doubtless meet with feminist approval. But this government which announces a dozen new policies every day has had little or nothing to say on most of the specific issues feminists campaign actively on.

Home Secretary Jack Straw has spoken about alcopops and curfews on children, but not about the under-provision of refuge places or measures to tackle the huge attrition rate in rape cases. More depressingly, we've heard barely a squeak out of our minister for women Harriet Harman. The main thing she has said about women is that single parents (read, mothers) will be helped (read, coerced) to take up waged work. When she said this, Harriet Harman was wearing her other, more important hat as social security minister. A number of women (often identifying themselves as single, full-time carers for their children) wrote to newspapers pointing

"It's time to modernise Westminster"
(Julia Drown)

out the apparent conflict between the minister's two roles. How can she defend women's interests while simultaneously presiding over a welfare state that discriminates against them, and fully intends to intensify that discrimination in order to reduce the amount spent on state benefits?

Another worrying sign is that Tony Blair is importing all kinds of outsiders—people no-one has elected—to oversee key policies like the minimum wage. Most of these people come from business, and all the high-profile ones are men. If the women who we did elect are not to be sidelined, they are going to have to find a voice and make some noise.

Sugar and spice and all things nice?

I don't want to be churlish: in some ways it is an obvious advance for women to have 119 women MPs at Westminster. Then again, in some ways it was an advance for women when Margaret Thatcher became, first leader of her party, and then Prime Minister. Mrs Thatcher was no feminist and she did nothing to advance women's cause, but her example showed that a woman could wield power at the highest level.

That, in a nutshell, is what I want to hear more about: women MPs recognising their power and accepting a

responsibility to use it for something. Not all of them will want to use it for feminist ends, and to the extent that Parliament is meant to be a representative body that seems fair enough. All women are not feminists, either inside or outside the Palace of Westminster. But what I really can't stand is all the oh-so-feminine

disclaimers that women could actually want power (as opposed to consensus and efficient modern management); and I swear I will throw up if I hear one more woman repeating that our unique contribution to politics is *niceness*.

The waffle we've heard from media commentators and women MPs alike reminds me of another contemporary phenomenon which is all image and no substance: the 'girl power' touted by the Spice Girls. Sugar and spice and all things nice is not what I want from women politicians. I want them to make a difference to women's lives. I want them to make trouble. And I want us to make trouble if they don't. □



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