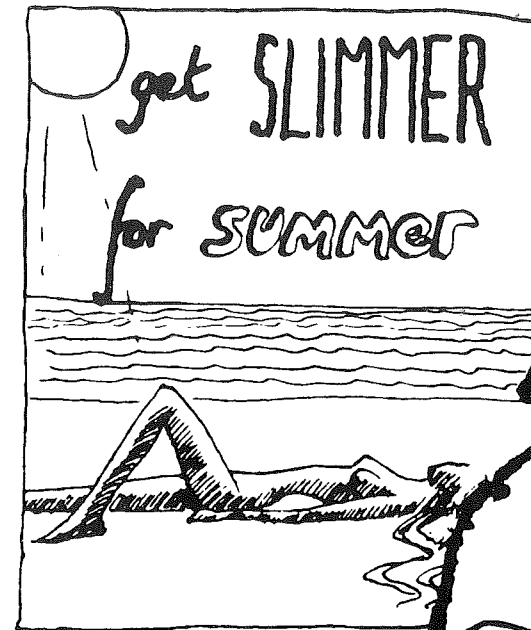


Trouble

The radical feminist magazine

& Strife



Fat politics

Navel-gazing memoirs

Feminist activism in South Asia

SheBoom women drummers

New Labour: Any gains for women?

Child sexual abuse in the news

No. 37
£4.50

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

Trouble & Strife is produced by Dianne Butterworth, Debbie Cameron, Stevi Jackson, Liz Kelly, Jill Radford and Joan Scanlon.

Cover illustration: Jacky Fleming

Thanks to: Kate Cook and Caroline Forbes.

Printed by Sandypress Manchester (0161) 273-7535.

Distributed by Central Books (0181) 986-4854.

Our editorial address is:

39a Eburne Road, London, N7 6AU.

Our subscription address is:

Trouble & Strife, PO Box 8, Diss, Norfolk IP22 3XG.

Copyright is retained by authors and illustrators.

Subscribe to Women's News!

Ireland's feminist magazine

We have news on the state of the movement in Ireland & worldwide, as well as cartoons, creative writing, events & contacts...

Women's News has numerous contributors from Ireland and Elsewhere

If you would like to subscribe, then fill in the form below and send, with a cheque to Women's News: 29 Donegall St. Belfast BT1 2FG

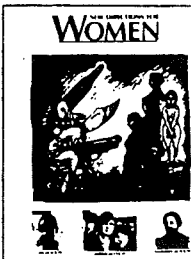


Rates (for 11 issues)	N.Ireland & Britain	S.Ireland	Europe	Overseas
Low/Unwaged	£10.00	IR£11.00	£12.00	
Ordinary	£14.00	IR£16.00	£18.00	£24.00
Women's Groups/Support sub	£18.00	IR£18.00	£22.00	£28.00
Institutions	£28.00	IR£32.00	£34.00	£40.00

NAME:.....
ADDRESS:.....

TIMES DEMAND THAT WOMEN'S VOICES BE HEARD!

Political and progressive, reaching more than 65,000 readers, our six issues a year cover the women's beat: politics, health, grass-roots activism, racism, homophobia, sexism... and more. We critique pop culture—movies, theater, books, art and music—all from a "blissfully biased" feminist perspective.



Don't miss a single issue of **New Directions For Women!**

YES. I want to try a sample copy.

Enclosed is \$3.00.

YES. I want to subscribe.

Enclosed is \$16.00 for a one-year subscription, \$26.00 for a two-year subscription.

Name _____
Address _____
City/State/Zip _____

Return to
Subscription Department NDW
PO Box 3000
Denville, NJ 07834-3000

NEW DIRECTIONS FOR WOMEN
108 WEST PALISADE AVENUE, ENGLEWOOD, NEW JERSEY 07631-3001

get your own oob!



off our backs a women's newsjournal

Join us for our third decade of news, reviews, commentaries — the best in feminist journalism!
subscribe today

11 issues a year \$19

Contributing \$22

Canada, Mexico \$20

Overseas, all airmail: US \$28, UK£16

Trial sub: 3 issues for \$5

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____

STATE _____ ZIP _____

oob, 2423 18th St. NW, Wash. DC, 20009

Contents No. 37

Trouble & Strife

Letters	2
Sizing up the arguments <i>Debbie Cameron reviews Fat and Proud, a new book about the politics of body size</i>	5
Between context and continents <i>Feminist activists in South Asia are making connections between forms of sexual violence. Liz Kelly reports</i>	12
Making a big noise <i>Magda Ang-Lygate talks to members of the Scottish women's percussion group, SheBoom</i>	23
What the papers say <i>Hilary McCollum reads between the lines of newspaper coverage of child sexual abuse</i>	31
Courtroom dramas <i>Denise Mina and Jane Scoular examine the rise of false memory stories on the stage and in the courts</i>	40
Space: The feminist frontier <i>As high summer approaches, Dianne Butterworth cruises the science fiction shelves</i>	46
Slick Willy and the silent sisters <i>Andrea Dworkin speaks her mind about Bill Clinton's exploitation of women</i>	50
A navel of one's own <i>Meryl Altman has her doubts about the women's 'memoir boom'</i>	52
Labour pains <i>Jennifer Marchbanks assesses the new Labour government's stance on women</i>	66

Letters

T&S: A plea from the collective

T&S is the longest-surviving independent feminist magazine in Britain, and it has always relied for its survival on the goodwill of the editorial collective and contributors, all of whom are unpaid, as well as the support of our readers. We try not to raise the cover price as production costs rise, but it is often a struggle to pay the bills and keep things going.

Readers can make an important contribution to our financial health by taking out a subscription rather than buying T&S in a bookshop. You may not realise that when you buy from a shop, our distributor gets more than 50% of the cover price; when you subscribe, the whole amount goes to support the magazine. Subscribing actually costs slightly less than buying two issues at full price, and you also get your copy posted directly to your address. So if you don't have a subscription already, please use the form on the inside back cover and take one out. That way you increase our earnings at no cost to yourself and help to ensure that the struggle continues.

In sisterhood,

T&S Collective

P.S. Why not take out a sub as a gift for a feminist friend?

Europe and women

Dear T&S,

There is now so much talk about Europe — from the European Economic Community via the European Community (that's how I like to remember it most) to the European Union and even the United States of Europe. Within these radical developments we should ask ourselves — before it is too late — what this means for women. Women on the inside and on the outside of Europe — how are we affected by this new super-capitalist model that damages welfare states, environmental resources, whole countries... and creates xenophobia. Isn't it very contradictory that racism is actually on the rise, now that we are supposed to integrate more and more with our European neighbours? Is this integration?

We cannot close our eyes about these developments because no matter where we are in the world, the European project is going to affect us negatively — on the inside, it is the decline of the welfare state, and on the outside it very often means the intensification of neo-colonialism or

globalisation, whichever word you prefer to use to describe the advanced stage of capitalism that we find ourselves the victims of.

There has been a lot of criticism about the European project, or 'Fortress Europe', but there have been few women's groups that have criticised the project from a feminist point of view. Maybe this is because we are not united enough or we do not network enough. As a result, there are very few women's networks that operate on a European basis. A good example of effective feminist networking is the European Forum of Left Feminists (EFLF) who have a contact in each of the European countries, including Turkey and Eastern Europe. From the mid-1980s, they organised yearly conferences in different European cities. In 1993 EFLF produced the book *Confronting the Fortress: Black and Migrant Women in the European Union*. This is still a key document, I think. For the first time, last year, there was no conference. The theme for the last conference (November 1996 in Gothenburg, Sweden) was 'Beyond Fortress Europe — A Left Feminist Vision'. But many of us — including myself — could not attend the conference, maybe because women are too poor. After all, we are ourselves often victims of the cuts in the welfare state and victims in the job market.

So, if we are victims, it means we have to fight against it. Women in Spain have drafted a very comprehensive blueprint of what a better Europe should look like. A paper entitled 'European Women Face the 21st Century' was produced by CO-FEM (Confederation of Feminist Organisations).

Another impetus to intensify protest against the current shape of Europe was the Alternative Summit in Amsterdam in June 1997. This meeting and a subsequent conference in Copenhagen in November 1997 brought together the new Women in Europe Network, which is coordinated by Vibeke Hoeg in Denmark. Our objectives are:

- No to the Economic and Monetary Union
- Economic independence for women
- Secure and paid work for women
- Develop the welfare state — no to social cuts
- Shorter working week without loss of pay
- Women's rights to control their own bodies and sexuality

- No to Schengen
- Social and democratic rights of immigrant women
- Solidarity between women in Europe and the rest of the world

Of course, we could ask ourselves (as I did) what is the point in pressing for things like the expansion of the welfare state if we in Europe gained our affluence at the cost of the countries that were subsequently relegated to 'Third World' status anyway. But then we come to the conclusion that this type of exploitation which divides the world into poor and rich had been going on even before the cuts in the European welfare states. So let's fight for those things we can fight for, or, if that is still too optimistic, let's try it. However, our overall vision cannot remain with a different Europe, but a different world; we want an end to poverty and exploitation no matter where in the world we are. Yes, I know, we are already getting together on a global level to fight against injustice, but we still have a long way to go, considering the fact that conditions even for us have worsened in recent years.

All the three organisations mentioned above are looking for support and new members to implement our vision for more equality.

For more information, please contact Ursula Troche, 64 Marble House, Elgin Avenue, London W9 3PT. Tel: (0171) 286-6047.

Supporting women in Nigeria

*Dear Friends,

I write to salute you for the pains and trouble you have taken to champion the cause of women as expressed in the magazine *Trouble & Strife*. I feel proud to see women in different parts of the world rise up and face the challenges which tend to downgrade womanhood, and we also in this part of the world are in the mood to rise up to the same task of bringing out those women the society of men had thrown into the gutter.

Our centre is established to care for those women who suffer different kinds of abuse and neglect. We also campaign against female circumcision and genital mutilation. We advise and arrange for legal aid to those women who are handicapped in one way or another to get redress in court.

We appeal that you help us to get in touch with other groups and organisations with similar aims and objectives, so that we can interact with

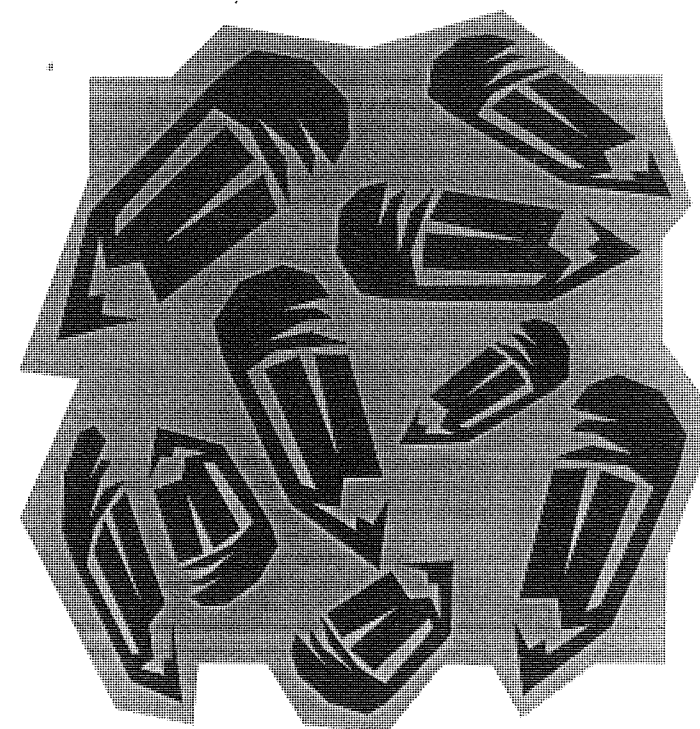
them to improve upon our efforts here.

Sincerely yours,

Antonia Bassey Edom

Antobasi Women's Welfare Centre
PO Box 829—Uyo
Akwa Ibom State
Nigeria.

Readers/organisations wanting to offer help and support to the centre can contact Antonia Bassey Edom directly at the address given —T&S.



* indicates that a letter has been cut

Call for Papers: 50th Anniversary of *The Second Sex* International Conference, 21-23 January 1999

Written and oral presentations may be made in French or English. Prospective participants should send the provisional title of their presentation, a 1,500-word abstract and a short curriculum vitae before July 15, 1998 to Cinquantenaire du Deuxieme Sexe. All candidates are asked to specify which of the following topics they wish to address:

1. **Origins** There have recently begun to emerge in Europe new approaches to *The Second Sex* which attempt, above all, to place the work in its historical context. They break with a type of commentary marked by anachronism, ethnocentrism, and biographical explanations. The conditions that gave rise to the work are given priority, and with them the intellectual history of the period. What are the philosophical and social science models and tools which were incorporated, used, transformed and created in *The Second Sex*?

2. **Impact of the Work** What were the reactions from intellectual and political circles, and/or feminist groups or movements of the period when the work first appeared - a date which varied depending upon the country (e.g. 1949 in France, 1958 in Greece, 1982 in Yugoslavia, etc.)? How were those reactions affected by the political situation in those various countries (e.g. the Cold War in Europe and Japan, McCarthyism in the USA, colonial or neo-colonial situations in Africa, Asia, the Middle-East, etc.)?

3. **The Difficulties of Translation** While *The Second Sex* has been translated into 121 languages — how is it translated? What cultural or historical prejudices are reflected in the 'errors' or cuts made by the different translators and publishers?

4. **The 'Second Sex' Generation** If *The Second Sex* was translated, it is because its impact has been truly global. It captivated and disturbed women who had very different lives. Why was its impact far greater than that of other books of the period concerned with similar issues, whether its readers were European, African, Asian or American? In what way was the Second Wave of Feminism helped by the availability of this work?

5. **Radically Feminist** Beauvoir's thought

continued to evolve after the publication of *The Second Sex*. In interviews, prefaces, articles, conferences and other books she continued to further her analysis of 'the woman question'. Beginning in 1965 she declared herself a 'radical feminist'. Can one identify the various stages of her development? How and what did her own thinking incorporate of the movement's brainstorm?

6. **From 'Them' to 'Us'** From its inception, Beauvoir participated in the Second Wave of the Women's Liberation Movement. She did this with considerable humility, declining to take a leadership role. Which projects did she personally advance? Which were the ideological feminist currents she supported? What was the relation of her viewpoint to the intellectual trends of the movement?

7. **Commentaries, Analyses, Critiques** *The Second Sex* was exhaustively discussed following its publication and continues to be so today. An average of three books per year are published on the topic. In certain countries the text holds such a key position in the feminist canon that its analysis has become a prerequisite. While this analysis varies in time and according to country, it has also recently been found to be hostile and/or negative. Histories of these analyses, as well as comparisons between countries, are necessary.

8. **Relevance and timeliness of *The Second Sex*** Many readings of the work are done starting from essentialist or differentialist positions. While chronologically these analyses appear after *The Second Sex*, do they represent 'progress' on an epistemological level? Or do they, on the contrary, represent pre-Beauvoirian positions which have endured? Can one speak of a Beauvoirian tradition, and can one find it in anti-naturalist feminist tendencies? What is the Beauvoirian legacy for young feminists?

Cinquantenaire du Deuxieme Sexe
c/o Nouvelles Questions Feministes
IRESO-CNRS, 59-61, rue Pouchet,
75849 Paris CEDEX 17 France

Sizing up the arguments

Books about the politics of size tend to fall into two categories. One tradition aims to promote positive images of fat women. Another concerns itself with eating disorders and is not about fat politics as such. Fat & Proud is one of the few books to tackle the fundamental issue of fat oppression. In her review of Charlotte Cooper's new book, Debbie Cameron argues the case for a more robust and militant fat politics.

Fat is famously supposed to be a feminist issue, but there are not many feminist books with anything sensible, let alone radical, to say on the subject. Instead we have a whole history of feminist writing about size which manages to avoid the central issue of how fat women are treated; the authors claim to politicise fat, but end up just pathologising it.

I Can't Believe It's Not Fat!

The classic case of this tendency is Susie Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, whose argument boils down to the idea that we wouldn't be fat if patriarchy didn't alienate us from our bodies and so cause us to eat for reasons other than hunger. More recent discussions, like Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*, implicitly address themselves to women who are not fat but who are obsessed and, at the extreme, incapacitated by the fear of being fat. Really, the main subject of these books is eating disorders — a serious issue, unquestionably, but one which has a different relationship to the politics of size and appearance. (Susie Orbach followed her own logic where it led by *defining* fatness as an eating disorder.)

I think of these texts as the 'lo-fat' tradition, the political equivalent of products like 'I Can't Believe It's Not Butter!'. They say they're about fat, but their fat content is tiny: they are not written by fat women, nor for us, nor about us. Their assumptions about fat remind me of the orthodox marxist position on everything undesirable, from wife-beating to flatulence, which fails to fit the model: since it is only a morbid symptom of patriarchal pathology (cf 'capitalist decadence' for marxists), after the revolution it will simply vanish. In feminist utopia no one will have to be fat, and certainly no one will want to be. Prejudice and self-loathing will melt away because fat itself will have melted away!

Laying out the issues

This, of course, is total nonsense, and Charlotte Cooper treats it with the contempt it deserves. In *Fat and Proud* she is more interested in documenting what kinds of oppression are faced by fat women and how some of them are fighting back. She also critiques the spurious 'scientific' arguments which so often legitimate sizeist oppression.

Charlotte Cooper *Fat And Proud: The Politics of Size* (The Women's Press, 1998)

Cartoons by Jacky Fleming



As Charlotte Cooper points out, size can't just be lumped in with all the other issues around 'beauty' because of the strong connection it has with ideas and practices purporting to be about 'health' — the 'we don't care how you look, we just don't want you to die young' approach. If the first task of any writer on this subject is to spell out the everyday consequences of sizeism (the denial of jobs to fat women, the street harassment, the humiliation and sometimes abuse handed out by the medical profession, the exploitation by the diet and pharmaceutical industries), the second task is to disentangle the 'health' and 'beauty' discourses around fat — or rather, to show that they are inextricably tangled though they pretend to be quite separate. Both are also connected with another, 'moral' discourse. The reason why it's OK to have a go at fat people whereas those who are 'unattractive' for other reasons deserve pity, is that fatness connotes such moral failings as greed and sloth and lack of self-control.

Fat and Proud does a pretty good job of laying out these issues. It's divided into three main sections, the first of which is called 'Fat Lives' and presents material from interviews

with 13 fat women, while the second, 'Health', explores the shortcomings of scientific theory and medical practice around fatness. I didn't learn much from this that I didn't know already, though I did find it an accessible survey.

I was more gripped by the third section, 'The Fat Rights Movement' which gives a thought-provoking historical account of organised size politics from its origins to the present day. Most interesting of all is the last chapter, 'All together now?', which takes issue with some of the assumptions and practices of the fat rights movement itself. This excellent chapter (whose contents I will return to) could easily have been developed into a book in its own right, and from where I stand as a radical feminist it would have been a better book than the one we actually got. As I read it I started to wonder if there were two Charlotte Coopers, one a lot sharper and more radically feminist than the other. The conclusion I came to, however, is that actually there are two tendencies in fat politics, one which focuses on self-help and 'positive images' while the other is more critical and more militant. The early part of *Fat and Proud* mostly reflects a feminist take on the first tendency, and for me that did present some problems.

The politics of 'pride'

Although I am fat myself, I have never been involved in organised fat politics. This is not because I am 'self-hating' or 'in denial' about being fat; it's because so much of what I have read about fat politics uses terms like 'self-hating' and 'in denial'. It is pervaded by ideologies of self-help and by therapy-speak. There's an obsession with the problem of 'low self-esteem' and the need for fat women to learn to love ourselves as we are. 'Big is beautiful', 'fat and proud'...bleeuurgh!

As Shelley Bovey put it in the title of an earlier book, 'Being fat is not a sin'; but if I ever come to consider it a major accomplishment I will know I have started to suffer from low self-esteem, not to mention brain-rot.

In the first section particularly, Charlotte Cooper uses the discourse I am taking exception to routinely and uncritically. She also illustrates what I have long believed to be a general principle: that when self-help/therapy is appropriated for feminist purposes, it usually incorporates the worst excesses of identity politics.

Consider, for instance, a paragraph like the following (p.2):

Today I feel lucky to be fat. The difference my fat connotes has been and continues to be one of the most challenging and enriching areas of my life. I am very proud of my difference, I feel like a survivor, and I think my perspective as a fat person is a benefaction that has made me special.

This comes from a place in feminism which values 'difference' in and for itself, and which never asks whether there are different kinds of difference. The idea that being fat makes you 'lucky' and 'special' rings no bells with me. I'd say my own 'specialness' consists mainly in providing a large target for anyone on earth who feels like dissing me. I have found this a challenging experience, certainly, but rarely an enriching one. For that reason I would not want to make an identity out of being fat. It is, inevitably, one part of who I am, but as I see it, being fat — as opposed to being, say, Black or working class — is not an area of experience rich and complex enough to provide a basis for primary self-definition. There is no 'fat culture' or 'fat history' comparable to the heritage of an ethnic or social group.

'Identifying as fat'

One of the problems with using the language of identity politics in the context of body size is that it tends to give hostages to the lo-fat tradition of Susie Orbach *et al.* As I noted earlier, this tradition makes no distinction between the (material and institutionalised) oppression of fat women and the feelings of anxiety and unhappiness around size from which many or most western women suffer. It thus suggests that the only real problem is women's endless, patriarchally conditioned dissatisfaction with their own bodies, whatever size those bodies happen to be.

I agree that this *is* at the root of the problem, but it doesn't mean everyone suffers in exactly the same way. Where do women get the idea that being fat is about the worst catastrophe that could ever befall them? Partly, by looking at how actual fat women are treated: we function as scapegoats, Awful Warnings to other women. It is problematic to conflate the consequences of *being* fat with those of feeling or fearing fat, since this deflects attention from actual fat oppression, and from the part women themselves often play in dishing it out.

The framework of identity politics makes the persistence of this problem almost inevitable, by inviting women to become involved with fat

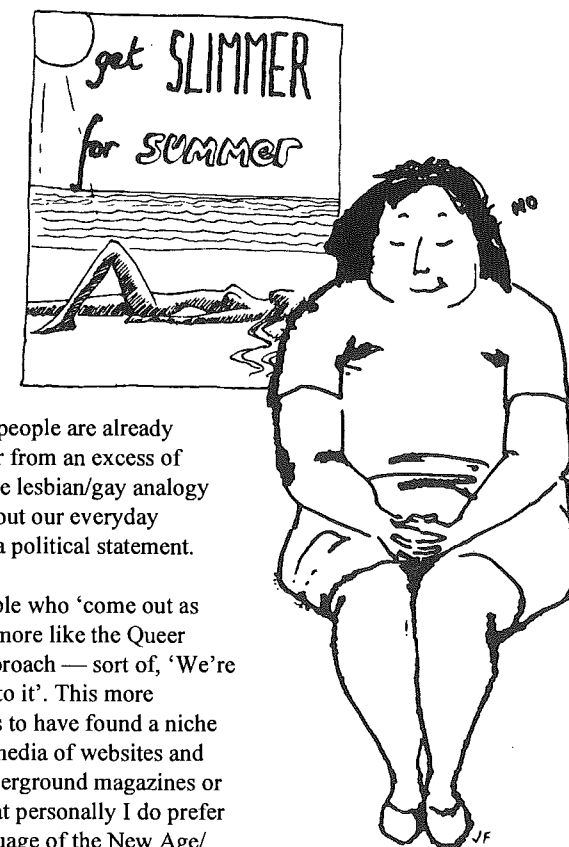
politics on the basis that they 'identify as fat'. Predictably, many women who are apparently not fat, but who 'identify as fat', turn up to conferences or groups for fat women, where the effect can be to marginalise the concerns of their objectively fatter sisters.

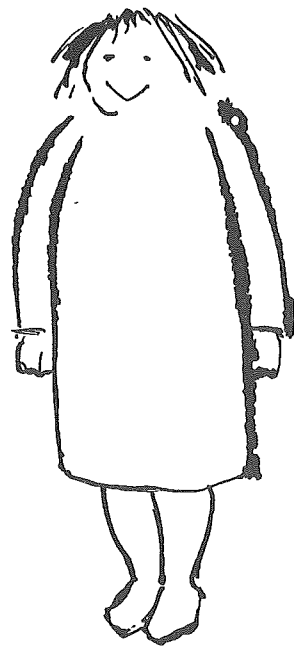
In feminist politics, it's true that membership of many identity categories has been largely self-defined: women identify as 'lesbian' or 'working class' and nobody checks their credentials. But fatness arguably presents unique problems in this respect, inasmuch as saying 'you're fat if you identify as fat' will net you half the female population. This has led to a proliferation of categories (e.g. 'supersize' as opposed to 'smaller' and 'medium' fat women). Some groups have apparently been plagued, or even split, by festering resentments among different-sized fat women.

Coming out

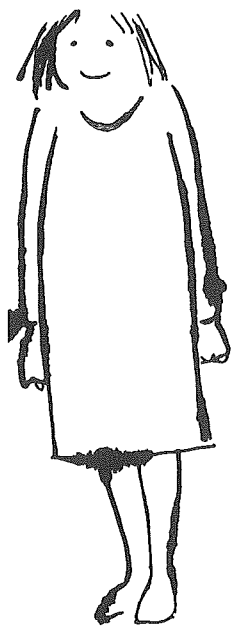
Even stranger than the notion of 'identifying as fat' is the idea of 'coming out as fat', which Charlotte Cooper at one point introduces. As with the 'survivor' comparison quoted earlier, she analogises one oppressed group's liberation struggle with another's; in this case the analogy is with gay men and lesbians, who 'come out' in order to make their difference visible. But most analogies of this kind are ultimately unsatisfactory, and this one is no exception. Fat people are already visible: indeed, we suffer from an excess of visibility. If we accept the lesbian/gay analogy then merely by going about our everyday business we are making a political statement. 'Here I am, fat as ever!'

To be fair, what people who 'come out as fat' intend is something more like the Queer Nation 'in your face' approach — sort of, 'We're here, we're fat, get used to it'. This more aggressive attitude seems to have found a niche in the new 'cyberpunk' media of websites and zines (self-published underground magazines or comics). I must admit that personally I do prefer it to the coy, cutesy language of the New Age/





BEFORE



therapy crowd (the Sisters of Size, the Women of Width, the publications with excruciating titles like *Radiance: A Magazine for Large Women...*). Still, there's a sense in which only the language is different: one lot talks about loving yourself while the other lot publishes zines called things like *i'm so fucking beautiful*. I'm sure you are, sister, but i'm just so fucking tired of all this talk about how we look and how we feel about ourselves.

Pissed off by the fat police

What I would like to hear is something more along the lines of, 'we're so fucking pissed off'—a collective statement of anger that might underpin political action. It isn't as if there's nothing to do: policing of people's 'lifestyles' under the banner of public health is getting more intrusive all the time, and being fat is increasingly defined as irresponsible and unacceptable behaviour.

This legitimates public expressions of intolerance which would not be respectable in relation to, for instance, disability or mental illness. Sizeism is one prejudice you can still hold without ruining your liberal credentials: when the issue is (allegedly) 'health', even the genteel classes feel justified in throwing 'manners' or 'good taste' out of the window. The mere fact that someone is fat can nowadays be seen as a perfectly good reason for chucking them out of Harrods, or refusing to consider them as a suitable adoptive parent. A celebrity feminist (who I will not name, since my own manners are impeccable!) once idly remarked to a group which included me: 'fat people are disgusting. I hate it when you have to watch them eating in restaurants'.

This kind of thing leaves you somewhere between rage and tears; but as ever, the really damaging consequences of size prejudice are felt in the sphere of medicine. Hysteria about fat licenses scientists and doctors to become more cavalier than ever about subjecting fat people to treatment which is usually ineffectual, often degrading and sometimes downright dangerous.

In the degrading category, a couple of years ago in Britain a doctor suggested in all seriousness that underwear for people whose waist size exceeded a certain limit should only be available on prescription. Fat people would be forced to go to their GPs and, presumably, bargain with them: 'if I agree to have treatment, can I have a new pair of knickers?'.

Mercifully, this ludicrous proposal came to nothing (perhaps Marks & Spencer lobbied against it, or perhaps the police feared that drug barons would move into outside underwear as a black market developed). The ideas that do come to something may be less obviously absurd, but they are often far more potentially harmful. Even since *Fat and Proud* was written, one of the weight-loss 'wonder drugs' it discusses, which was 'fast-tracked' in the US (i.e. not properly tested) because of the alleged gravity of the nation's 'obesity problem', has had to be withdrawn because of the health risks it turned out to pose.

These are the sorts of issues that call for urgent and militant action, and I'm convinced taking such action would do as much as anything, and maybe more, to make those involved feel better about themselves. This brings me back to the last part of *Fat and Proud*, which describes — and in some cases questions — what organised fat politics has actually been about in its 30 years of existence.

The flab fights back: fat politics, then and now

Before reading this book I had no idea that the first size rights organisation (NAAFA, which originally stood for 'National Association to Aid Fat Americans' though it now means 'National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance') was founded in the US as early as 1969. In line with the political preoccupations of the time, it placed size issues in the framework of civil rights, and campaigned against unjust discrimination. It also had a social function, organising fashion shows and parties; and it ran a kind of dating agency.

Even in the early years there were women who found this kind of thing objectionable. In 1974 two disillusioned radical lesbian feminists, Aldebaran and Judy Freespirit, split from NAAFA to form an organisation called the Fat Underground. Reading about its activities is a salutary reminder that 'self-help' did not always mean the kind of therapised mush it so often denotes now. The Fat Underground encouraged its members to read for themselves the research 'proving' fat people must diet or die. The conclusions they drew from the science they read (that dieting did not work, and was more of a health threat than being fat) became the basis for most subsequent radical arguments on the subject. It was also within the Fat Underground that the issue of size was given an explicitly

feminist analysis (some of the writings of the women involved were later collected in the volume *Shadow on a Tightrope*).

In Britain, feminist fat activism had its peak years in the late 1980s with a London Fat Women's Group forming in 1987 and a national conference in 1989 (these developments were covered in *T&S*; see references below). The account given here suggests, however, that the acrimonious identity-politics of the time and place eventually destroyed the movement's cohesion and split it into fragments. Charlotte Cooper herself restarted the Fat Women's Group in 1992 but has since left. She says that the group, like most other fat women's groups in existence, is now more about providing support and promoting positive images than about political campaigning (though a new campaigning group called SIZE was started in 1997).

Taking issue: the sexual politics of fat rights

Meanwhile, the most established fat rights organisations continue to engage in some rather dubious activities. In her final chapter, 'All Together Now?', Charlotte Cooper brings to light a number of issues of concern to radical feminists, which have evidently been the subject of internal discussion, but are rarely aired outside the fat rights movement.

The most worrying of the issues she raises is the position in the movement of men who 'admire', that is, eroticise fat women. Known as FAs (fat admirers) or in vulgar parlance 'chubby chasers', these men often hold positions of leadership in organisations like NAAFA, and their motives are, for obvious reasons, distrusted by feminist fat activists. As one feminist, Karen W Stimson, observes (quoted p.185):

The fact that FAs have a different agenda from those they 'admire', the high (perceived) ratio of available fat women to male FAs and the power of patriarchy in general...combines to make abuse inevitable when we give thin male FAs the power to determine or represent fat women's best interests.

Karen adds, 'I don't personally know any non-fat FAs who don't exploit or abuse fat women'.

Missing links

I would put things a bit more bluntly than this; it seems to me that FAs are by definition abusive to fat women, and their presence in the movement is by definition a problem. Charlotte's discussion suggests to me, however, that there is some confusion about the nature of the problem.

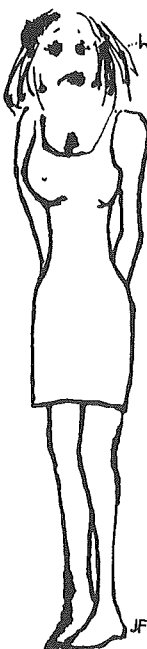
Even when it has some analysis of gender, fat politics often seems to lack a clear analysis connecting the oppression of fat women to the workings of compulsory heterosexuality.

This is how I would analyse the FAs/abuse issue. NAAFA, like many other mixed fat rights organisations, has always seen one of its functions as being to 'help' fat people acquire (hetero)sexual partners, given that in the mainstream they are often viewed as sexually ineligible. While this was (and is) presented as an equal opportunity activity, it is likely, in a context of overall male dominance, that the main agenda was (and is) to secure for fat men a form of 'normal' male privilege which they felt they were denied, i.e. sexual access to women. With this set-up in place, and no restrictions on non-fat people joining, some non-fat men might well be struck by the possibilities of NAAFA as a place to prey on women.

I would not necessarily assume that all these so-called FAs are fat fetishists: it seems possible that what some of them eroticise is the idea of women who will be pathetically grateful for any kind of sexual attention. The basic problem as I see it is the assumption that fat women's interests 'naturally' include an interest in becoming sexual objects for men, either fat or thin. FAs become an issue because their interest in fat women is felt to be somehow 'abnormal' (fetishistic) and demeaning, but the connection with more 'ordinary' forms of sexual exploitation (of women by men in all size combinations) goes unnoticed.

Charlotte Cooper's interview data suggests that some heterosexual fat women are grateful for male sexual interest. Though her informants all have pretty high levels of political awareness, around gender as well as size, a number of the straight women cite meeting a sympathetic or admiring man as the most important source of positive change in their self-perceptions. This need for validation through male approval, it seems to me, is one of the things which keeps a lot of women's fat politics from being truly radical.

Then again, it is my experience that lesbian feminist circles are not immune from fat prejudice and stereotyping; they cannot always be relied on to provide the support women need if they are to reject dubious and reactionary forms of fat 'acceptance'. This is an issue which would bear more discussion, though Charlotte Cooper has little to say about it.



AFTER

Playing for laughs

Another potentially interesting topic which is briefly raised but not pursued very far is the position of fat women in the culture and entertainment industries. In most sectors of these industries, fat women (and indeed men) are generally unacceptable, but in a few sectors they are highly visible. Blues singing is one case in point; another one is comedy.

The whole question of size and humour has been much discussed in fat activist circles, and some campaigns have focused specifically on attacking offensive fat jokes in, for instance, Hallmark cards. The issue becomes more complex when fat people themselves makes a career out of being laughed at, and matters are complicated still further when sexism is combined with sizeism by a female performer. In this connection Charlotte mentions Jo Brand and Dawn French (she could also have mentioned Roseanne Barr); and she notes that fat activists have sometimes disagreed about whether the audience laughs with them or at them.

I found this interesting, because although I think these women are talented, I rarely find them funny. Is it because they use their size as a source of humour? On reflection, I don't think it's as simple as that. It has more to do with the links they make or don't make to their (hetero)sexuality.

Jo Brand's persona, for example, which I am very uncomfortable with, is that of a woman who apparently hates men but would go to bed with one like a shot if only she were asked. She wears her size defiantly, but at the same time it appears as the source of her ambivalence and bitterness towards men (they reject her because she is

unattractive, and thus prove how worthless they are). So the message is very mixed, and in terms of sexuality it is thoroughly conventional.

Dawn French, on the other hand, very rarely presents herself in heterosexual terms at all; the humour more often centres on the contrast between her and a much thinner woman, like her colleague Jennifer Saunders. The size joke I most clearly remember her doing — I remember it because I actually found it funny — was a sequence in which she danced with the ballerina Darcey Bussell, behaving all the while as if she were the prima donna while the professional dancer was a graceless novice. Although the intention was to make herself as a fat woman look ridiculous, the reason I found it funny was that I felt Darcey Bussell looked just as stupid; it became a parody of ballet itself, and the effect was to point up the intrinsic idiocy of ballerinas as icons of femininity.

I can't say if Dawn French meant me to interpret it like this, or if any other viewer did so. But whatever the joke was supposed to be, at least it didn't depend on a fat woman being humiliated by a man, or fantasising about one who will not humiliate her, or taking revenge on men for past humiliations. With Jo Brand it always does depend on one or other of those things, and that's why I find her unwatchable.

Questioning feminist myths

Another admirable thing about the last chapter of *Fat and Proud* is that in it Charlotte Cooper questions a number of beliefs which have acquired the status of sacred myths in many feminist discussions of the politics of size.

For instance, it is taken as an article of faith that the current equation of beauty with thinness

is a recent aberration of western European cultures. In other cultures, and at earlier periods in this one, fat women were/are admired rather than reviled.

This idea often depends on questionable interpretations of the evidence. Charlotte points out that Rubens (the most commonly-cited 'fat admirer' in the history of western art) was not a social realist painting individual women he considered attractive, his paintings had a strongly allegorical component. Even more obviously allegorical are the rotund female fertility symbols sometimes cited as 'proof' that the cultures of antiquity celebrated fat women. Deducing from these representations that fat women in earlier times had a better deal than now is like deducing from the picture of the Queen's head on coins that Britain in the second half of the twentieth century was a society dominated by women.

Charlotte also sets out to debunk the stereotype of African or Pacific cultures as fat-accepting. She quotes fat Black women who have never experienced their communities' supposed delight in abundant flesh, and points out that a great deal of what we 'know' about attitudes to body size in nonwestern societies has been filtered through the perceptions of European travellers and anthropologists, many of whom projected all kinds of 'primitive' beliefs onto their 'exotic' subjects. We cannot dismiss some of these projections as racist nonsense while retaining others — like the idea of fat women being honoured as symbols of fertility and plenty — because they happen to suit our politics or fuel our fantasies.

Perhaps the most important thing Charlotte says about the idea that fat women were preferred to thin ones in other cultures/periods is: 'so what if they were?' Even if it exists, the reasons most often given for such a preference (e.g. fat symbolises fertility, or it displays the ability of a woman's male 'owner' to provide abundant food) are, from a feminist viewpoint, repulsive. Practices like force-feeding pubescent girls to make them fat, attested in parts of Africa, can hardly be seen as less abusive than encouraging young women in the west to emulate Kate Moss's shape by going on starvation diets. From a feminist perspective these are variations on one theme. Practices which coerce women to be fat,

thin or whatever, and social values which define and judge us on the basis of size, are invariably linked to the workings of patriarchy in general and the heterosexual market in particular.

Moving the movement on

Charlotte Cooper makes the telling observation that

[Fat activists] have relied heavily on pre-existing frameworks, such as the social model of disability, New Age spirituality, sexual politics, or medicine, and these are as diverse as our identities as fat people (p.147).

This sums up a lot of what bothers me about some of the analyses presented in *Fat and Proud*. It's as if you can throw anything into the mix, and if that makes your overall position unclear or contradictory you just reach for a platitude like 'as diverse as our identities as fat people'. Because we are 'diverse', and our differences must be respected, it is seemingly taboo to voice such obvious objections as, 'but medicine and New Age ideas entail diametrically opposite assumptions', let alone make judgements on the frameworks themselves (for me, for instance, the framework of New Age spirituality applied to anything at all has the considerable drawback of being unrelieved nonsense).

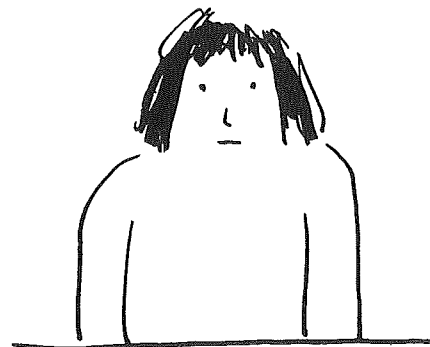
I understand why it's important to affirm that fat people are not an undifferentiated homogenised mass, but the problem about justifying your position with reference to your unique 'identity as a fat person' is that it brings political argument, and thus the development of *collective* analyses and priorities, to a virtual standstill. You can't argue with someone's 'identity'. You can only take issue — and as Charlotte herself demonstrates in her final chapter, this need not be done in a disrespectful way — with the accuracy, coherence or logic of their position. If people are unwilling to engage in this kind of exchange, if they view any kind of challenge as an attack on the very essence of their being, their thinking will never move on from where it is.

Fat and Proud is undoubtedly a useful sourcebook, but it is most interesting and most challenging when it has the courage of some kind of consistent political conviction. I hope that many women will read the book, but I also hope their responses to the best and most politically courageous parts of it will help to move the movement on. □

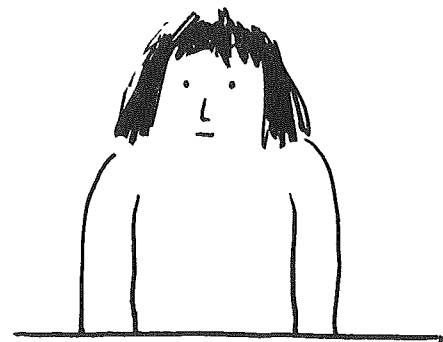
References

- Shelley Bovey *Being Fat Is Not A Sin* (Pandora, 1989)
 Tina Jenkins and Margot Farnham 'As I am', *T&S* 13, Spring 1988
 Susie Orbach *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (Arrow, 1978)
 L. Schoenfelder and B. Wieser *Shadow on a Tightrope* (Aunt Lute Press, 1989)
 Heather Smith 'Creating a politics of appearance', *T&S* 16, Summer 1989.
 Naomi Wolf *The Beauty Myth* (Chatto, 1990)
Contact Addresses
 Fat Women's Group
 The WHEEL
 4 Wild Court
 London WC2B 5AU
 SIZE
 c/o Diana Pollard
 Ten Palace Gate
 London W8 5NF

if I were thinner



I'd be thinner



Between Contexts and Continents

Feminist activists in South Asia are involved in a huge range of projects tackling all aspects of violence against women. Liz Kelly reports back from Calcutta and offers UK feminists some food for thought.

Earlier this year I was invited to attend a regional workshop on violence against women by the British Council in Calcutta. Participants attended from Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka, with themes covering state violence, violence in conflict situations, rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment and trafficking in women and girls. As part of the visit I also visited four projects in Calcutta. Many of the women and girls I met were an inspiration and a challenge to some of the ways we in the UK have responded to violence against women. What I heard, saw and thought confirmed to me that activist feminists need to become more adept at working with difference and similarity at the same time. I became acutely aware of how contexts make critical differences in what is possible and useful in supporting women and girls; yet at the same time I participated in lengthy discussions about

common tensions and dilemmas in feminist organising. Some things do, and others do not, transcend context and continents.

Women's groups in action

The only word which describes my response to the projects I visited is humbling; it was salutary to see how much organisations achieved with extremely limited resources, and to listen to their plans and aspirations. How many women's organisations in the west would be prepared to work in a tiny room in a slum with a stinking canal outside it?

It is difficult to communicate the scale of difference projects in India work within. I understood for the first time what 'teeming' streets meant; in the city centre this included large numbers of pavement dwellers and street children. The women's groups I visited (includ-

ing the women's studies centre in the university) were housed in dilapidated buildings, their work and meeting rooms sparsely furnished. The most important furnishings were the mats which everyone sat on and some sort of table which was invariably used for block printing. Yet the atmosphere was one in which care, laughter and affection between girls and women seemed to thrive.

There is a strong focus on the girl child in Indian activism and service provision, both to improve the valuation of girls within families and to expand opportunities for girls. *CINI ASHA*, for example, was set up in 1989 to work with street and working children. They provide education classes and other services to many children, and have a sponsorship scheme for full-time education and the new project which is described below (see box for details). Like many Indian NGOs (Non Governmental Organisations — similar to our voluntary sector, many are funded through development funders, including large international charities) *CINI ASHA* discovered an issue, and then established a project to address it. I visited a new project based in a slum area which provides education and training for the eldest girl in Muslim families. The eldest daughters in these families were being removed from school at an early age and became domestic workers, either inside or outside their household. The project pays a small stipend to families to allow girls to continue their education; they have classes in the mornings, and in the afternoon training sessions in marketable skills, especially traditional crafts such as embroidery and fabric printing. The project is now having to extend into work placements, as the oldest girls have reached school leaving age.

Saanlap (which means dialogue) is a larger, possibly better funded, group which defines itself as a women's rights project. It has two main focuses: working in the red light areas of Calcutta and a rural programme building women's co-operatives. Initially the work on prostitution concentrated on trafficking — rescuing (this term is not unproblematic in India, but they, like me when writing this, have not been able to find an alternative which better describes the activity) girls who had been trafficked from rural India, Bangladesh and Nepal, and providing them with safety, education and other opportunities. The youngest child they have identified so far was nine, but the optimum age for trafficking appears to be 14.

Many trafficked girls tell stories of being shown pornography as instruction, and report that they are 'educated' through sitting alongside as older women service customers. The *Saanlap* workers refer to this as 'normalising' sexual exploitation. They run a residential home outside the city which can accommodate about 30 girls who have been rescued, and have developed strong networks with groups in other countries, so that girls who wish to return home can do so.

As the work on trafficking developed, connections with adult women in the sex industry grew; in fact the women are often the source of information on recently trafficked girls, and they work with *Saanlap* and the police to rescue them (this is one of the principles of the Calcutta sex workers' Union). These emerging links led to discussions about the women's needs; initially these centred on their own children, but rapidly extended to exchanges about the status of prostitutes, and wider political issues. This is yet another example of how Indian women's organisations expand organically, widening their remit to address the issues women they work with raise. (A week after I returned home an article in *The Guardian* reported on an exchange between community groups in the UK and India working on local regeneration; what the English community workers noticed most about the Indian approach was that it was 'holistic', seeking to encompass all of the areas' difficulties and needs.)

Visiting one of the (many) red light areas in Calcutta made clear why women were concerned about their children. Knowing we were going to a slum area with many brothels conjured up an image in my mind which bore no relation to the reality. In this small area close to 2,000 women, their children and some men lived and worked. The brothels were women's own houses, which were tiny — the size of the original kitchens in terraced houses. The beds in the houses were tall, and children sleep underneath them. When women are working, therefore, children either have to be out in the street or under the bed.

Saanlap have developed two forms of provision for children, both directly linked to what women said they wanted. They have 14 drop-in centres which operate as 'night creches'; children can do their homework, participate in games and creative activities, whilst their mothers work. Currently about 1,800 children use these facilities. The room I referred to at the beginning of this piece was one such centre, and



during the day it functions as an informal women's centre. The other strand of work involves taking older girls, who their mothers reported were frequently sexually harassed and encouraged to enter prostitution, away from the area.

Sneha (which means affection) is on the outskirts of the city, it houses 35 young women, all of whom attend school and receive vocational skills training. I spent an afternoon I will remember forever at *Sneha*, part of which involved having a dance performed for me. During an exchange (all of which was conducted through interpreters) with a large group of young women. I asked what their hopes for the future were. The staff member told me that they all probably wanted to get married. The girls themselves, however, had other ideas and gradually it emerged that most of them said they wanted a job and to be independent. When I gestured 'me too', cheering and shouting ensued. I was told that many of the young women were asking if they could come to the UK.

The most recent element of *Saanlap's* work is an advocacy project *Salah* (advice) which both addresses the individual needs of women for legal and health advice and acts as a lobby group



with government and the police about both trafficking and the sex industry more broadly. A journal *Jonaki* (glow-worms) documents the sexual exploitation of women and children. At the same time as the British Council workshop, *Saanlap* was hosting a conference on trafficking and prostitution, where the issue of legalisation was debated. Some of the organised sex workers had proposed this as a way forward, but few of the women's organisations supported it (some of the HIV/AIDS organisations do). They did, however, take the brave decision to openly debate the different positions. Through many conversations it became clear that the question of choice, as it is understood in the west, was simply not an issue. Few, if any, South Asian women working in prostitution say anything other than that they were forced into the industry at some point. What is more difficult to address are the basic survival issues, since hundreds of thousands of women support themselves and their children through prostitution in India. Visualising, let alone creating, alternative means of subsistence in a country where large proportions of the population live in abject poverty seemed unimaginable.

Other issues raised by women in prostitution at this conference had a familiar ring to them: harassment by police; corruption in the police; and the stigmatisation of prostitutes. The corruption issues, however, extend into both the legal profession and government bureaucracies; police officers throughout South Asia can only earn a living wage if they take some bribes. This reality has extensive implications, not just in relation to trafficking, but also for women reporting rape and domestic violence, since complaints and evidence can 'mysteriously' disappear or alternatively it can take up to ten years for a domestic violence case to come to court.

Swayam (oneself) was the most explicitly feminist (in terms of published literature) of the groups I visited; it defines itself as 'committed to fighting violence against women', the word patriarchy appears several times in their leaflet, and connections are made with issues like communalism¹. They use a wide definition of violence against women and provide a range of services, including counselling (one to one, group and telephone); legal advice and medical help; advocacy in relation to the police; a drop-in centre; support groups; vocational training; employment opportunities; and public education

SWAYAM



and awareness. They have recently published a book of writing by project users, and one of the support groups has transformed into a theatre group which put together a performance for March 8.

How *Swayam* is structured is reminiscent of UK women's organisations in the 1970's, with many volunteers, including professionals who offer their skills for free. They also make demands on everyone:

Each family/community of which men and women are members can:

- i) challenge violence against women, not condone it
- ii) recognise it as an issue, not ignore it
- iii) support women who are abused.

Re-reading their material confirmed an impression I had formed on my return, that within a longstanding tradition of protest, and radical politics, few if any Indian women's groups name men explicitly as the perpetrators of violence against women; rather belatedly I realised I was the only one of eleven speakers at the workshop to do so. *Swayam's* leaflet is a good illustration:

Violence is perpetrated by 'respectable' institutions like the family, the community, the education system, the job market, the state, the law enforcing agencies and religion.

Since this arena of difference emerged in retrospect I missed the opportunity to discuss whether it reflected a strategic decision, or a political emphasis (many Indian feminists emphasise structural analysis, including issues of state violence).

Breadth of vision

Coming from a context where service provision and campaigning have become increasingly limited to specific forms of violence against women, yet working personally from a perspective which stresses connections, it was extraordinarily exciting to see integrated projects and to hear about the range of groups which existed in a single city. Whilst there were undoubtedly political differences between groups and individuals, there was also a strong sense of connections, of working together towards common goals, and a profound grasp of the power and importance of collective action.

Two other groups in Calcutta illustrate this sense of collectivity, and both arise out of expressed needs of existing groups. *Sanhita* is a documentation (resource) centre on gender issues, which places a high priority on materials about violence against women (they would welcome materials, especially those which describe how women's groups work, their campaigns and the way they provide support to women and girls). They are used as a library by most of the Calcutta network, both in terms of depositing materials there and seeking information. Obtaining and distributing knowledge is defined as 'information activism', since they argue that unequal access strengthens gender



Sakshi

inequality. *Sanhita* claims to empower women by: creating space for information within the women's movement; producing advocacy materials; gender training for grass roots activists; collecting, processing and disseminating information through action research programmes; publishing; campaigning; and providing referral services. *Sanhita* print most of the leaflets for local groups (they produced beautiful folders and notebooks for all workshop participants) — anyone remember when we used to be able to use women printers in the UK?

Maitree is a networking organisation for groups in Calcutta working on violence against women. It facilitates meetings, and organises campaigns. *Maitree* is intended to provide both a strong political voice and an opportunity to explore contentious issues, which may subsequently result in a united position. *Maitree* coordinates much of the activity in what they call Violence Fortnight — beginning on November 25 (International Day of Action Against Violence Against Women) and ending on December 10 (Human Rights Day). Activities in 1997 included a Reclaim the Night March.

The feminist organisation which works most from a recognisable radical feminist framework



graphic from Manushi

is *Sakshi* based in Delhi. They were one of the first organisations to use the term sexual violence, and to address physical and sexual assault of women and girls in the home. They use a wide definition of violence, and the interconnections between various forms:

Sakshi is a small effort to make a difference, to open a few doors for speech, expression, protest and even outrage. We wish to know, to witness, and therefore we will use every possible methodology of leaning and recording this pervasive assault.

The work of *Sakshi* covers training, research, counselling and publications. Their guide on sexual assault is printed in 12 regional languages and is intended to simplify the law (no mean feat, given the complexity of the Indian legal system). Some of the most radical feminist lawyers are members of *Sakshi*; they have recently presented a new draft of the law on sexual abuse of children to government, and achieved a significant victory in having a version of a set of guidelines on sexual harassment at work endorsed by the Supreme Court in August 1997.

This piece of work began following a case in a village in Rajasthan, in which a woman working for the Government Women's Development Program was repeatedly sexually harassed for attempting to prevent a child marriage in a high caste household. Her complaint resulted in no action, and she was subsequently gang raped. Activists supported her in the criminal case and also filed a writ petitioning the Supreme Court to issue guidelines. Within the new framework sexual harassment is defined as

Any unwelcome:

1. Physical contact and advances
2. Demand or request for sexual favours
3. Sexually coloured remarks
4. Display of pornography
5. Any other unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct of a sexual nature.

All employers are required to set up procedures through which women can make complaints, and all complaints committees must be headed by a woman and have 50% female membership. In addition all such committees should have a third party member from an NGO or other body which understands sexual harassment. Employers are also expected to take steps to prevent sexual harassment and raise awareness in the workplace. Unlike many other approaches to sexual harassment, the guidelines outline the

connections to criminal law, and the responsibility of employers to file a complaint. Whilst not statute law, the guidelines are mandatory, so women can demand that their workplace acts in accordance with them, and take them to court if they fail to do so. As far as *Sakshi* are aware this is the first example of this kind of approach in the world; it is undoubtedly amongst the most thoughtful and comprehensive approaches to sexual harassment, connecting criminal and civil legal remedies with institutional policy and prevention. Another fascinating piece of work completed in 1996 is *Gender and Judges*, a research project exploring judicial attitudes to violence against women which combines surveys of judges, women lawyers and court observation.

One recent development in West Bengal deserves mention, which is the adaptation of the Brazilian model of women's police stations (similar provisions have also been recently introduced in Pakistan). One compelling reason for their development must be the continuing reports of what is termed custodial rape — rape of women by police officers and other state officials. The framework is simple — police stations in local areas staffed by women officers to which women can report crimes against them, especially sexual violence. In the West Bengal model there is also a 'cell' (room) attached where a civilian worker offers counselling, advice and advocacy. An evaluation of the model is currently taking place, and first indications suggest that the combination provides access to some form of remedy.

Maiti Nepal

One of the women attending the workshop was Anuradha Koirala, who is the inspiration behind *Maiti Nepal* (*maiti* means mother). In four years this organisation has become known throughout the world for its work on trafficking, and was recently visited by Prince Charles. Anuradha is one of those women who does not recognise distinctions between types of victimisation, so women who have been raped, abandoned children and women escaping domestic violence are all welcomed and supported by the organisation. Their official leaflet gives the impression of a traditional development project, but this is only part of the story. Anuradha talked of how they use funding intended to cover a limited number of children to work with as many as they are able: 'never limit yourself... My heart will ache for the whole night if I refuse one woman'.

The current best estimates are that 5-7,000 Nepali girls are trafficked to India alone each year; other destinations include Pakistan, Sri Lanka and a route to Saudi Arabia has just been uncovered. In the last 12 months the project has rescued 25 eight year olds, and a six year old was recently found in Bombay.

Maiti Nepal is yet another example of the kind of holistic approach which seems common in South Asia; the project's genesis was small scale, but it has evolved into a multi-layered, integrated approach to trafficking. The various elements are outlined below.

The shelter home

Based in Kathmandu, this was the first part of the project to be established. It offers accommodation to girls who have been trafficked, medical treatment (some of them are sent back to Nepal because they are injured or sick), space to talk about what has happened to them, and legal advocacy. Girls who cannot or do not want to return to their family home receive education (at the best local school, which is private) and vocational training. A micro credit union has been founded to enable women to generate income — an increasing number have successfully created their own businesses, one has joined the police and another is considering running for political office. Alongside the routes outlined above *Maiti Nepal* tracks reports of where Nepali girls are trafficked to. Contacts are then established with groups in those areas to ensure efforts are made to identify the girls. Staff members also always visit red light areas when they travel outside of Nepal, and frequently return home with groups of girls they have rescued; Anuradha herself planned to return from Calcutta with about 20.

Transit homes

Four transit homes now exist on the borders between Nepal and neighbouring countries. They serve two functions — to prevent trafficking by checking the papers and circumstances of any young women crossing the border, and to house young women who have been rescued from neighbouring countries. The latter is necessary because official red tape often means that it can take weeks and months to 'repatriate' girls, and in the intervening time if they remain in the country they have been trafficked into, no-one is responsible for their care, and state officials can be bribed by traffickers to release them. The border checks were originally the responsibility



Sakshi

All of the groups below would welcome links with other women's organisations. For some financial support and sponsoring education for girls would be the most useful exchange, others (marked *) are interested in exchanges about support, campaigns and publications.

CINI Asha (education for street children and Muslim girls). T&S have sponsorship forms, just write to our mail address OR write direct to

'Amader Bari'
63 Rafi Ahmed Kidwai Road
Calcutta 700 016
India

Saanlap (work on trafficking and prostitution, publish journal *Jonaki*)

21B Pratapaditya Road
Calcutta 700 026
India

**Swayam* (works on violence against women, including domestic violence)

3F Palm Avenue
Calcutta 700 019
India

**Samhita* (gender resource centre, publishes *Her News* twice a year in English welcomes all research, information — especially from women's groups about how they work and organise)

89B Saja Basanta Roy Road
Calcutta 700 029
India

Sakshi (violence intervention centre, drafted new law on child sexual abuse, guidelines on sexual harassment at work and done research on judicial attitudes)

c/o Ms Jasjit Purewal/Naina Kapur
B-67 (First floor)
South Extension, Part-1
New Delhi 110 049
India

Maiti Nepal (works on trafficking, and seeks sponsors for the education of the girls it works with)

Gaushala
Post box 9599
Pingaisthan
Kathmandu
Nepal

of the police, but stories from young women about harassment, rape and bribery led *Maiti Nepal* to establish their own houses, staffed by women who had themselves been trafficked. Anuradha gleefully told stories of two groups of girls who were raped by Nepali police. The project enabled them to make an official report, and during this process the young women showed the police chief their papers which confirmed their HIV status. Both she and the young women regarded this as a form of unofficial justice.

A hospice

This is located in the low land area of Nepal, which has a gentler climate. It was recently established to care for the increasing number of women and girls who were arriving back in Nepal with HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, TB and/or serious injuries. Anuradha told the story of five Nepali girls who were trafficked into India; they jumped out of a window rather than submit to prostitution. They are all back in Nepal, but three have serious injuries and one will never walk again. The hospice ensures that good health care, subsistence and support are available for the most vulnerable and the most damaged. Damage is not just physical, I was told of young women who, in Anuradha's words were 'gone — she is not there'. I got the impression that considerable care is provided to this group, in the hope that some form of connection and can be made; sometimes communication and a wish to survive results.

Public education

When the project was founded much of the trafficking was from the hill villages. *Maiti Nepal* conducted public education in hundreds of villages. Anuradha questioned the western presumption that parents knowingly sell their daughters into prostitution 'ask yourself, what mother would do that'; most believe the children are going to work in the carpet factories in Kathmandu, or similar forms of child labour. The model of education was to take police officers and health workers to provide accurate information. The police officers, however, aroused much suspicion and few of the villagers participated. Not to be deterred, the next trip included a police band who began playing in the centre of the villages; the music proved an enticement to many villagers and has become a core part of the strategy. They have been so successful in educating the hill villages that the

traffickers have shifted their concentration to the low land areas.

There is now a network of 69 groups working against trafficking in Nepal who all undertake some form of public education.

Targeting traffickers

This is another arm of the prevention work *Maiti Nepal* undertakes. They now have agreement from the government that staff members can inspect every plane leaving Kathmandu airport. If there are any suspicions about girls and women, they, and anyone they are travelling with, can be removed from the plane and the situation investigated. The organisation is also strongly committed to tracking and prosecuting traffickers, and it works with women to enable them to identify and testify against their abusers. At the workshop a large sheet of paper entitled 'Criminals we have put in jail in March 1998' displayed about twenty photographs; they were mainly men but included some women. Amongst those convicted were the five people involved in trafficking the five girls who jumped out the window. Another recent case resulted in 50 people being charged. This aspect of *Maiti Nepal's* work had involved lengthy and difficult negotiations and challenges to police and other officials. I have no doubt it is Anuradha's passionate commitment, unflagging energy and her refusal to settle for less than visible change which has made a difference. Her international profile now acts as a powerful brake on the corruption which previously undermined attempts to bring traffickers to book.

In explaining trafficking, many workshop participants stressed both poverty and the current reliance of many families and businesses on child labour. Whilst not dismissing either of these as factors, Anuradha unhesitatingly stated that the fundamental issue was the status of the girl child.

In much of the literature I have read, considerable stress has been placed on the difficulty of 'rehabilitating' prostituted children. I raised this with Anuradha, who looked deeply perplexed. This appears never to have been an issue for *Maiti Nepal*. Part of the explanation may be connected to the efforts put into returning girls as soon as possible to their homes — both to Nepal and their families. Moving stories were told of the distress families express when they are told what has happened to their daughters, and many are welcomed home rather than

rejected (another western myth?). But beyond this, two other factors which I suspect make a difference are the love and affection which Anuradha undoubtedly feels for all the girls and women she supports, and the holistic approach which *Maiti Nepal* takes. For this project, barriers are not in the first instance things to be written about, but practical problems for which solutions must be created. This orientation may be the most important thing which western aid agencies, and organisations like ECPAT could learn from. The same could be said about the refusal of indigenous organisations working on trafficking to make what they regard as unhelpful distinctions between children and women with respect to sexual exploitation. This drawing of discretionary lines — between children and adults, trafficking and prostitution — is rapidly becoming a major hindrance to a coherent perspective on this issue internationally.

Similarity across difference

A number of important differences between organising in South Asia and the UK emerged which warrant further attention. I became even more aware of how few UK organisations either address violence against women as a whole and provide a wide range of services, or work with the kind of organic/holistic development which pervades feminist organising in South Asia. We also have few, if any, of the resource centres and networking groups which acted as local focuses for action and protest. Having attempted, unsuccessfully, to create such a network in Manchester, I am left wondering why UK women's groups find it easier (even preferable) to network with statutory agencies than each other. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why we have failed to sustain a culture of protest, whereas this still thrives in India.

The workshop and conversations with activists also revealed a number of ongoing debates, many of which echo unresolved issues in the west. The most obvious were: the different histories and perspectives of NGOs, women's organisations and feminist academics; how we locate ourselves and women like us within the issue of violence against women and girls; how to combine service provision and accountability to funders with work for broader social change; how to engage with the state, including whether one's focus for change should be government and organisations or the wider community; legal reform versus implementation of current law.



As in the west, some of the ways these issues arose posed them as if only an *either/or* position was possible — either we work with the state/government or we position ourselves outside it, either we provide services or we work within communities. If a *both/and* perspective can be explored then more complex strategies, interventions and connections can emerge. This can be true within an organisation or within a network. For example, one network I know of in Canada has an understanding between the women's organisations that one of them holds the 'radical' outsider position, thus allowing others to build more co-operative strategies with the criminal justice system and other agencies. Rather than seeing this as a fundamental ideological difference, the groups use this 'difference' as strategic positioning in order to ensure that change and accountability continues to be at the centre of the network's agenda.

Whilst academic feminism/women's studies in India seems not to have moved into an isolationist position, reliant on high theory for its place in world, there clearly were tensions between academics and NGOs. I am fairly certain that I failed to grasp some of the significance of the differences, but one clear perception was that some of the newer groups had gained substantial development funding at the cost of radical politics. One example of this was women from the women's studies department asking why so much of the income generation and training provided by NGOs concentrated on traditional areas of female employment, why were they not encouraging and enabling girls and women to develop manual trades. Tensions also emerged around a version of class and identity politics — which women were organisations working with and whether they worked in rural areas seemed to be the touchstone here. It is interesting how many of the city-based NGOs had an 'arm' which worked in rural areas; I have pondered on whether this model is an Indian one, or if it is linked to the agenda and requirements of aid agencies. However, some of the younger Calcutta groups vigorously defended their focus on urban women, arguing that it was appropriate for them to work in the context which they themselves were located in.

An interesting challenge, connected to this, was made to workshop participants by Flavia Agnes, who was one of the first women to speak openly in India about domestic violence. She raised two contentious issues: where women located themselves and the contradictions of making demands on the state. In essence the first challenge was to privileged activists, who she suggested were not recognising and naming the abuse which occurred in their own homes and families. The second questioned the tendency of feminists in India to make demands on the state, which was itself implicated in violence against women. She also noted that the most common response to issues was to call and work for legal reform, whilst paying limited attention to either testing the laws which existed or looking at how procedures rather than statute were barriers to just and equitable outcomes.

What was termed 'the politics of rescue' came up frequently, as did discussions of what 'empowerment' actually meant. These issues in turn were linked to the agendas of funders, but extended beyond that. One fascinating exchange

about child labour revealed that in South Asia there are issues where personal location and political principles collide. One speaker made an impassioned statement about the importance of feminists taking a principled position themselves by not using child labour, especially not employing children to do domestic work in their own homes. Considerable protest followed, with a number of participants arguing that by employing children they were both protecting them from exploitation on the street and ensuring that they received some education.

Between contexts and continents

I had expected to be challenged by this, my first visit to South Asia, and I was. I had hoped to be inspired by the continuing tradition of protest in Indian feminism, and I was. Much of what I learnt, however, was unexpected. Some of the differences from similar work in the UK were not ones I had anticipated, since they reflected the perspective I try to work from: making connections between forms of violence; working on violence against women as a whole, including resource centres and action networks; and having integrated provision. Especially exciting and validating were presentations and discussions which refused to make absolute distinctions between trafficking and prostitution of girls and women. The similarities in the tensions, debates and unanswered questions for feminists were also something of a revelation, and offered considerable space for discussions in which everyone had information and ideas to exchange. Attention to difference is vital if feminism is ever to achieve its best aspirations to be an inclusive movement. But a politics based only on difference will fail to identify and notice similarities. It was, in fact, similarity which proved to be the source of the most animated and rewarding of the exchanges between contexts and continents.

Interview: Creating a campaign

In this short interview Manjima, a young woman who describes herself as having become a feminist in the last 12 months describes how a campaign grew out of her own experience and began on March 8 1998. She was returning from a women's conference with members of the group she belongs to (Jagori — Women Awake — a resource and training centre in Delhi). For days they shared a train carriage with several men from the military who had been drinking and who were obnoxious for much of the time.

Manjima: As I was going to leave the train I had to pass him, and I had my luggage in one hand and was helping the coolie with the other. He put his hand under my clothes and squeezed my leg. I was so shocked, I hit him. He then said 'how dare you, a girl, hit me' and hit me right back, my glasses went flying. I was near the door so I went out and told the others and said 'let's do something, we must do something, get the police'. I was dazed and just wanted them to do something while I recovered. One woman went and got a policeman who said he could not find the man. He had locked himself in the toilet, so all the women went back on the train and banged on the door. He came out, but all puffed up saying 'I'm in the army, you can't touch me, go on call my commander'. The police didn't do anything, and said 'come on it was an accident, just say sorry'. We refused and demanded that he take a statement. But the men got back on the train and it moved out of the station and they waved at us. We were furious there were women running after the train shouting, it was ridiculous.

It took us two and half hours to make a complaint because first we had to complain against the policeman who had not done anything, and then file an FIR [first instance report — similar to a statement in the UK]. It took so much determination for them to take us seriously, and we were a group of strong angry women. I think it was when we mentioned the press — that if they refused we would call a press conference the next day — that they began to take notice. The men were apprehended the next day, the police had not even taken their names, but we described them and had an idea of

their berth numbers. The military police took them off the train, took their statements and let them go.

We then began writing letters to the RPF (Railway Protection Force) and the GRP (Government Railway Police); in the one to the RPF we complained about the policeman's lack of action; he had said 'madam we protect property not people'. We also reported it to the National Human Rights Commission and they have taken on the case. What was amazing was that the railway said this was the first complaint like this, but when we began talking about it women had stories of similar things that had happened to them.

The campaign was born then and things got a lot stranger. The army obviously took it seriously — their image was at stake. The three men were sent to Delhi on their own. They came to the project, asked for me by name, but I was not in that day. They haunted the project trying to get us to drop the case, saying they would lose their jobs, what about their wives and children, one that he he'd a sick mother — all this blackmail. We said we refused to communicate with them outside the court. I was called to identify them and they tried again. They tried to get my personal address and phone number. I think the case will get to court this month (March 1988) but there is a slight complication because all three of them were travelling under someone else's name.

All sorts of stories then came out; women began talking. And there was a case three years ago where three tribal women were raped on exactly the same train by army *givanis*. Some horrifying cases came out, in one a mother and her daughter were travelling, sleeping in berths. The girl was ten and small so she took up only part of the berth; in the middle of the night this man got in next to her! She managed to squeeze out and told her mother, when the train officials came they said 'oh well nothing happened, better not to make a fuss'. We thought OK there is a pattern here and we should campaign.

We wanted to communicate three things: that these things were crimes; what women could do about it; and to encourage other passengers to



गाड़ियों में महिलाओं के साथ
यौन हिंसा बन्द करो



STOP SEXUAL VIOLENCE
AGAINST WOMEN ON TRAINS

Footnote

¹ This term refers to complex social relations which include religion, ethnicity, region and forms of fundamentalism, and have been the source of much internal conflict in countries in South Asia.

support women when it happens. There was very little time: this was mid-February and we decided on a poster campaign on making travel safe for women, because even thinking about travelling becomes a negotiated risk for women, before she ever goes anywhere, we wanted to say we had a fundamental right to move freely and safely. So we made the poster and wrote a leaflet and mobilised for 8 March, both of which we now want to revise because they were written very quickly.

We started off thinking ambitiously — that we should cover all trains nationally, but decided on a trial run in New Delhi Station. We were there all day on 8 March, giving out leaflets in Hindi and English, especially to women. We had a meeting place on Platform 5 with a banner and placards and slogans. One woman checked what trains were leaving and we worked in teams of six, because that's how many it took to plaster a whole train, to glue the posters and leaflets outside the bathrooms in each carriage. Lots of women turned up, we all wore black and had bags to carry the posters and leaflets. We had planned to stay till 11.30 to do the night trains, but by 1 we had no glue left and by 4.30 we had no more posters. No one could move a muscle, we were so exhausted.

Our biggest help were the street children. There was a boy who has polio and walks on his knees, and he earns money by sweeping the platforms, he mixed the glue with us all day. Other children put the posters on local trains, tiny kids would rush off with the posters glued to plaster the trains and when we finished they said 'tell us when you are doing it again and we will help'. The co-ordinator of *Jagori* asked the boy who stayed with us whether he wasn't losing money, and he rolled up his sleeve and there was a piece of cloth round his arm and he touched it saying 'it's ok I have enough for today's dinner'. She then talked to him about saving money and he said 'save, what for, I can't have a savings account because I haven't got an address', so she felt she learnt something that day too!

It really was a great success, we had worried that the RDF would come down hard on us, and the police. But I had talked the day before to the police and the railway union, and it was very good we did that. The union worked with us, and when we ran out of glue they made some from flour and water in their canteen. They also kept announcing what were doing on the public address system every hour or so, saying it was

International Women's Day and that harassment was illegal.

The next phase

That was phase one. We are now planning phase two. We are meeting next week to evaluate what happened, and think about how to expand the campaign. There are four stations in Delhi, so should we do all of them, should we do it every couple of weeks, or every month? Should we go from 5-8 to target the night trains? So what precise strategy are we going to use? We are doing it again on 28 March from 5-11 on the night trains.

It was truly amazing, it was my first campaign, so maybe I would feel that, but it was like delivering a baby. When my friend and I first saw women sitting reading our leaflets we looked at each other and I said 'it's really happening'! We are going to make it national by making copies of the new posters and leaflets and sending them to core women's organisations in each state, suggesting they translate them into their own languages. Even if we only do it one day a month that will be great, because so many people use stations.

Liz: You mentioned Jagori did work on lesbian issues, is there any campaigning about this?

Manjima: A recent law, section 377, has been passed which says that women who run away with women are punishable, it is criminal to 'have sex against the order of nature'. I don't know very much about it, but some women's organisations are organising a petition to oppose it.

The issue of lesbianism is very problematic here, there is far less visibility and lots of problems, even at the big women's conference we went to. It was on the agenda because of this law, but the local groups cut out this section before any of the information was made public. It caused uproar at the conference, there was a lot of conflict about it, because the host group just didn't want it talked about — they saw it as a very 'Bombay, Delhi problem'

Liz: Well that's slightly better than it's only a western problem! □

Note: Manjima talked about the railway campaign at the workshop and there was a lot of support for taking it to other cities. Anyone wanting more information about section 377 should contact *Sakshi* (see contact list).

Making a big noise

SheBoom, a women's percussion band from Glasgow, have been making themselves heard loud and clear in Scotland and beyond for the past five years. SheBoomer Magdalene Ang-Lygate talks to two other group members about the pleasures of drumming.

Unless you have an incredibly restricted social life, or indulge in leisure activities limited to mail order catalogue collecting, you would probably have noticed a growth in the number of percussion or samba bands around. A few of these bands are women-only and somehow it has become commonplace for the public to accept the idea that such bands are 'normal' when numerically, there are still more male drummers than female. *Trouble & Strife* readers will be interested to know that there is in fact a specific (feminist?) moment which can be traced as the beginning of the women's drumming movement in Britain. And neither Xena nor the Spice Girls had anything to do with it. This article contains the substance of two exclusive interviews — covering the conception and continuance of the SheBoom phenomenon.

Background

SheBoom is a powerful and unforgettably dynamic Celtic women's percussion band based in Glasgow. It came into the world with a

pyrotechnic bang on Samhain (Halloween) 1993 at the Glasgow District Council funded Glasgay! festival. Their sensational success sparked instant critical acclaim and inspired the birth of many women's drumming bands initially within Scotland and lately throughout Europe. Since the launch of the SheBoom website, contact has also been made with several similar groups all over the globe.

SheBoom perform a mix of Afro-Brazilian samba, African, Latin American, Celtic and European rhythms creatively arranged for mass performance. They are 40 strong and play a range of percussion instruments such as the repenique — high pitched light drum with a distinctive 'cracking' sound that makes it ideally suited to 'call' to the other drums engaging them in drum dialogue; surdo — large, heavyweight drum with a deeply resonating and imposing voice which is the pulsating 'heartbeat' of the ensemble; tom — tenor and bass toms are of various sizes and timbres which together strengthen mid-range melody; snare — racy,

'Who wants to be a Goddess when she can be a SheBoomer?'

rapid, rhythmic, providing clear contrast to toms and surdos with its exacting precision. Other instruments include the tamborim, whistle, shakers, agogo bells, wood blocks, conga and bongo.

In seeking to foster a spirit of solidarity instead of rivalry, SheBoom maintains strong links with its daughter/sister bands. Our occasional combined drumming sessions have been awesome and can be heard for miles around! Although not an explicitly political group, SheBoom has supported many local and national campaigns that concern its members. For example, the launch of the Zero Tolerance Campaign at the Royal Concert Hall, Glasgow; London Pride and Pride Scotland Marches, World Aids Day events; the Yes/Yes Campaign for Scottish Devolution. From time to time SheBoom has also played at charity and political fund-raising events such as Ayrshire Hospice, People's Dispensary for Sick Animals, Barnardo Homes, Stonewall Equality Concert, Strathclyde Rape Crisis Centre, Anti-Poverty Campaign, Faslane Peace Camp, Big Issue. The bulk of SheBoom events remain firmly rooted in sheer entertainment and the celebration of great percussion music.

They have performed to appreciative audiences at the Royal Albert Hall, London;

Bath International Music Festival; Glasgow International Jazz Festival; Edinburgh Winter Festival Torchlight Procession and at the famous 'La Merce' Dragon and Fire Festival in Barcelona. They have received press acclaim for their contribution to the new Pet Shop Boys album 'Bilingual' and the single taken from it Se a Vida Ú (That's the way life is). SheBoom represented the city of Glasgow at the 1997 European Cultural Celebrations in Bavaria. SheBoom also featured prominently at The New Yorker magazine event which was part of the 1997 American Society of Travel Agents convention held in Glasgow. More recently, SheBoom performed in Edinburgh at the high profile victory celebrations of the Yes/Yes Scottish Devolution Referendum Campaign and has since become associated with the spirit of Scottish devolution.

Deeply rooted in Scottish socialist traditions, SheBoom operates as a self-funded collective of percussionists and has grown from strength to strength. To date, the band has benefited tremendously from the selfless experience of excellent musicians such as Erin Scrutton, Marion Christie, Sue Ferner, Fif Cook, Anne Marie Murray, Val Graham and Karen Mashalsay; each with their own musical styles as reflected in SheBoom's repertoire.



Edinburgh Castle

'My kids' friends at school think I am really cool.'

'Of course we have lots of disagreements but when we start drumming, differences disappear and we work on the music alone.'



'I was going through a divorce and being part of this band helped me find a sense of self.'

'The women are just wonderful!'

Feminist politics/Frivolous pleasures

I interviewed multimedia artist Jane Sutherland, whom many consider to be the woman who first visualised the phenomenon which became SheBoom. Jane continues to drum, work and live in Glasgow.

Magda: We all know you were there when it all began and you often remind us that the band had no name to begin with. Band member Olive Miller later coined 'SheBoom' which seemed to capture the phenomenon of women drumming. Tell us what it was like and the role you had in the early days of SheBoom.

Jane: A magical process. A set of circumstances, magic all coming together really. There was the first Glasgow! being mooted in early planning meetings. This was going to happen in October, and it was way back in February 1993. They were looking for visual arts, which was why I was involved in having some input as a multimedia artist. I actually wanted to do something much bigger in scale. I wanted to do a big performance piece. Great opportunity to do something for Halloween because that was right at the very beginning of the first gay festival. I had never done any performance work

until this first gig.

One of the things I wanted as part of this performance was a huge women's drumming band. And so I got together with some friends like Erin Scrutton and spoke with her at a party one night and asked if she was up to getting this together. And that was the ball rolling really. The idea came like a dream. I wanted to see fire and celebration and women coming together to do something very creative over the river Clyde to celebrate the lives of women like ourselves but who had a much more difficult time — women who got dunked in the river and set fire to for their wayward ways.

And so we were out there kicking, making big noise. There was fire and drums and film and fireworks. Lots and lots of involvement by women who never thought they could do things like that before. And I was one of them.

Magda: How many women were there?
Jane: There were over 50 women actually involved in the drumming side of it but there were over 120 women involved altogether in the costume making and the welding works, pyrotechnics and all the other side of it. The

'On stage, we take up so much room and we make such loud music, it's quite incredible.'

'Noisy grrls just want to have fun!'

women who took part in the performance on the bridge created something which was something completely unforgettable. The women joined up to do that one performance — the band was created for that one performance only. Getting up there and performing. Most of us had never performed before — it was so fiery and scary... The bridge was dancing. It was a suspension bridge. One person on the bridge can make it move. Fifty women rocking ... They had the Council out tightening all the bolts on the bridge before we played. And I was having nightmares that the thing would go and here would be another fifty witches in the water!! But no, the bridge danced with us and it was a full moon. It had been raining all day and then all of a sudden it stopped.

I spoke to people afterwards who had seen the gig and they were saying that they had arrived late for it. We had actually managed to start the gig on time, which was pretty good for a first gig. And people could hear it from blocks and blocks away. Well over half a mile away to the heart of the city. The sound just travelled. It was like a rallying call and people just came to the sound and to see it. We played four numbers in the first performance. We played them on the bridge and then it was interspersed with fireworks and banners and film and other bits of performance and then we came round to the riverside and played the same set again. It went like a storm. It was about half an hour all in. It seemed to last forever and it seemed to go by in an instant. Very strange time warp. An absolutely big bang! It was the detonation point. It really was.

Prior to SheBoom getting together, the only samba that was happening in Scotland was the mixed band MaCumba. We borrowed their drums. To begin with we were playing on dustbins, mop buckets, broom handles. We had 10 weeks and four or five women who had played drums before. We had Erin who was a magician in pulling us all together and teaching us in a really fun way. It was not heavy duty musical theory. It was wee ditties and she made it really

'Noise without the boys.'

'You can't live in Glasgow and not want to be part of SheBoom.'

learnable and pulling us all together. I think there is an ancient and primordial thing. Although it might seem alien to British culture, it was certainly in my psyche and something I wanted to see happen. And just from the impact it has had. Like there was only MaCumba with eleven, twelve strong. And then us with 50 strong — all women.

Loads and loads of women who saw the performance wanted to join and several of the women who were in the band had made the commitment to do the one performance but couldn't take the commitment any further. So the band both shrank and grew. In fact it more than doubled in size within the first couple of weeks. And we had two more gigs that week even though we hadn't made any plans. We just went down an absolute storm. Major impact, straight onto the box with offers of more gigs and things. And it has had amazing repercussions. Just about everywhere we played since, there have been samba schools set up. There have been women's drum groups set up the length and breadth of Britain and further afield as well. Last year (1997) for the Midsummer Carnival at Glasgow's West End, there were 50 samba bands and only one of them was Irish and the rest were Scots. All within the space of three years. You don't have to be able to read music. You can just celebrate and have a bloody good time.

Magda: Several of the women I spoke to earlier have said that they joined SheBoom very soon after they had seen one of these early performances. Have you had any feedback from women about



Kelvingrove Park, Glasgow

the impact these performances have had on them?

Jane: There has been various accounts. Most women have just said it just really stirs them up. It gets them going and they find it really really exciting. It is amazingly sexual, very potent, dynamic, exciting. And getting together a whole bunch of women doing something women haven't been traditionally doing. And I think a lot of women have said it has completely changed their lives. They have found themselves getting involved in doing all sorts of things they didn't think they would be doing. Whether it is playing with the Pet Shop Boys, at the Royal Albert Hall, running about the place with fireworks, taking part in really memorable gigs like the dragon fire run in Barcelona. Feats of organisation bring forth creative skills, organisational skills, rhythmical skills — great untapped sources are being plugged into.

Magda: Where did you get the idea about women drumming? Were you a drummer?

Jane: No, I wasn't before and it would be cheeky to call myself a drummer now!

My wee brother is a drummer and I've always enjoyed getting in there and borrowing his kit and having a shot. I remember going to see a fantastic performance, ritual really, of the Beltane Fires in Edinburgh back in 1989 when they were just beginning to get established. And this was all fire and drums and dancing on top of Calton Hill. They only had 6 drummers and they were all guys but there was something very primordial about it because up in the hill top with the fire and everything. I just wanted to see this 10 times, 20 times, 1000 times bigger with all women. I just thought it would be a very different dynamic. Good ritual magic. A very good way to celebrate. The old festivals need to be reinterpreted and replayed, recycled.

Magda: Tell me about the women who join SheBoom. How many drummers are there?

Jane: They are as many and varied as women are. From young girls to wise grandmothers and every size, shape, a huge range of experience, shy, outgoing. You name it we got it. In the years that SheBoom has been going there have

'These Bavarian matrons were all clapping along with us! The men just stared in disbelief.'

'It's more than a band, more like a community.'

been over 250 women who have played in the band. But the character of the band is still dynamic. Sometimes quite sparky, a creative hotbed. Other times a bit of a cesspit too. But it is part of it all.

Dancing with the devils

Magda: Most people first come across SheBoom through the documentary 'Dance with the Devils' made by band member filmmaker Lucinda Broadbent about SheBoom's trip to Barcelona in 1994. Can you tell me how the Barcelona episode happened?

Jane: Many years back I went out to Barcelona to do the Gaudí homage and made friends with a wonderful woman called Merce. Her big brother French was the President of the Federation of Devils. Now none of it made any sense at the time. Merce came to Scotland and came and visit me. She saw that I had a houseful of dragons and said to me 'You've got to come to Barcelona. You've got to come and see the dragon fire run.' She kept saying this and every September, she would say — 'When are you coming to Barcelona?' 'Yeah, yeah, I'll get there.' And eventually one year I

'Standing on a stage and performing has given me loads of self-confidence. I used to be very nervous performing but now I love it.'



Sauchiehall Street, Glasgow

phoned her up and said, 'Look can I bring some of my pals?' And she said 'Yes. How many?' And I said '65 to 70. A few of the girls anyway.' And she said, 'Right. Talk to French about it.'

It seemed impossible but getting the band together in the first place had seemed an impossibility. It was an act of faith, a dream and something I felt really passionate about. So we went out there. We managed by all sorts of wonderful, creative but devious means as well to go out there — 65 women, a very large dragon, all the drums. We were the first non-Catalans to actually run the fire and take part in this ancient 900 year old festival. Actually it is older than that but it has been written about for 900 years. At our very first gig out there that night (at a women's centre) a Catalan women's band was formed in Barcelona. Its still going strong and they are getting national press coverage for doing International Women's Day things. So we made a direct impact there.

They have had women in the various devils groups but they are just a few women drummers amongst what tends to be large groups of men so it was good to



see women-only bands setting up now. And I think there are even women-only devil groups going. At least one. Stirring things up and changing things and having a big impact on us — apart from being filmed, documented and being on the box and giving us wider coverage, it showed us we could do something completely outrageous and survive it and learn from it and hopefully go on to do bigger and better things. Also to see how scary and dangerous other people like to play it.

Magda: It must be very exciting to be around to see the revolution you started still gaining momentum and evolving in very unpredictable ways. Do you have a vision for the future?

Jane: I have loads of visions for the future! One of the things I'd really like to see is for all the bands to come together and have a massive bash. Maybe more than once but to get together for a really big celebration, probably Midsummer in an urban setting and also right up in the hills, a great big pagan ritual — all the bands coming from all over Britain and possibly getting a family of devils across from Barcelona to do more pyrotechnics. I'd really like to see these bands come together for something immense. And for SheBoom to rule the world! We are a revolutionary group which is new and vibrant. A whole new rhythm of life, a new rhythm for the country, the nation. I'd like us to be there for the opening of Scottish Parliament. I'd like to see some of the women in the band running for seats in the Parliament: Samba Federation in Scotland.

Magda: One question you must be asked a lot: 'Why are there no men in SheBoom?'

Jane: Because it is a women's band. Simple as that. Now that there are so many samba bands, I think there are three women's bands in Glasgow alone. All the others are mixed. I think because men could not join SheBoom, they have done the next best thing and gone out and started growing samba schools. But I love the dynamics and energy of women. On the occasions we have played with men's bands, it has a different dynamics and can set up a competitive spirit and I think it is more collective and co-operative with women.

International Women's Day

Every year since SheBoom was formed, the band had been inundated with invitations to play at International Women's Day (IWD) events. Taking the months of January and February off to learn new pieces and to rest, March 8 had traditionally been SheBoom's re-entry into a new gig season. These gigs were usually organised by various women's groups and SheBoom often played to women-only audiences. Whilst these performances were important, many band members felt that they were a form of 'contained' celebration because gigs were usually indoors, to women-only (feminist) audiences — preaching to the converted — and they were sometimes a little self-indulgent. Further, in previous years Glasgow City had been supportive of International Women's Week events by providing free publicity and distribution of publicity materials e.g. special publications of newsletters, but in 1997, due to cuts in funding they had pulled out of this crucial role they used to play. Subsequently, even though many events were organised in and around Glasgow city, they were not well publicised and the day was in danger of slipping away unnoticed. Besides, a year earlier there was a lot of media attention on IWD because *The Scotman* newspaper became *The Scotswoman* for the day. Although it was a publicity stunt for the Scottish newspaper, it was actually very successful in raising public consciousness that it was a day set apart to remind us of unfinished business of sex discrimination and related issues. And SheBoom wanted to continue reinforcing public consciousness.

As such, the band made a conscious decision

Announcement: Pride Scotland 1998, Glasgow

SheBoom women drummers are leading the march this year and are very pleased to announce that their brand new CD 'Guid Wimmin' — 8 mind-blowingly brilliant tracks (see below) will be available for £10.00 from the Women's Environmental Network stall in the Women's Tent. Get your Christmas presents now...

The CD is also available by pre-paid mail order for £10.00 plus £1.00 post & package within UK *but* if you get it at the Women's Tent, you will be helping support WEN.

New Intake: Good news for noisy women

SheBoom is holding a series of drumming workshops after Pride Scotland with a view to a new intake. Women who fancy having a bash should contact SheBoom at the address below with a note of their contact details — phone, address.

ABSOLUTE beginners welcome, no prior experience necessary. You don't need your own drum — come as you are. You just need to be a woman, have a certain amount of rhythm, huge appetite for fun and the desire to make lots of noise (musical noise, that is). A willingness to explore the dynamics of working within an all-women environment may be beneficial to all!!

If, after the workshops you still want to continue drumming, you might then want to consider going through with applying for membership and joining the band. Come along and find out more — lives have been known to change irrevocably! Why be a goddess when you can be a SheBoomer?

SheBoom
Maryhill Women's Centre
Shawpark Street
Glasgow G20 9DA
Scotland



to take more control over how that day was spent. Instead of playing the odd 20 minutes here and there in support of other women's organisations, members decided they wanted to make a noise on their own behalf. Refusing all engagements, SheBoom chose to perform their latest repertoire — uninvited, in public, for free. This was to happen on the busiest pedestrian precinct in Glasgow city, on a Saturday afternoon, March 8 1997. The plan was to make as much noise (music actually!) as possible to draw attention to the fact that it was International Women's Day. Women in the audience would be invited to a special party which SheBoom organised to celebrate the day. Leaflets were available to all to advertise the reason why SheBoom was celebrating. And banners flew in the sunshine as we played.

The second interview is set in the context of SheBoom's decision to perform on Buchanan Street, Glasgow on International Women's Day 1997. Jenny Hickey describes the SheBoom experience from her perspective as an 'ordinary' woman — middle-class, stay-at-home wife and mother, and as someone who saw the light on her way home from the shops. She has taken more organisational responsibilities in the band and now stays out late and parties all night if she feels like it!

For bookings, merchandise or general information, contact:

SheBoom, c/o Maryhill Women's Centre, Shawpark Street, Glasgow G20 9DA, Scotland

Fax: +44(0)141 616 2583 or
Tels: +44(0)141 616 2582 or
+44(0)1698 854720

Website:
<http://www.quine.org.uk/groups/sheboom/>

Magda: Jenny, you have been a member for a year now. Why did you decide to join SheBoom in the first place?

Jenny: I saw SheBoom busking on Buchanan Street about a year ago (March 8 1997) and simply knew I had to become a drummer. They completely fired me and I thought they were wonderful! Fate had something to do with it too. I came home and spoke to my neighbour Sue about SheBoom and she said 'Oh I'm going to see them tonight'. It was a party at a community centre. I went with her and spoke to Val (musical director at the time) and asked 'Do you take beginners?' I asked to be put on the waiting list and three weeks later I joined the Baby Boomers.

[Against its many appearances at concerts and festivals, SheBoom also keeps an important community-based profile by running beginner drumming workshops for women.] Coming across SheBoom was like an epiphany. Big changes have happened in my life since. It was as if I needed to do this. I just needed to do this thing. The fact that it was women, a lot of women, communicating in a primordial and primitive way was very strong. I could feel something deep in my guts. It blasted my consciousness. I was a traditional woman — wife, mother, looking after kids at home. Suddenly there was this opportunity to express myself in the social world. To put something into the collective social world was a total revelation to me. Drumming has communicated with me on a deeper level than anything else. It has given me an opportunity to communicate with others — especially other women in the crowds. Middle aged women really grooving to it. I have found it to be cathartic, being part of a group. I love performing, being someone else, something else, having fun. Its therapeutic. I feel like I am Freddy Mercury at Wembley. SheBoom has woken me up. □

What the papers say

Radical feminists have been stern critics of the way the media reports sexual violence, and child sexual abuse in particular. Hilary McCollum reports on her systematic study of reporting in four national newspapers. Using the concept of a 'moral panic' she shows how the kinds of stories selected and their content re-define the issues, and manage to ignore all the key questions feminists have posed about sexual abuse in childhood.

Over the last twenty years feminists have developed a perspective which understands child sexual abuse as part of a continuum of male violence, linking offences such as rape, incest and domestic violence with 'a range of male behaviours that have often been dismissed as mere routine minor nuisances' (Cameron & Fraser p164). This analysis defines male violence not as aberrant and abnormal but as ordinary, everyday expressions of patriarchal social relations between men and women, boys and girls, adults and children.

Liz Kelly (*T&S* 33) has criticised the re-emergence of a professional and popular discourse on 'paedophiles' which sees child sexual abusers as abnormal, as 'other', thus disguising the connections that they have with 'normal men/normal masculinity'. This article is based on research which examined the extent to which this process of 'othering' men who sexually abuse children can be found in newspaper reporting, and the strategies they use to achieve this. It also looks at whether it helps feminists to make sense of these responses using the concept of a 'moral panic'.

In one sense the influence of the media on public opinion is obvious. What detailed studies of the media reveal is not just how news reporting selects the stories it presents, but also that the various newspapers present stories in particular ways. What is selected for coverage, and how it is

covered can tell us a lot about the preoccupations of specific newspapers. What is not covered is also revealing, so I looked at the silences, gaps and omissions as well as what the papers did say about child sexual abuse.

The sources

I looked at four British national daily newspapers during January and February 1997: *The Mail*, *The Mirror*, *The Guardian* and *The Times*. This selection reflects the range of target audience and political perspective within the British media. *The Times* and *The Guardian* are both 'quality' broadsheets aimed at a middle class market. *The Times* is regarded as representing a right wing/establishment viewpoint, whereas *The Guardian* is associated with a more left wing/liberal stance. *The Mail* and *The Mirror* are both tabloids: *The Mail* is aimed at a lower middle class market and reflects a right wing/traditionalist viewpoint; *The Mirror* is a populist paper aimed at the working class market and has traditionally supported the Labour Party.

New technology has made this kind of research much easier to conduct, since many newspapers are now available on CD-ROM; simple searches on key words will select all the stories which appeared on that topic. It was possible to do this for *The Guardian*, *The Times* and *The Mail*. The search in *The Mirror* had to be done by hand. Only reporting on events in Britain

Table 1
Consistency of Reporting

Number of newspapers covering story	Number of stories
4	3
3	6
2	15
1	89

(including those where a British national has abused children in another country) were included. Letters were excluded, as these were not the representations of the newspaper itself, but features and arts reporting were included.

Making the news

The period covered included 51 publishing days. The number of reports on child sexual abuse in each paper was: *The Times*, 20; *The Guardian*, 38; *The Mail*, 45; *The Mirror*, 59. The higher level of reporting of sexual violence by the tabloids has previously been noted by feminist campaigning groups such as the Campaign Against Pornography, which criticised the sensationalised presentation of specific cases of sexual violence as 'isolated entertaining horrors' in the tabloids (CAP Action Pack 1993).

A further 26 articles potentially relating to child sexual abuse were found in *The Mirror*. All were reports about murders or about girls who were missing and whose murdered bodies were eventually discovered. Each of these could potentially be sexual murders as defined by Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Fraser. Equivalent articles were not uncovered in the computer searches on *The Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Mail* as murder was not a specific search criterion used; it was the visual search of *The Mirror* which revealed them. They are not included in this section, but are discussed later.

Table 2
Types of Reporting

Types of Reporting	Times	Guardian	Mail	Mirror	Total
Cases/trials	2	2	12	29	45
Community/policy responses (including register)	8	14	11	5	38
No Child of Mine	1	6	6	3	16
Ashworth/Broadmoor	3	6	2	3	14
West/Hindley	2	0	1	11	14
TV/Arts	2	1	9	1	13
Clwyd tribunal	2	4	1	2	9
Porn/Trafficking/Prostitution	0	1	3	5	9
False memory	0	2	0	0	2
Marietta Higgs appointment	0	1	0	0	1
Joke	0	1	0	0	1
Total	20	38	45	59	162

Whether there was consistency of reporting between papers — did they cover the same stories — was assessed, allowing a time lag of three days for the story to be covered. In this analysis, when a number of articles in the same paper related to the same story on the same day, it was only counted once. Table 1 records the results.

Interestingly, only three stories were reported in all four newspapers. These were the opening of the Clwyd tribunal into allegations of widespread sexual abuse in children's homes made by more than 180 ex-residents (22/1/97);

allegations of child sexual abuse within Ashworth secure hospital involving unsupervised visits with convicted sex offenders by an ex-inmate and his 8-year-old daughter (8/2/97); and reviews and commentaries on the television drama *No Child of Mine* (26/2/97).

Since the first two of these stories related to allegations of abuse within state institutions, it is not surprising that all four newspapers reported on them. More interesting is the coverage of *No Child of Mine*. It was a controversial drama which represented a challenge to the public discourse that emphasised abuse outside the family. It told the story of a girl sexually abused by her mother, raped by her stepfather, prostituted by her father and sexually abused by a care worker and, according to the producer, it was based on a true story. The newspapers, in a variety of ways, 'made' a long running story (most of which is outside the time frame of my research) about the programme. Rather than addressing the central theme of the programme, attention focused on: whether the story was 'true'; identifying the woman whose story the programme was based on; and whether it was a form of abuse for the child actor to play the part. Thus the newspaper reporting undercut the challenging message of the programme.

The majority of stories were covered in only one of the papers. This raises the question of whether this group of newspapers have a different definition of what child sexual abuse stories are 'newsworthy'. The stories were placed in categories according to the particular focus of the piece, and the results of this second analysis are in Table 2. There is a difference of emphasis between the papers with different types of reporting being accentuated. Some categories of reporting were entirely absent in some papers whilst composing a significant part of reporting in others. For example there were no reports about the Wests or Myra Hindley in *The Guardian* whereas *The Mirror* had 11 articles.

Much of this variation can be understood in terms of the place each paper occupies in the mass media market. *The Times*, being 'the establishment' paper, could be expected to concentrate on public policy issues. Because public sector workers and care professionals are significant elements of its readership, the same focus can be seen in *The Guardian*. *The Mail* has a predominantly female lower middle class readership. Whilst retaining an interest in policy, a 'human interest' element is introduced through coverage

of cases and trials which are largely ignored by the broadsheets. *The Mirror* is a mass circulation sensationalist 'entertainment' tabloid; its interest in trials, cases and celebrated sex murderers (the Wests and Myra Hindley) is entirely unsurprising.

Abuse on trial

Many media researchers see the reporting of trials as crucially important in defining opinion on crime and deviance. However most crimes reported in newspapers are not followed through the criminal justice system to trial. Even where trials are reported this is often inconsistent, since the whole process from opening, evidence, verdict and sentencing is rarely covered. In fact it is only a tiny minority of criminal trials which are reported on at all.

15 trials were covered in the 29 reports. None of them involved abuse in the family. The closest relation was the ex-boyfriend of the five year old victim's mother, who was found guilty of rape and murder and sentenced to life (*The Mail* 15/1/97, 7/2/97; *The Mirror* 15/1/97, 16/1/97). Sex murder was the subject of another of the trials in which a 20-year-old man was found guilty of mutilating and murdering a 15-year-old girl (*The Mirror*, *The Times*, *The Mail*, 31/1/97). Again, the offender and victim knew each other. Both are discussed later in the section on sex murders.

Of the remaining 13 trials, six concerned offences committed by male strangers and six involved men known to their victims in a variety of ways. The remaining trial was the only one where the defendant was a woman. This was the only case which made a front page; *Miss Filth: Teacher jailed for sex notes to boy 11* (*The Mirror* 4/1/97) reports that a 'perverted' woman teacher had been sent to prison for six months 'for sending filthy notes to an 11 year old boy in her class'. The high profile coverage afforded to this case would appear to bear out Emily Driver's observation that although 'women rarely sexually abuse children ... in the few cases that have come to light, public outrage reflects society's contradictory expectations of women'.

Most offenders, especially if convicted, were presented in various ways as 'other'. For example in *£3,000 fine for pervert photographer whose mother ran a nursery* (*The Mail* 24/1/97), the offender is described as a 'pervert' and 'loner' and in *Madness* (*The Mirror* 18/2/97) as mentally ill. *Sex shame PC jailed* (*The Mirror* 19/2/97) reported the conviction of a policeman for three indecent assaults in 1985 and 1986 against girls

from his youth club. Although no explicit reason for the assaults is offered, the reader is told that 'a car crash in 1985 left him impotent'. In *Shame of punk Rev with girl, 11* (*The Mirror* 28/2/97) the curate's 'mohican haircut' is emphasised. Both *The Guardian* (*Warden of home 'vile paedophile'*) and *The Mirror* (*Evil Captain Hook preyed on lost boys*) use the 'Captain Hook' characterisation coined by the prosecuting barrister to describe Keith Laverack, on trial for 21 sexual offences against children in his care.

The impending trial of Briton, James Fraser-Darling, accused of sexually abusing nine boys aged 7 to 13 in Thailand was one of only two trials covered in *The Times*, perhaps because the accused was an academic and son of former Oxford don Sir Frank Fraser-Darling (*The Times* 27/1/97). This trial was also reported in *The Mail* and *The Mirror*. There are similarities in the reporting of the three papers, all using the framework of 'paedophiles' and 'child sex' (*The Times* and *The Mirror*) or 'sex with children' (*The Mail*). Fraser-Darling's representation of himself as the victim of a 'witchhunt' by non-governmental organisations is common to *The Mail* and *The Mirror*; and *The Times* and *The Mail* both report that he was known as 'Uncle James', 'befriended' the boys, and bought them presents. Both of these slants on the story serve to minimise the victimisation of the boys concerned. Another strategy which served to minimise can be seen in two reports — both *Video pest's £1,000 fine* (*The Mirror* 10/1/97) and *Groping soccer steward jailed* (*The Mirror* 1/2/97) use the words 'pest', 'groped' and 'fondled' to describe the abuser and his actions.

In contrast *The Mail* is outraged by another case of indecent assault when the conviction was overturned because evidence of the girl's distress was ruled out as corroboration by a higher court. The issue became the subject of *The Mail's* leading article:

Since in the majority of sexual assaults the only witness other than the assailant is the victim, this major change in legal procedure presents serious implications — not least for those who the law has a duty to protect as well as afford justice. (*The Mail* 29/1/97)

Although the article does mention that this was a ruling in Scotland, it implies that the situation has been made worse across the whole of Britain. In reality, the ruling puts the Scottish system in line with the rest of Britain where distress has never been considered as corroboration. Readers are not told that, until 1995, judges

'Evil Captain Hook preyed on lost boys'

in England and Wales had to give the corroboration warning (that it is dangerous to convict only on the words of a woman or child) or that, despite a change in the law making this discretionary, many judges continue to give the warning. The high (and rising) attrition rate in rape (see *T&S* 35) and sexual abuse cases is also not mentioned. Readers of this editorial could be forgiven for thinking that there was no problem until this ruling.

The real victims

Sex trial diving coach is cleared (11/1/97) was in fact a report of a rape trial in which it was claimed by the defence that the teenage girl had 'invented the allegations as revenge for failing to be picked'. Although a child protection investigation rather than a criminal trial, *The Mail's Abuse claim nightmare ends*, 20/1/97, took a similar tone. A police chief superintendent was apparently the victim, after being accused of sexual abuse by one of his adopted Brazilian daughters. *The Mail* reports that he was 'cleared' following an investigation. His solicitor is quoted as saying 'There has been no corroboration of the wild allegations'.

In the light of these two reports with their emphasis on 'invented' allegations and 'no corroboration', at first sight it seems strange that the ruling on corroboration mentioned above should have provoked such outrage. However that case involved an attacker not known to the girl. Such a man can readily be presented as 'other', as unconnected to 'normal' men, so convicting him does not threaten the 'traditional', and in particular the 'family' values that *The Mail* sees itself as upholding. By contrast, the 60-year-old diving coach was a 'father of two' supported 'throughout his ordeal' by his 'estranged wife' who had left him prior to the allegations because she was a 'diving widow'. The other allegation was not only in the family but also involved a police chief superintendent.

The Mail chose to report two cases where the 'family' men rather than the children could be presented as the victims. The many cases where 'family' men are found guilty or where the child protection investigation reveals sexual abuse, would be more difficult for *The Mail's* family values agenda and so are ignored.

Making a mess of it

The reporting of trials therefore reveals that in most coverage the offender, especially if convicted, is constructed as 'other'. This is done

through the use of terms like 'pervert', 'paedophile', and 'loner' or through other details, such as impotence, which sets him apart. The exception to this is in cases where 'family' men are found not guilty. This serves to reinforce the distinction between convicted sex offenders and 'normal' men. A number of the reports also reveal elements of minimisation of the seriousness of the offence.

A number of other stories illustrate other techniques which are used to 'otherise' men who sexually abuse. The examples here are typical of how reporting in the tabloids and middle range newspapers achieve this.

Doc 'kept girl of 15 as sex slave' (*The Mirror* 7/2/97) opens with 'A hospital doctor and his wife are wanted by police following claims that they smuggled an orphaned girl into Britain from Pakistan and kept her as a sex slave.' In the next paragraph the reader discovers that the girl had been sexually abused only by the husband. The family had returned to Pakistan before the police could intervene. This, the only case of sexual abuse in the family that *The Mirror* chose to report, is in many ways a 'safe' case — it does not threaten the white nuclear family or 'normal' British white men because the victim was an orphan and both she and her abuser are Pakistanis.

Apart from a brief mention in a report on another trial, rape is absent from the trial reports. However four different rapes are covered in six case reports. Three of these four reports are explicitly stranger rapes. In all but one of the reports traditional tabloid representations of sex offenders are used to create the perpetrator as 'other'.

Cop had sex with hooker in rape flat (*The Mirror* 9/1/97) reports that a man broke into a flat at midnight and raped a mother and her nine-year-old daughter. No description of 'the brute' is given; instead the focus is police embarrassment because a 'cop had sex with a prostitute' in the same flat.

The man who raped a 14 year old girl on a bus in broad daylight (*The Mirror* 28/1/97) was described as a 'fiend' and a 'brute'.

Sisters raped on way to school (*The Mail* 7/2/97) tells the reader how the girls, aged 12 and 14, were forced into woodland by 'a man with staring eyes'. The original report is followed up in *The Mail* four days later with details of other attacks that may have been carried out by the same man. In *The Mirror's* report (8/2/97) the attacker is labelled the a 'sex maniac', and 'a brute'. A warning from the police to parents 'to accompany

their children to school if possible' is included. The danger to children here can be explicitly located with strangers not parents.

Sex murders

Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Fraser in *The Lust to Kill* define sexual murder as 'including all cases where the killer was motivated by sadistic sexual impulses'. This definition would include murders where the victim was not raped or sexually assaulted but where the 'act of killing [is eroticised] in and for itself'. I used this definition in considering the reports on sex murder, and I also drew on their analysis that most sex murderers are defined as either 'bad' or 'mad'. As we will see, journalists are not averse to using both categories, even though this is often contradictory.

The preoccupation of the populist press with the Moors murderers, particularly Myra Hindley, has been linked to the 'existence of a particular discourse on the beauty of the Horrid and the pleasure of cruel acts.' (Cameron and Fraser). Since the publication of *The Lust to Kill*, the Wests have been added to the canon of sex murderers (see *T&S* 33 & 34). Of the fourteen reports on the Wests and Hindley, two relate to Fred West's forthcoming biography and six to the possibility of a film about Fred West. An explicit comparison between the Wests and the Moors murderers was made in *The Times* (1/1/97):

Only perhaps the calculating sadism of Ian Brady and Myra Hindley stands comparison. The Wests chose the innocent, the vulnerable, their own flesh and blood for sexual violence and torture.

All of the other stories relating to the Wests and Hindley were only reported in *The Mirror* and covered a number of issues including the inquest verdict on John West's suicide, and three reports on Hindley's continuing campaign for freedom. The Wests and the Moors murderers have come to epitomise 'folk-devils' (This is the term Stan Cohen introduced when developing the concept of moral panics; it refers to individuals or small groups who are constructed as the ultimate threat to social values and social order.)

Three papers covered the trial of Edwin Hopkins — *The Mail*, *The Mirror*, and *The Times*. *The Mirror* follows the tabloid recipe for sex murder in their coverage of the trial of Edwin Hopkins, found guilty of sexually assaulting, mutilating and murdering a 15 year old girl. Hopkins knew his victim, Naomi Smith, who lived in the same village. Her bitten and mutilated body was found in the playground. Hopkins denied the charges but overwhelming forensic

evidence resulted in his conviction. Following the conviction, Naomi's parents demanded the reintroduction of the death penalty, which was covered in all three papers. The opening, progress and verdict in the trial were reported by *The Mirror* (23/1/97, 25/1/97, 29/1/97, 31/1/97). Hopkins was referred to variously as a 'maniac', 'sex fiend', 'powerful brute' and 'loner' and described as 'evil', 'twisted' and 'obsessed'. In *Possessed by evil: Mum's rage as Naomi murderer is locked up for life* (*The Mirror* 31/1/97), Naomi's final minutes of life were speculated on in a salacious way that places some of the responsibility for the murder on her:

Naomi kept a diary. But her accounts of sexual adventures were just teenage fantasies.

She was a virgin who had never had a boyfriend.

Twisted Hopkins killed her after what *could have been* her first kiss. (my emphasis)

Naomi 'who knew him [Hopkins] and had confided to pals that she fancied him strayed into' Hopkin's path while she was posting a letter and he was going to the shop.

She *may have* gone willingly with him for a kiss and cuddle and been slaughtered when she tried to call a halt. (my emphasis)

In a linked article, the reader is told that Hopkins had previously attacked another woman in a similar way but she had managed to get free. No charges were brought. In this attack, two years previously, Hopkins had chased his victim across a field before dragging her to the ground, ripping off her bra, biting her breast and trying to pull off her pants. No suggestion was made that this woman 'may have gone willingly with him'.

Only the verdict in the Hopkins trial was reported in *The Mail*. It described him as a 'savage loner' with a 'warped personality' who was 'a familiar sight shuffling about the village with his head bowed and was seen as withdrawn and a "weirdo"'. Like *The Mirror*, the attack on the other woman 'in a chilling dress-rehearsal of Naomi's murder' is reported. She complained to the police at the time but when Hopkins denied the attack she withdrew her complaint because she had learning difficulties and thought she would not be believed in court. This extra information was not included in *The Mirror* at all and is not commented upon in *The Mail*.

The Times also reported on the verdict. It fails to mention the similar attack instead concentrates on the forensic evidence and Hopkins' obsession with knives. However in contrast to *The Mail's* weirdo theory it leans more towards the 'Jekyll

'Video pest's £1,000 fine'

and Hyde' explanation of sex murderers, quoting Detective Superintendent Bayliss:

He portrayed himself as a fairly inoffensive young man but obviously I think some of his more surly side was demonstrated in the court. There were no outward signs that he would obviously be considered a suspect for this offence. (*The Times* 31/1/97)

What these 'outward signs' could have been is not even hinted at.

The other sex murder trial was that of Andrew Pountley for the rape, abduction and murder of five-year-old Rosie McCann. The opening and progress, but not verdict, were covered in *The Mirror*. Rosie, the daughter of Pountley's ex-girlfriend was kidnapped from her bed, raped and suffocated. Her body was found seven weeks later. No motivation for the murder was offered although the reader is told that Pountley had 'called round in a drunken rage.' In contrast to the reporting on Hopkins, the coverage of Pountley does not employ the usual sex murderer language, possibly because the relationship between Pountley and his victim was too close for him to 'fit', since sex murderers are so strongly associated in the tabloid imagination with strangers.

The Mail report the opening day and verdict of the Andrew Pountley trial. The opening day article reported Pountley's motivation as 'a fit of jealous rage'. It also reported that Rosie's mother had moved out of Pountley's flat 'after Pountley began to drink to excess and became aggressive and jealous'. The verdict of the trial is covered in *Justice for Rosie: Drunk who killed girl to spite mother is given life* (*The Mail* 7/2/97). Following his conviction, it was revealed that an accusation against Pountley was lying on file for the rape and indecent assault of a 13-year-old girl and that he had a history of violent attacks. Yet even after this, *The Mail* still do not apply the sex murderer framework to him. Mrs Justice Steel's comments to Pountley were quoted:

'Rosalene's abduction resulted basically from a jealous and wicked motive to punish the woman you regarded as your wife.' (my emphasis)

Quite why a jealous abduction should also involve rape and murder is not explored.

A large number of reports in *The Mirror* related to the murders of three girls, Zoe Evans, Kayleigh Ward and Billie-Jo Jenkins. Kayleigh and Zoe were both missing for some time before their bodies were found. Zoe's stepfather was charged with her murder (he has since been convicted). A local man was charged with the rape and murder of Kayleigh Ward. Billie-Jo Jenkins

was found in her garden, beaten to death with an 18-inch metal tent peg (*Find the scarface killer of Billie-Jo, The Mirror* 15/2/97). A 'scar-faced maniac' was sought who had allegedly been stalking the family. Police declared their puzzlement at the motive for the crime; a sexual motive had been ruled out, in spite of the fact that the frenzied nature of the attack could have suggested this, primarily because she had not been sexually assaulted. After interviewing two men, at least one of whom was reported as scarfaced, the police arrested Billie-Jo's foster father despite being neither 'scarfaced' nor fitting the tabloid stereotype of a 'maniac'. Although he was subsequently released, he was not cleared by the police (at the time of writing this piece he is in fact on trial for Billie-Jo's murder).

Kayleigh Ward's murder was clearly sexual. Billie-Jo Jenkins' murder may also have been sexual. No information was reported about whether or not Zoe Evans' murder was sexual. However feminists have documented that one of the tactics used by men who sexually abuse within the family to stop children from telling is threatening to kill them. We currently have no way of knowing the frequency with which this threat is carried out. This means that murders of children carried out to cover up sexual abuse will remain outside the current definitions of sexual murders.

Is there a moral panic?

Within sociology and media studies attention has been paid to the media's power to influence public opinions through generating moral panics, which in turn inform political and policy responses. The term 'moral panic' was first used by the sociologist Stan Cohen. Moral panics occur when something or someone is perceived as threat to widely held social values or to social order. In a situation of moral panic, reactions are exaggerated out of all proportion to the actual threat. The subject of the panic may be new, such as a new drug like Ecstasy, or it may have existed for sometime but becomes highlighted in a different way. There are a number of ways in which mass media representations create moral panics, most commonly by using stereotypes and by exaggerating the scale or the consequences of the phenomenon. The significance of these responses is that they can lead to swift, re-active and ill-considered changes in law and in social policy by fostering a sense that 'something must be done' about it. Policy changes which take place in the context of a moral panic tend to reinforce, rather than

challenge, the status quo. Evidence of a moral panic, therefore, is often seen in terms of responses from the government, police and the courts and the wider community — if there is a moral panic about 'paedophiles' one would expect to see aspects of this in the newspaper reporting.

The fact that the largest category of reports concerned community/policy responses gives some support to the idea of a moral panic. An ongoing theme in the broadsheets and *The Mail* throughout the period related to proposals to set up a national Sex Offenders Register. The register was first proposed by the Home Secretary in March 1996 and was fuelled by the Dutroux case in Belgium (see *T&S* 36).

The register was reported in *The Mail* in the context of ongoing local demonstrations against a convicted child sex offender, Alan Christie. Christie was released from prison in December 1996 to a hostel near Stirling. Schools in the area were warned about his presence in a letter from the council about Christie's release. *The Mail* (11/1/97) reports a demonstration by 'angry mothers... chanting "beast out"'. Whilst quoting the mothers' conception of Christie as a beast — the 'bad' label — *The Mail* also turned to the 'mad' label, reporting that Christie had spent 11 years in a psychiatric hospital after a previous attack against a child and that at his recent trial 'a clinical psychiatrist warned the paedophile may well strike again because he suffers from "deviant sexual arousal"'. Although the reader is told that Christie is married with three children under the age of 10, no concern about the danger he may pose to them is expressed.

The Times also reported this demonstration, informing the reader that he was living on an estate five miles from Dunblane. The link to the massacre at Dunblane was made explicit by one of the mothers:

They all had suspicions about Hamilton but they didn't act on them. If we don't act, the council will wait until perhaps our children are raped and murdered and our schools are shot up and then they'll say 'Oh we had a theory about him. (Margaret Haney, quoted in *Jeering mothers drive paedophile off council estate* [*The Times* 11/1/97])

A separate article on the same day outlined the proposals for the register. A further demonstration against Christie, described as a 'fugitive paedophile', was reported in *Pervert besieged in hostel* (*The Mail* 1/2/97). It was only in the next report, *Stop hiding perverts say protest mothers* (*The Mail* 3/2/97), that the proposals for the Sex

Offenders Register were mentioned in the context of demands by the demonstrators to make it public 'so parents can check if they are in their area'. Government proposals at this stage were that the register should be held by the police — wider notification was not intended, apart from 'exceptional cases' and was to mainly concern schools and other agencies rather than the wider community. The demands for a more public register fits with the idea of a moral panic and one protestor was reported as saying: 'Something needs to be done about this.'

The idea of a public register as a solution was rejected two days later in Colette Douglas Home's *A register of evil just invites a witch hunt* (*The Mail* 7/2/97). Whilst noting that 'no one wants to live next door to a child molester... moves to alert communities to the presence of a convicted paedophile in their midst invites witch hunts, lynch mobs. Most importantly, it fails to protect children'. Home's argument is that the real problem is the release of men who are still considered a danger to children, and that this is the issue which politicians should be addressing. She accuses legislators of 'behaving like Pontius Pilate':

In providing a register they are washing their hands of real responsibility. But it is their job to establish the rules that will protect society. It is their job to protect the innocent; to incarcerate the guilty and the dangerous. They must not be allowed to pass the buck.

The register again features in *More than 100,000 paedophiles at large says Home Office* (*The Times* 20/2/97) which reports that a detailed study by the Home Office has revealed that 260,000 men have been convicted of sexual offences since the 1950s. 'The proposed register will not be retrospective so it would be decades before a comprehensive list of men who pose a potential danger to children and women is complete.' The report also highlights further problems with the register resulting from the fact that most cases are not reported to the authorities, do not go to court and do not result in a conviction. Liberal Democrat spokesperson Peter Thurnham is reported as saying that 'paedophiles should remain in custody until they were assessed as being safe for release'. The proposed register receives extensive coverage in *The Guardian*, which also opposes a public register, as it would serve to fuel 'vigilante action' (*The Guardian*, 15/1/97, 12/2/97, 19/2/97).

In all three newspapers, the register is referred to interchangeably as the Sex Offenders Register

'Pervert besieged in hostel'

'Groping soccer steward jailed'

and the 'paedophile register'. The use of 'paedophile' in this context narrows the frame not just to child sexual abuse, but a particular stereotype of sexual abusers. Yet the proposed Sex Offenders Register covered a wide range of offences: rape; intercourse with a girl under 16; incest by a man; indecent assault; indecency between men and causing or encouraging prostitution. The only paper to list the offences was *The Times*. This narrowing of the frame could also account for the fact that none of the reporting referred to criticisms of the list of offences: gay groups were concerned that the inclusion of indecency between men would lead to gay men convicted for consensual cottaging offences being included on the register; various women's organisations made similar points about the proposal to include all prostitution offences and the way this would define many women working as prostitutes as 'sex offenders'. (In fact the eventual law excluded both indecency between men and most prostitution offences.) The fact that most sex offenders commit offences against adult women (150,000 of the 260,000 offenders in the Home Office study reported in *The Times*) did not prevent the newspapers following their agenda on 'paedophiles'. This fits both aspects of moral panics — the accentuating stereotypes and the exaggeration.

The Sex Offenders Register was not the only policy response discussed during this period. Whilst the idea of treating child sex offenders is touched on by *The Mail* and *The Times*, it is at its most developed in *The Guardian: Law and the lynch mob* (19/2/97) argues that 'it is high time we recognise that finding and solving the area of fault — although notoriously complex — is a possibility that can be achieved through therapy'. The article makes no reference to the highly gendered nature of child sexual abuse, although unlike much of the other reporting it does highlight the fact that 'most abuse still occurs within the family' so the focus on 'stranger-danger' is the wrong one. This theme is also developed in *The danger of living in ignorance* (19/2/97) which criticises the government for allowing:

the 'stranger danger' account of child abuse to be promoted at the expense of the knowledge that it is within the home that children are most likely to become victims of childhood sexual abuse

In *On The Record: Paedophiles: Warning word to the wise* (3/2/97), MP David Mellor argued for the development of tribunals to conduct risk assessments of individuals thought to pose a danger, even if they had not been convicted. Again the 'something more must be done'

message is clear. It was also present in an article in *The Mail* (5/2/97) which outlined the need for a national solution to housing convicted sex offenders. Pat Begley, the Director of Social Services in Christie's area, said: 'There needs to be consideration nationally about what arrangements can be made for individuals like Mr Christie'. That the issues raised in terms of housing policy had shifted to another level was revealed in reports in *The Guardian* and *Times* (9/1/97) that Middlesbrough Council was considering banning known sex offenders from council housing. The decision of Hounslow Council to refuse to re-house a specific child sex offender echoed this trend. The high court ruling which declared Hounslow's decision lawful was reported in *The Guardian*, *The Times* and *The Mirror* (20/22/97). In the period this study covered — and in many of the similar issues raised since — there are many examples of local protests and actions becoming both national stories and calls for nationwide action; again these are processes one might expect to find in the context of a moral panic.

The only newspaper to discuss a policy intervention aimed directly at children is *The Mirror* (*Sex education is kids salvation* 28/2/97) The brief report opens:

Child prostitution and abuse are increasing. Meanwhile it is suggested that children need more sex education. Quite right. If kids are to be better protected they need to know what they are to be protected from.

This analysis of reporting during January and February 1997 suggests that a moral panic was (and arguably still is) taking place. The subject of the panic, however, is not child sexual abuse or even child sex abusers, but the narrow stereotype of 'paedophiles'. This framing of the issue means that both the scale of sexual abuse and the fact that children are most at risk from men that they know almost disappear from the popular and policy agendas. What matters for feminists about moral panics is that whilst they generate the impetus to do something — the Sex Offenders Act was passed, and a number of other policy changes have been introduced since — the responses are unlikely to be either effective or appropriate.

I am not arguing that all proposed responses in this moral panic were 'wrong' — the calls to do something about the release of dangerous offenders and the questions raised about where known sex offenders should live are important issues. The problem is rather that not only do

they focus on a tiny minority of sex offenders, but also that the narrowing of the agenda to paedophiles means that limited measures can be represented as having 'done something' about child sexual abuse. The moral panic about paedophiles serves to disguise the realities of child sexual abuse. The fact that no newspaper or government representative — during the period of study and since — commented on the fact that proposals with reference to 'paedophiles' are at odds with civil law rights accorded to fathers who have sexually abused their children, is just one example of the many contradictions which now exist between public policy and the realities of child sexual abuse.

Back to normality

The stereotyping and 'othering' which are part of the creation of folk devils and moral panics can be seen in much of the reporting in both the quality and tabloid press during the period this study covered. This process of 'othering' has been noted by both Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Fraser and Liz Kelly (*T&S* 33) who identify it as the means by which the connections between 'normal' men, masculinity and men who commit sexual offences against women are hidden.

'Paedophile' was by far the most popular term, being used more than 20 times in *The Times* and more than 30 times in *The Mail* and *The Guardian*. In contrast, *The Mirror* uses 'paedophile' only twice preferring 'perverts' (9), 'sex fiends' (5), 'sex monsters' (4), 'sex pests' (3) and 'sex maniacs' (6). 'Pervert' was also popular in *The Mail* (8) but is not used at all by *The Times* and *The Guardian*. 'Child molester' was occasionally used by all four newspapers. Offenders are described in *The Mirror* variously as sick, shamed, evil, brutal, twisted, depraved and vile; in *The Mail* as evil, warped, manipulative, cunning and savage; in *The Times* as sick, evil, cunning and manipulative; and in *The Guardian* as vile, sinister and anti-social. Perhaps most revealing of all, the issue of gender, the fact that the vast majority of sex offenders are male, was not explicitly addressed by any newspaper in any report.

Liz Kelly (*T&S* 33) documents the growing tendency within the discourse of child protection professionals to view men who sexually abuse children as deviant and 'other'. This research has found a similar process within popular discourse. Men who sexually abuse children are created as

'other' in newspaper reporting not only through the label 'paedophile' which Liz Kelly highlighted, but also through terms such as 'pervert', 'sex maniac' and 'sex fiend'.

By focussing on a certain type of man (paedophile/pervert) rather than a certain type of behaviour (the widespread sexual abuse of children, particularly girls), attention is shifted away from political solutions addressing male power and the construction of masculinity towards a range of 'problem-management' solutions: long-term incarceration (*The Mail*); risk assessment tribunals for dangerous men (*The Guardian*; to registration for offenders (*The Mail*, *The Guardian* and *The Times*); and individual therapy (*The Guardian*). Unfortunately, it is currently a moral panic about 'paedophiles' rather than feminist analysis which is fuelling the social policy agenda in Britain on child sexual abuse.

But the problem remains: most abuse is carried out by known men, often within the family. Writing of sexual murder, Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Fraser have argued that the pages of the tabloids:

are apparently still stalked by motiveless 'fiends' whose 'brutal lusts' remain for ever unspecified, their connection with masculinity somehow obvious, yet unexplained.

As with sexual murder, in the reporting of child sexual abuse and policy responses to it, the issue of gender is never addressed — the question of why child sex offenders are overwhelmingly male and their victims primarily female is never asked. To ask it would be to spotlight masculine sexuality and male power. To answer it would require solutions based on changing the construction of male sexuality and the distribution of power in society. Instead the newspapers parade paedophiles and perverts, monsters and maniacs thus obscuring the issue of male sexuality and removing the most crucial question of male power from the debate. □

References

- Debbie Cameron 'Wanted: the female serial killer' *T&S* 33 (Summer 1996)
- Debbie Cameron 'Motives and meanings' *T&S* 34 (Winter 1996/7)
- Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Fraser *The Lust To Kill: A Feminist Investigation of Sexual Murder* (Polity Press, 1987)
- Stan Cohen *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (Martin Robertson, 1980)
- Kate Cook 'Raging about rape' *T&S* 35 (Summer 1997)
- Emily Driver and Audrey Droisen *Child Sexual Abuse: Feminist Perspectives* (MacMillan, 1989)
- Liz Kelly 'Weasel Words: Paedophiles and the Cycle of Abuse' *T&S* 33 (Summer 1996)
- Liz Kelly 'Confronting an atrocity' *T&S* 36 (Winter 1997/8)

'Possessed by evil'

Courtroom Dramas

At the 1997 Edinburgh festival, a new play about False Memory Syndrome, Mike Cullen's Anna Weiss, was hailed by critics as 'powerfully thought-provoking theatre'. It was also described as 'not taking sides'.

In fact Anna Weiss does take sides: it takes the side of men against abused women and children. And as feminist legal scholars Jane Scoular and Denise Mina explain, what happens in the imaginary world of the theatre is increasingly being re-enacted in the real world of the law courts: the dramatic potential of 'false memory' encourages lawyers to introduce it even where it is patently irrelevant.

The newly invented 'False Memory Syndrome' describes a suggested condition where the sufferer remembers events which didn't happen; it is most commonly associated with female accounts of sexual abuse. It was in fact created by the False Memory Syndrome Foundation (FMSF) in America; a group of aggrieved parents accused of sexual abuse by their children (see 'FMS: Fraudulent, Misogynist and Sinister', *T&S* 31). The syndrome disputes the possibility of repressed memory of trauma. According to this formulation when such memories are recovered they are the result of being implanted by an external source. Among the most commonly cited means of implantment are the use of hypnosis or drug therapy by therapists.

The FMSF and its British counterpart, the British False Memory Society (BFMS) have

recently widened the possible causes of implantment to include 'softer' forms of intervention such as a therapist's questioning or 'being with a patient', or women's reading books, watching television shows or even attending a feminist meeting. There is the suggestion that women cannot be trusted with information and political ideas and that the scarce resources we have campaigned for are in some way damaging to our individual and collective memories. The implication of this extension is that all memories can be tainted, and support of any kind is a potential pollutant.

Support, even in the sense of believing that memories *can* be repressed and later recalled, is seen by one commentator on the subject as being sufficient to implant. Psychologist Janet Boakes, interviewed in a recent *Frontline Scotland*

programme about the Fairlie case (discussed below), stated: 'It's not just [memory recovery] techniques [which cause false memory syndrome], just believing in repression ... becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy'. She adds that this belief makes it likely that professionals will find evidence to support child abuse allegations.

Through the campaigning activities of the two organisations, false memory syndrome has gained currency in the media, as Jenny Kitzinger notes in her article 'Media Representation of Sexual Abuse Risks' and increasingly in law. The way it has been adopted in these discourses has meant that 'false memories' appear as much a risk as child sexual abuse itself. The complexities of child abuse are sidelined as the battle between recovered and false memory takes centre stage. In this polar argument only one account can be true.

To illustrate how this polarisation works, we will use a play, *Anna Weiss*, and then draw parallels with the syndrome's increasing adoption into law.

Anna Weiss

The play *Anna Weiss* by Mike Cullen, which debuted in 1997's Edinburgh Festival, tells the story of the confrontation between a daughter claiming to have recovered memories of sexual abuse, her accused father and the attendant therapist. One of the most lauded aspects of the play in press reviews, was that it 'refuses to take sides'. The playwright describes himself as being without 'any social or political agenda, other than that this should be talked about'.

Yet the way in which Mike Cullen 'talks about' the issues is not neutral. Even before the play begins, the apparently neutral author's presentation of alleged child abuse starts with a nursery rhyme; an adult representation of a child's idiosyncratic world. The proem to the play reads;

I thought I saw upon the stair
A little man who wasn't there
He wasn't there again today
Oh, how I wish he'd go away
Children's rhyme

The overactive imagination described is the property of a child. The child is frightened by an imaginary man, the child is scaring *itself*.

The first appearance of the daughter, Lynn, on stage clearly identifies her as the 'child' of the proem. She arrives on stage frantically trying to find something that she has lost; 'In detail, I remember in detail... approaching this box..

putting the thing in the box. I can see myself'.

She cannot remember correctly where she has put a photograph of her father, taken on the day that she claims he raped her. It is later found in a different box. Her memory is flawed from the very first line, in the first scene. Despite her certainty over her memory Lynn has misremembered. This casts doubt on her version of events; she is an unreliable subject. She is the child who thought she saw a man, this man is her father yet he wasn't there.

The play opens by rehearsing the cultural construction of women and children as deceitful. This construction can be seen in judicial utterances, commonly in the area of rape, such as Judge Sutcliffe's comment in 1976: 'It is well known that women in particular and small boys are liable to be untruthful and invent stories'.

In contrast the male subject in law has integrity. This is paralleled in the play; the father's memory is never presented as conditional. He can recall events from his earliest childhood; '[B]efore I could even walk, lying in my *pram*, for Christ's sake.' He recalls smells, he remembers his room 'in every detail'; its colour, its shape, its texture. He talks of his uncomfortable bed, he can *hear* himself wetting it. He can feel the fuzzy blankets on his skin. His total recall even extends to a faulty knob on his chest of drawers and there follows an inventory of its contents; tight necked jumpers, gold and black hooped ankle socks from thirty five years ago. We have a clear impression of a man with acute cognitive senses. His recollections extend to Lynn's own childhood, he remembers 'every detail' of Lynn's childhood. He describes her birth, '[E]very birthday, every Christmas...every gift I bought her, every expression on her face'.

Empty vessels

Of all the characters, it is the father who is furnished with a history. In contrast, the only dimension to Lynn is her determination to confront him. She is constructed as an empty vessel to be filled with ideas and a history provided by external sources. These sources include her father, the therapist and a nameless self-

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97



Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

Photo from *The Scotsman* 15/8/97

help book. One cause of implanted memory commonly referred to in BFMS literature, is the best selling *The Courage to Heal*, a self-help book for survivors of abuse. In a 1996 case discussed below, referred to as the Cracker case, *The Courage to Heal* was directly implicated as a source of false memories. Cullen echoes this: 'The things he did. I wrote them down, like it said in the book.' Lynn is silenced, it is the book which appears to speak.

The Courage to Heal is often discredited by tainting it with a pseudo-religious characterisation. Such an association operates to reduce recovered stories to scripture and turns subjects into disciples, once again denying their subjectivity. Anyone who facilitates the telling of the story is discredited; therapists and feminists become the high priestesses of the cult of repressed memory. The playwright, Mike Cullen, repeats this device in his characterisation of the therapist Anna Weiss who is a mish-mash of misogynist fears. She is a man-hating, covert lesbian who uses the therapeutic relationship to press her agenda on Lynn. In Act 1 Scene 1 she launches into her regular diatribe 'Hole Blindness — The male affliction', 'a man, any man, looks at a woman... when everything's stripped away [and sees] a big pink gaping hole that must be filled.'

Throughout the play this is cast as the motivating force behind the confrontation rather than any truth of the memories. This mirrors the BFMS's frequent claims that therapists have their own political agenda. Anna's agenda is even more questionable as Anna and Lynn also live together. This relationship is not furnished in any way, and the silence serves to cast it as sinister and abusive. The sinister pall is deflected from the father: he begins to question Anna, 'You get off on this...fuck[ing] with peoples lives.' And later, 'Where do you sleep, Lynn?'

The suggestion of a sexual relationship casts Anna Weiss as both unprofessional and predatory. Neither of the two women talk about their relationship; we are left with the father's aspersions.

Protecting the family

In a similar manner, it is the therapeutic relationship that BFMS constantly interrogate without questioning the familial dynamics. The family are only mentioned in their accounts to document the damage done by therapeutic intervention. In the legal setting it is the therapeutic

relationship which comes under scrutiny. For example, in two cases we discuss below, the Ramona and Fairlie cases, the action is for damages for insult to the father's reputation caused by therapists' actions. In clearing their name the safety of the family is reinforced. Accounts routinely focus on the damaged family and their attempts to rebuild relationships which have been 'torn apart' by the violence of therapeutic intervention. In *Frontline Scotland's* account of the Fairlie case, the final scene is of the Catriona and Jim Fairlie 'learning to do the things that other fathers and daughters take for granted'.

In *Anna Weiss* the shifting of responsibility for damaging the child, Lynn, is complete when the confrontation between father and daughter is overtaken by the therapist. After a sound slap from the father it is Anna who suddenly remembers being abused by the same characters, in the same setting and with the same emotional content as Lynn. The suggestion is that Anna has penetrated Lynn's consciousness and filled it with her own memories. The abusive relationship in Lynn's life is her relationship with Anna.

At the end of the play the hapless women are confused; Lynn confesses, '[H]ow can we know... what's yours, what's mine...?' Anna and Lynn's subjectivities are conflated. The therapist is so powerful that she takes over the patient's voice, her agency and even her abuse.

The dynamics in the play are mirrored when False Memory Syndrome appears in a legal context. As therapists and health professionals become the subjects of legal suits the issue becomes an adversarial contest between them and the accused parent. Any account of abuse is sidelined, the family is re-established as a safe-haven and the therapeutic relationship is cast as dangerous.

False Memory Syndrome In Law

The development of False Memory Syndrome in law is an interesting one, involving two crucial misrepresentations by the pro-FMS bodies. Firstly, from the moment of its establishment in 1993 the BFMS established a pattern of falsely claiming legal victories which supported the syndrome. In these initial cases the facts did not correspond to the syndrome as defined by the BFMS and FMSF. Often there had been no repressed memories and the accuser had not been in therapy at the time of the initial allegation.

The second misrepresentation concerns the

legal weight attached to these 'legal victories': the submission of a defence in court by a lawyer does not amount to legal recognition or adoption. Even if a court finds for the defence, unless the syndrome is referred to in the judgement of the court, it is not authoritative and has no precedential value in later cases; this means it cannot be relied upon as a set legal rule.

The first case which the BFMS claimed supported their cause demonstrates both deliberate errors. The case was heard in 1993, the same year that the BFMS was founded. It concerned Linda Bolland Heaton, a worker for the charity Barnardos whose 22 year old daughter had gone into therapy after alleging that she had been sexually abused by her stepfather. Before going into therapy the daughter extended the allegations and accused her mother of sadistic sexual abuse. As a result Heaton was dismissed from her job at Barnardos and subsequently brought an action against the charity for unfair dismissal. The industrial tribunal found for her, awarding her £14,000 in damages.

Both Heaton and the BFMS claimed that this case represented the adoption of FMS into the UK courts. However, the tribunal's hearing centred on the procedures for dismissal. They quite properly found 'insufficient' evidence for the allegations: the daughter had not made her allegations public, nor had she pursued a criminal investigation. The only mention of the veracity of the daughter's memories came in the form of evidence led, not in the judgement. The mother called a psychologist who, using Freudian theory, contended that women with 'hysterical personalities' are more likely to report fantasy or untruths as fact. These submissions did not find their way into the judgement, and the tribunal did not find on the question of false memory at all. The case is not even a false memory case as defined by the societies: the daughter accused her mother of abusing her before she went into therapy and there was no suggestion of lost memories being recovered, much less of memories recovered under intrusive therapeutic intervention.

One year later the society claimed victory in another case which again did not fit within the parameters of the syndrome, nor did the court find on the issue. Fiona Reay, a 33 year old care assistant, accused her father of systematic sexual abuse during her childhood. The facts of her childhood were not in dispute: she had run away

from home on a number of occasions and there was evidence that she had never been enrolled in secondary school. Her father said it was because she was 'young and stupid'. He had physically assaulted Fiona on a number of occasions, one of which occurred when she was sixteen. The police had been called to the house by her boyfriend; after he had dropped her home, he heard her screaming as her father beat her with a dog chain.

As before there was no evidence of repression of memory in this case. Fiona Reay had been telling the same story to different health professionals for years. Her medical records document her consistent reference to family problems from the age of 14. She finally made a clear statement in 1982 when she asked a gynaecologist if her need for a hysterectomy could be related to the fact that she had been sexually abused by her father. Five years later she was admitted to psychiatric hospital stating that one of the precipitant factors causing her breakdown had been an unexpected visit from her father. She found him stroking her daughter. There had been no therapy, no regression and no hypnosis prior to the allegations being made public.

The jury took 27 minutes to find Fiona Reay's father not guilty of rape and indecent assault. As before, the court did not hear evidence from expert witnesses stating that Fiona was suffering from false memory syndrome. The only suggestion of this was by the defence counsel, Toby Hedworth. In his closing remarks he referred to the 'worrying phenomenon of people coming to believe in phantom memories'.



Photo from *The Glasgow Herald* 29/7/97

'I read a newspaper article about a man whose daughter went to a therapist, and in the course of therapy discovered she'd been abused by her uncle. Her father was appalled, and tried to help her recover more. In the process of recovering more, she discovered memories of having been abused by him. I felt a huge sense of injustice at that'
Mike Cullen, author of Anna Weiss

'Recovered memory is a possibility. So is false memory. That's what makes this situation incredibly dangerous. It comes down to one person's word against another.'
Mike Cullen

The next case which was claimed as a triumph for false memory was heard in March 1995. A father was acquitted of raping his daughter. The claims of the BFMS followed the familiar pattern of not fitting within the parameters of false memory at all. The daughter made the allegations to staff members whom she had befriended during her stay in psychiatric hospital. As before there was no evidence of memory repression or recovery during therapy and again the case failed due to lack of corroborating evidence. Yet the society picked up on the defence solicitor's statements that the daughter was a prone to 'fantasise' about sexual matters and had been sexually promiscuous with other patients in the hospital.

The Cracker case

Ironically, the first English law case where the judgement was based on a finding of 'false' memories induced through therapy has been ignored by the BFMS. We can only presume that the reason was that the case was not about sexual abuse. It concerned a woman suing the Coal Board for compensation for her psychiatric injuries sustained during the Aberfan pit disaster of October 1966. Ms Crocker was a ten year old child at the time and had since experienced both physical and emotional symptoms relating to the disaster, such as the disturbing sensation of having pins stuck under her nails, a feeling which she later attributed to the memory of scrabbling through the slag as she attempted to free her friends underneath it.

Ms Crocker entered into therapy in an attempt to overcome these debilitating symptoms. She underwent a form of abreaction therapy which included the use of sodium amytal (a so-called 'truth drug'), reading contemporaneous news reports and watching documentaries about the disaster. The judgement of the court stated: '[A]breaction itself represents a powerful process, which is capable of generating as well as bringing back memories.' and later in the judgement,

It is clear, as I have already mentioned, that some of the 'memories' induced were false in that objective sense I would say only that they are not to my mind established for present purposes as objective fact on a balance of probabilities.

This case, while not fully adopting the concept of false memory syndrome into law, does represent an opening of the door and the adoption of some of its central tenets.

False confession become 'false memory'

The case of Michelle Uncles in May 1996 shows how woolly and broad the original concept of false memory had now become and yet it demonstrated the continued willingness of defence lawyers to use it as a device to discredit any contentious memory presented by a woman. In this case Michelle confessed to the police that she had smothered her baby who had died 6 years before. The pathologist's report made at the time of the original death concluded that the baby had died from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). There was no forensic evidence suggesting that Michelle had smothered her baby. Her lawyer claimed that she was suffering from false memories of killing her child, memories induced by guilt over his death. The judgement of the court centred on the fact that there was no evidence of smothering and Michelle was released. This classic case of a false confession was recharacterised by the defence as an example of false memory syndrome and was reported in the press as further evidence of the rise of false memory syndrome.

In Manchester in 1996 yet another case was reported by BFMS as 'the first British case of False Memory Syndrome'. The defence barrister, Stephen Meadowcroft, stated that the complainant had been influenced by reading *The Courage to Heal* and watching an episode of 'Cracker' in which a rape occurred. Reporting restrictions on the case were very tight; it has been unreported in the legal literature and information about the case has been hard to come by. It is therefore unclear whether or not the case was decided directly on the issue of false memories. What is known is that Roger Scotford, the head and founder of the BFMS, stood on the steps of the court handing out press releases to journalists claiming that this was a case of false memory syndrome. Stephen Meadowcroft has subsequently claimed that Scotford misquoted his submissions to the court in these press releases and Bryan Tully, an expert witness on false memory syndrome, has complained about Scotford's behaviour during the case.

Suing the therapists

It is against this background that two cases will be heard in the next few months, which once again bring up the issue of false memory syndrome. Anna Hunter has just been granted legal aid to pursue her suit against a psychiatric

hospital in Newcastle upon Tyne. After numerous suicide attempts and developing an eating disorder she was admitted to hospital. While there she alleged that her father and grandfather had abused her when she was a child. She has subsequently retracted her allegations and is suing the hospital for negligence, on the grounds that the hospital did not question her memories and treated them as true.

The second case, reported on the 15th October 1997 in *The Daily Telegraph* involves a daughter's allegations of abuse against her father, Jim Fairlie, the former Scottish National Party deputy leader. She made the allegations while under medication in a psychiatric unit and has since recanted. In a recent *Frontline Scotland* programme screened in early March 1998, Catriona Fairlie said, 'There was no corroboration so it didn't happen'. What she claims did happen was that while dealing with flashbacks to childhood sexual abuse (which remains undisputed), a nurse who was listening to her 'disclose' an episode asked, 'Has your Dad ever abused you?'. Catriona replied 'No'. The nurse asked her whether she was sure. Catriona said that yes, she was sure. It appears to be on the basis of this conversation that false memories are supposed to have been implanted. Her father is now suing the Hospital Trust for defamation, the Scottish equivalent of libel, on the grounds that his daughter's memories were believed without question.

The usual defence in defamation cases is 'veritas' — that the allegations are true. If the court finds for Fairlie the implications could be staggering: health care workers may find themselves under a legal obligation to interrogate memories of abuse and will be unable to report it to the police until they have some physical or other corroborating evidence. The outcome of these cases remains to be seen.

Ready-made arguments

The campaigning of the BFMS has had an effect and the law does appear to be becoming increasingly receptive to this model of memory despite its contentious nature. One of the reasons is that it provides defence lawyers with a ready made explanation of allegations of child abuse. When Bea Campbell asked the father's solicitor in the Fiona Reay case why he had used false memory syndrome in his defence the solicitor,

David Smee, replied that his job 'was not to pursue the truth but to protect his client, to get him off'. In the same article Smee claimed as inspiration the BBC *Inside Story* documentary film on false memory, screened only a few weeks earlier.

In an adversarial contest defence solicitors have everything to gain and nothing to lose from making such a damaging claim. Yet as we can see from the earlier cases, the law does not have to decide cases on the issue of false memory syndrome. A case can be dismissed as a false allegation or on the grounds that there is insufficient evidence. These findings are routinely returned in cases every day. Yet why is it that when a case involves a woman's allegation of child abuse her memory becomes suspect and medicalised? In order to answer this we must look at the various characteristics of legal discourse, many of which are also evident in the play *Anna Weiss*.

Silencing women

The law presents itself as a neutral forum in which disputes can be resolved in a balanced manner. The play also presents itself as neutral, yet any enquiry into the methods deployed in both discourses uncover a pervading sexism. Women and children come from a position of social and historical inequality. The law's claim of neutrality ignores this context, and its method, amplifies their marginalisation.

In the legal cases, as in the play, the audience is being asked to determine whose memory of events is correct. By presenting it as a polar issue both discourses detract attention from the fact that the playing field is not level. The central issue before the audience and the court is the women's agency and integrity. Attempts are made to destabilise both as it is debated and decided upon. The reliability of the female subject is interrogated, it has to be: it forms the very nub of the question before the court.

As FMS gains currency female voices lose audibility. This silencing takes place in the play and has happened in the media coverage of stories. The danger is that if this syndrome is fully transferred into law, in the up coming cases, an already hostile discourse will become an utterly inaccessible forum for survivors to tell their stories of abuse and seek any kind of redress. □

References

- Bea Campbell 'Mind Games' *The Guardian*, 11th February 1995
- Beth Follini 'FMS: Fraudulent, Misogynist and Sinister' *T&S* 31 (Summer 1995)
- Jenny Kitzinger 'Media Representations of Sexual Abuse Risks' *Child Abuse Review* (Vol 5 No5, 319-333)
- Mike Cullen *Anna Weiss* (Nick Hern Books, 1997)

Space: The feminist frontier

Science fiction need not be about technological gadgetry or wars in outer space. Feminist writers have used science fiction to explore alternative to patriarchy as we know it. Hence it can entertain us while making political points. Here Dianne Butterworth suggests some science fiction novels which radical feminists might enjoy.

Last summer, I lent some science fiction books to one of the T&S sisters to take on holiday with her. This year, she asked if I could write a short summer reading list for this issue. I must warn you, though, that this is a very idiosyncratic list. It's not a systematic review of recent books, nor does it have any kind of theme; I just scanned my shelves and picked out a few books that I thought radical feminists might be interested in reading (in fact, one of my selections is not about gender).

I am going to skip over the well-known feminist classics such as Joanna Russ' *The Female Man*, Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Suzy McKee Charnas' *Walk to the End of the World* and *Motherlines*, Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue*. Most of these are already known to feminists, although I would always recommend them to those who haven't yet read them. (*The Female Man* is one of the most amazing science fiction books I have read — see the review in T&S No. 5). This is also not a proper 'review', since what I know about critiquing fiction could fit in the bellybutton of a gnat. Instead, this will be more of a commentary on books I have found particularly gripping.

Having given all these warnings, let me

begin by telling you why I like science fiction — I know many women are utterly uninterested in it, so let me try to convince you to read these books. Most non-science fiction readers, when they think of science fiction, tend to think of *Star Wars* or *Aliens*. Yes, these are set in the future or in a galaxy far, far away, but they do not show what science fiction can achieve (don't get me wrong, though, I like both these films). Science fiction, at its best (and there is a lot of really crap science fiction out there), allows authors to explore ideas and themes which are not bound to 'reality'. They can postulate situations where the reader cannot say 'the legal system doesn't work like that' or they can create alien races which escape the limitations of so-called 'human nature'. This is the kind of science fiction I like best. Forget *Star Wars* — that's just a war movie set in outer space, with a few weird-looking creatures thrown in. *Aliens* is a jumped-up slasher film with some *real* mean bad guys.

A Door into Ocean

My first book, *A Door into Ocean* by Joan Slonczewski, is about two worlds: Valedon and its moon, the ocean world of Shora. Valedon is a world very much like our own in many ways —

capitalist, and patriarchal in its many forms. Ruling over all the known worlds in the galaxy is the Patriarch. Shora, on the other hand, is a world where the 'Sharers' live. This is a race of women, genetically compatible with humans, as they are descended from humans. The following description of Sharers will cause many women to sigh heavily, I'm sure (oh, no, not another women-are-all-connected-to-nature aren't-we-all-nice utopia), but, please, bear with me.

Physical violence and coercion is incomprehensible to Sharers (although there are a few psychotic individuals), they live in balance with their ecosystem, they limit their numbers to a sustainable population, decisions are reached through consensus. However, the Sharers are not perfect people — they feel anger, jealousy, hate, they can be petty, but the one thing they do not feel is fear; or rather, they feel sensible fear when confronting the dangers of their world (carnivorous creatures, storms), but they have the ability to withdraw into 'whitetrance' — a kind of dissociation. Whitetrance is used when Sharers want to be alone in a world where they are forced to live in very close proximity to each other. It is used for meditation and for grieving.

The plot of the book revolves around the fact that the Patriarch's representative, the Envoy, has ordered Valedon's High Protector to get Shora under control before his next visit some years later. So Valedon 'invades' Shora. The crucial point of the book is: what happens when an army invades a planet of people who don't understand the concept of 'orders' and who therefore don't understand how to obey? How can non-violent tactics succeed against violence? How can soldiers force someone to co-operate when she can choose to withdraw into whitetrance — a state in which Sharers do not feel pain?

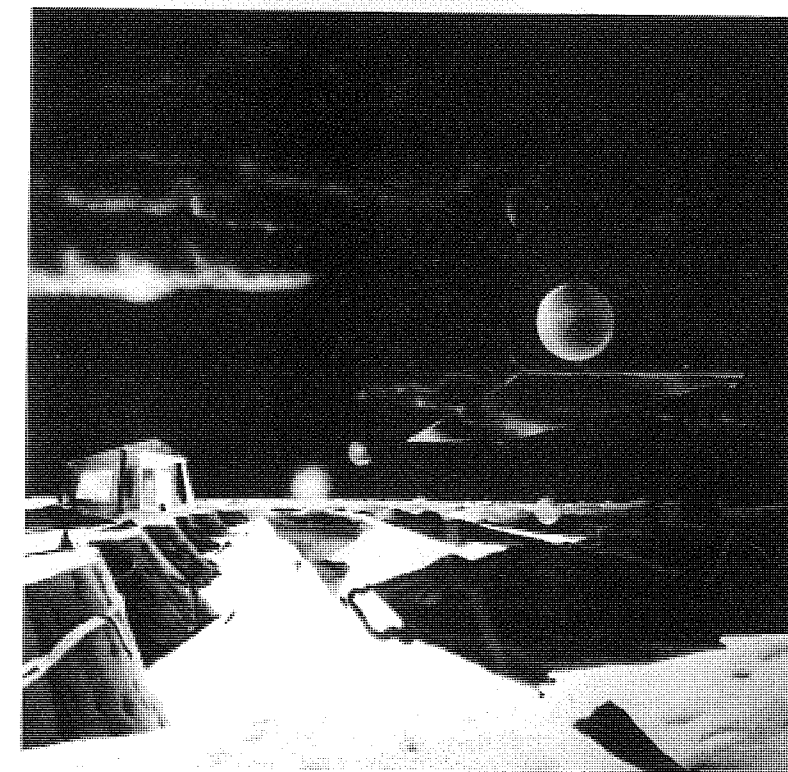
The tension in the book is in the dilemma faced by the Sharers — to learn violence in order to repel a ravaging army (as one faction would do), or to hold to non-violence. In the book, two of the central characters are Valans living with the Sharers — a woman, Berenice, whose father was one of the first to start trading with Shora, and who grew up amongst the Sharers, and a boy, Spinel. These characters (whose culture is much more like ours than Shora's) allow the reader to observe and react along with them and to engage with the fears and hopes of the Sharers.

I keep returning to this book, especially

during those times when I've heard one atrocity too many, when sustaining a radical feminist vision of possibilities seems too hard, and when violence as a political strategy begins to seem an appropriate response to male violence. *A Door into Ocean* grounds me; the relationships between the women — despite tensions and complicated individual histories — delight, amaze and amuse me; the core message of non-violence refreshes me; and I reflect again on how my fears constrain my life.

Alien Influences

In contrast, *Alien Influences* by Kristine Kathryn Rusch is disturbing, but it is one of the most powerful novels I have ever read about child abuse. The book begins with an investigation by Justin Schafer, a human- and xeno-psychologist, into the murders of two children on the planet Bountiful. The only human presence on this harsh planet is a colony of 1,000 men, women and children living in a dome, who trade with the native race — the Dancers — for the ingredients of Salt Juice, their only export. Justin Schafer, whose anthropomorphic assumptions about another alien race triggered humans' genocidal slaughter of a harmless sentient species, is determined to find out the truth about the



murders and the possible involvement of the Dancers, who are under suspicion because both children were murdered in an imitation of a Dancer ritual.

Soon after Justin's arrival, a third killing takes place, and it becomes clear that the killers are a group of the colony children. The first half of the book follows the investigation, the subsequent arrest of the children, their deportation to Lina Base for trial, the children's attempts to cope with their new environment, and the various interactions, benevolent and otherwise, of the adults on Lina Base with the children. It emerges during this time that the children 'killed' their peers in order to force them to grow up, imitating a Dancer's metamorphosis into adult life.

But the adults around them — Justin Schafer, their attorney and the base psychologist, as well as the police and guards — are much more concerned with whether the children were 'influenced' by an alien species. Their case will be the first test of a new law, the Alien Influences Act. Their lawyer says:



'We have to determine at the hearing how to treat them in our legal system. Do we treat them as children or are their crimes too severe for that? Do we treat them as human? Do we treat them as human under Dancer influence? Do we treat them as Dancers with human characteristics? Do we treat them as Dancers only?'

Twenty years later, John, the last of the the Dancer Eight, as the children became known, begins a quest to find the other seven, not knowing their fates. John eventually meets up again with Justin. This time he says what he was not able to as a child:

'You have never looked beyond the surface, Dr Schafer. Your entire career has been one of taking the illusions people present and going no deeper. When you realized that children — children! — were killing each other, you never asked why. You never looked to the true cause, the real motive.' ...

'Think, Doctor. It would seem to me, although I am not an expert like you, that a basic tenet of human psychology is that when the children take drastic action, there is something wrong with the adults. You never looked at the families. You never looked at the community, although you did us all a favour by breaking it up. You only looked at us as if we were diseased and because we imitated the Dancers, you and everyone else figured that they had influenced us somehow.'

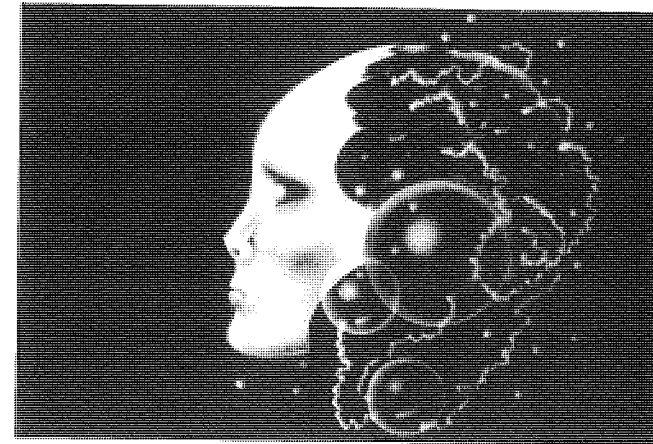
'You chose their rituals,' Justin said. 'You chose them.'

'No,' John said softly. 'They chose us. But that's another issue and one I've only just figured out. No. The Dancers were never players. They were only a method of escape. And on other colonies, there are other escape methods — probably not as drastic or severe — but they exist. You don't understand your own world, doctor. How can you understand alien worlds if you don't understand your own?'

Alien Influences is about memory and surviving, and it is about the choices we make, even given extremely limited options. It is about how adults intervene, and the consequences — for the children and for themselves — of their actions and assumptions. It is about the damage child abuse can do, as well as the ways in which we cope with our own pasts.

Feminism against fundamentalism and liberalism

My third choice is an author, rather than a single book. Sheri S. Tepper is a prolific science fiction writer. One of the things I like about her novels is that she always has such great female characters (the vast majority of her central characters are women). I never hesitate when I see one of her new books in the shops. However, the more I



found this book so powerful was that it mirrored some of the discussions she was having at the time about how lesbians and/or feminists raise boy children in a sexist, patriarchal society.) Outside Marthatown, however, the men are plotting to take over the town, and are using Cheron, a young warrior, to romance Stavia, the daughter of one of Marthatown's Councillors, who refuses to see what Cheron is...

Liberalism at its most ludicrous is explored in *Sideshow* (a sort of 'sequel' to her earlier

books *Grass* and *Raising the Stones*). On the planet Elsewhere, each province has its own system of government — democracy, theocracy, meritocracy, or whatever — chosen when the planet was first settled and no other province is allowed to interfere. Elsewhere is managed by Council Supervisory, based in the city of Tolerance, and respect for other provinces' ways of life is ensured by Council Enforcers, whose job it is to deal with provinces that threaten the status quo. However, from deep with one of Elsewhere's continents, a threat to Tolerance is emerging, and two Enforcers are sent to 'Attend the Situation'...

I disagree fundamentally with many of Sheri Tepper's ideas. Nevertheless she is a keen observer of male culture and her sweeping generalisations and impatience can be refreshing when I'm in the mood for an unambiguous read. Science fiction can be more than interstellar battles and bug-eyed monsters. So suspend your disbelief, put aside your *Star Wars* notions of science fiction, and take the plunge... In the right hands, science fiction can be used to 'sidestep' reality and offer a different perspective on our lives, our choices and our politics. □

Having said that, her settings and plots are imaginative, her female characters are strong and interesting, she is usually impatient with men, two of her most frequent targets are fundamentalist religion and liberalism (her authorial views are always crystal clear), and she understands how the two often combine with violence against women — this makes for a rather appealing combination. Her books are fast-moving, and are much 'lighter' reads than *Alien Influences*.

One of the books that most explicitly explores Sheri Tepper's ideas about the 'genetics' of violence is *A Gate Into Women's Country*. The book is set 300 years after some kind of disaster or war wiped out most of humanity. In Women's Country, the women (and a few non-violent men) live in walled towns, whilst the warrior men who guard the towns live outside in garrisons. Boys are nurtured by their mothers, but are given over to the garrisons at the age of five. Those who have the strength and will to resist their indoctrination into the male military culture can return to the town when they are 15. (A friend of mine tells me that the reason she

books *Grass* and *Raising the Stones*). On the planet Elsewhere, each province has its own system of government — democracy, theocracy, meritocracy, or whatever — chosen when the planet was first settled and no other province is allowed to interfere. Elsewhere is managed by Council Supervisory, based in the city of Tolerance, and respect for other provinces' ways of life is ensured by Council Enforcers, whose job it is to deal with provinces that threaten the status quo. However, from deep with one of Elsewhere's continents, a threat to Tolerance is emerging, and two Enforcers are sent to 'Attend the Situation'...

I disagree fundamentally with many of Sheri Tepper's ideas. Nevertheless she is a keen observer of male culture and her sweeping generalisations and impatience can be refreshing when I'm in the mood for an unambiguous read. Science fiction can be more than interstellar battles and bug-eyed monsters. So suspend your disbelief, put aside your *Star Wars* notions of science fiction, and take the plunge... In the right hands, science fiction can be used to 'sidestep' reality and offer a different perspective on our lives, our choices and our politics. □

For readers interested in science fiction, I would recommend Sarah Lefanu's *In the Chinks of the World Machine: Feminism & Science Fiction* (Women's Press, 1988).



SLICK WILLY AND THE SILENT SISTERS

Andrea Dworkin wonders why feminists say nothing as Bill Clinton exploits and humiliates women.

This piece was an interview, edited and strung together by The Guardian on 29 January 1998. Clinton has shown himself to be impervious to the harm he does to those who support him and work for him. Americans, including too many US feminists, have also been impervious — to Clinton's callousness toward women and to his sexual exploitation of women. Poor Tammy Wynette died — leaving Hillary to stand by her man without musical support. Clinton is a shark who is being treated as if he were a frisky little pup. He's a disgrace and so are feminists for going along with his bullshit.
—Andrea Dworkin, 8 May 1998.

Monica Lewinsky is in a terrible, terrible mess. She's being threatened by a very mean special prosecutor who has unlimited powers. And he plays hard ball. She has my sympathy. Of everyone who is a player in this game, she is the one who is going to be destroyed by it.

We are talking about a man who, in a predatory way, is using women, particularly young women. In this case, a woman who was working as an intern, for no money, because of her devotion to the Democratic Party and to him. In an alcove next to the Oval Office, he simply unzips his pants and she sexually services him.

Bill Clinton's fixation on oral sex — non-reciprocal oral sex — consistently puts women in states of submission to him. It's the most fetishistic, heartless, cold sexual exchange that one could imagine.

People are characterising this as a sexual scandal, but it's an abuse-of-power scandal. It corroborates what both Paula Jones and Jennifer Flowers have said, and it's a disaster for this particular young woman, Monica. I think there probably are many more of them, but I don't know how many will come forward. Whoever steps into this is stepping not just into public spectacle, but on to a legal landmine. And it is a

very hard thing for someone who is 20, 21, to find herself in the middle of all this, subpoenaed to talk about her sex life.

Humiliating Hillary

The second issue that concerns me is what Hillary Clinton is doing, which I think is appalling. She is covering up for a man who has a history of exploiting women. If there is one thing being a feminist has to mean it's that you don't do that. You don't use your intellect and your creativity to protect a man's exploitation of other women. She's done it before and she's doing it again.

Ever since she went to the White House as First Lady, her life has been going down the tubes. She had to give up her profession and she's been the staunch wife standing by her husband, no matter what vile things he does to humiliate her. It's pathetic. She should pack her bags and leave.

Women of Hillary's age — my age — have a responsibility not to let the men who are our peers exploit and destroy younger women. It breaks my heart to see Hillary on television. It's a performance and as such it's a lie. Whatever kind of deal they made in their marriage, I don't believe it included the public humiliation of her. And this has to be the most towering humiliation of all.

I had great hopes for her at the beginning. I thought: 'How wonderful — a feminist in the White House. She's so smart.' But I have not understood the choices she's made and have not been able to respect them. In protecting her husband, she is betraying younger women.

Maybe it was different 20 years ago. Maybe it looked different to her when Bill was fooling around in Arkansas. She had her job and her child, perhaps she didn't care. But now this is a man, her husband, the president, being sexually serviced by a 21-year-old woman — in her house.

It's impossible to believe that she, and everyone who works in the White House, doesn't feel utterly betrayed by him. They really thought he had stopped all this. They thought he was a creep before — even Monica calls him a creep — but when he became president, they thought he knew he couldn't get away with it any more.

There is a strain of misogyny in him, though. People say it has nothing to do with the way he makes social policy, but I think it does. These

things are connected. There are plenty of women who are simply expendable to him — clearly the White House interns are.

As for the conspiracy theory, I just don't believe it. Yes, there are rightwing people who hate the Clintons, but to think there's a conspiracy would mean somehow the rightwing planted the young woman in Clinton's office to entice him into sexual acts.

I have a modest proposal. It will probably bring the FBI to my door. But I think that Hillary should shoot Bill and the President Gore should pardon her.

A deafening silence

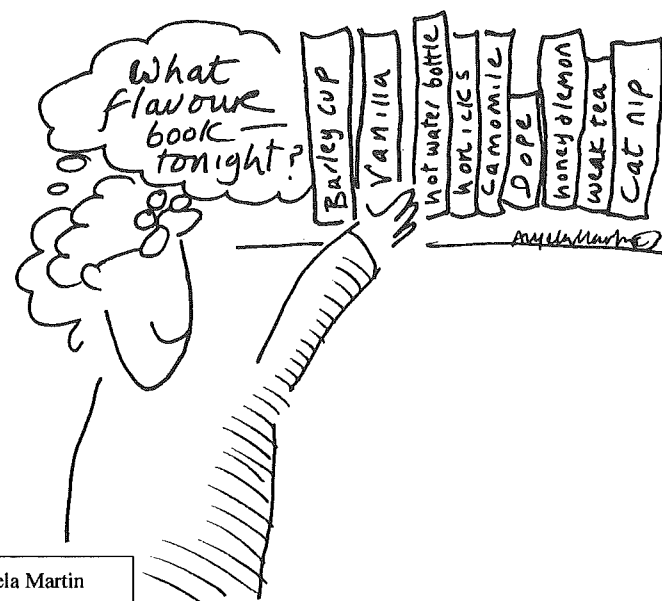
The silence from other feminists in this country is deafening. There's no outcry against Clinton, there's no outcry against Hillary for fronting for him. I think a lot of feminists are very distressed and disappointed in him, but they don't want to say so publicly because many of them are connected to the Democratic Party. It's a problem. It was a problem when Bill Clinton threw poor women off welfare and used pregnant teenage girls as scapegoats as if they were causing the economic problems of our country. Clinton has good policies for middle-class women, but I don't think he has good policies for poor women.

Male politicians' policies in respect of women are important, but sexual harassment is an issue, too. You don't say it's OK for the leader of your country to be having his cock sucked by someone half his age, while he is in the people's house. Yes, the law says that if both parties are consenting, it's not sexual harassment and it's not illegal. As far as we know, Monica was consenting, but I believe Clinton is culpable because I think he's guilty of exploitation. I care about how men in public life treat women. Clinton shows a real callousness in what he was doing to someone who was just about his daughter's age.

He may not have to resign, but I think he should and I think he will. I don't want him as my president. I think he's toast, I think he's done, I think he's outta there. And I'm glad about that. Most of my feminist colleagues won't be. They feel he's a good president and the country's in good shape, they feel he's a good guy. Yeah, he just did this one little thing that was wrong, but he's really a nice guy. Au revoir, Slick Willy. □

A Navel of One's Own

May Sarton has long had a devoted feminist readership. Wondering why she felt no urge to join it, Meryl Altman took a closer look at the boom in women's memoirs. She concludes that while they satisfy a market demand, they no longer have much to do with feminist politics.



Cartoons by Angela Martin

It seemed a perfect match. Here were two books by May Sarton, one called *Journal of a Solitude*, on sale for a quarter apiece just as I was starting my long-awaited sabbatical, which I had arranged to spend mostly by myself in a small New York apartment. I'd never read May Sarton, but I'd always looked forward to doing so one day; she seems to have a cherished place in the lives of some friends whose judgement I respect. (There's a very nice black and white postcard of her, looking dignified but foxy, which lots of people seem to have pinned up by their desks.) I knew many women consider hers an exemplary, a brave, even an enviable life. I guess I'd been saving her, and finally the day had come.

So when I took this book to bed with me, I was expecting a nice, soothing draught of inner peace, lit by a dawning lesbian-feminist consciousness and punctuated by insights I could use to fortify me in any struggles against

loneliness, or petty tedium, that might arise. Instead I was up most of the night in a rage, partly against Sarton, but mostly against whatever it is in some of my friends — and in the state of feminist criticism and feminism generally — that has elevated a minor, self-involved, over-achieving writer with a tin ear and no sense of how to tell a story to the status of a beloved (and beleaguered) heroine. I am supposed to be writing about Simone de Beauvoir, but it's slow going; a friend to whom I rage on the phone suggests I might find it simpler to write about Sarton. (She thinks my reverence and gratitude toward Beauvoir are impeding me.) So I try, and realize that this is part of my larger project, too: to see how second-wave feminism took up prefeminist writers (Beauvoir, Doris Lessing, Mary McCarthy), what they had and maybe still have to teach us, and what we made of them. For good or ill.

One feminist reason for valuing solitude, at least as a temporary state, is that it can teach self-sufficiency, self-reliance: in both emotional and practical terms. It can free us from dependency — which Beauvoir called women's curse — the intellectual timidity, the self-defeating behavior, the frustration that can result from believing one constantly needs the help of others, particularly of the Man. 'A room of one's own' is, to say the least, a feminist touchstone. Virginia Woolf introduced this resonant image to stand for a woman's *economic* independence, which she saw as essential to free the woman writer from caring too much about the judgements of others. (Material independence must precede intellectual independence, which you need if you're going to write anything worth reading.)

Sarton's *Journal* has much to say in praise of solitude, which Sarton seems to feel is her 'real life,' her deep self, something she needs in order to write poems — but it doesn't actually *show* us very much solitude, either in Woolf's sense or more colloquially. Sarton always seems to be flying off to give a reading somewhere, or bowing to the pressure to spend hours answering letters from her adoring fans, or having friends to stay, which means shopping, cooking dinner, sharing some perfect moments with them looking at a sunset or a fringed gentian, and then, sometimes, blowing up at them because other people are too much pressure, are a 'collision,' an interference with her real life. She spends a great deal of time worrying about bad reviews, and being bitter that when there are so

many friends of the work' among ordinary readers, the literary establishment ignores or disparages her.

Also, people seem to keep dropping in. Some of these are adoring fans. It took me a long time to figure out that others (not to put too fine a point on it) are servants.

The Sweat of Others

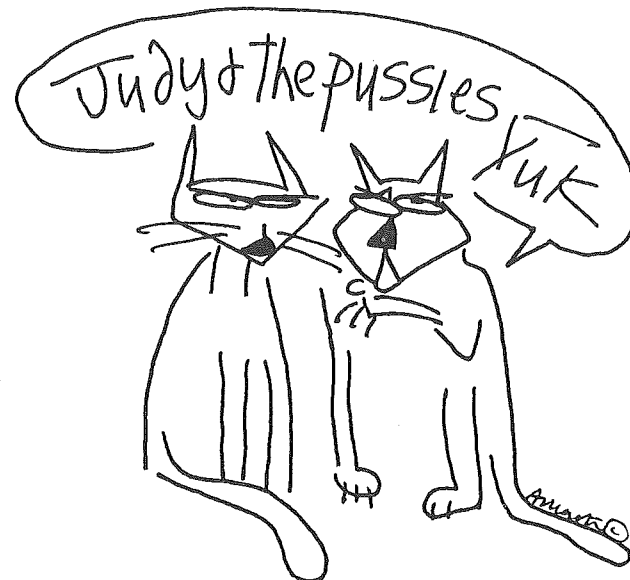
Part of Sarton's achievement, as she celebrates it in her earlier memoir, *Plant Dreaming Deep*, is supposed to be the creation of this beautiful world of solitude, this perfect poet's house with its wonderful gardens, a place where her whole life can *mean*. She spoke there (quite unself-consciously) about wanting to invent her own mythology, her own mystique. Here she explains that she wrote *Journal of a Solitude* partly to correct the impression of perfection in *Plant Dreaming Deep*, wanting to include the loneliness and the anger, to undo the myth that her readers found there. Fair enough. But what she doesn't correct, or even seemingly notice, is that much of this achievement, this creation, is actually accomplished by the sweat of others. 'Dear Perley Cole' did most of the heavy lifting and pruning; 'Dear Mildred' comes in to clean the house; 'Dear Gracie Warner' does the weeding, and her dear parents mow the meadow... The people who actually live in Nelson don't seem to interrupt her solitude any more than the dog does, or the flowers do. (Could it be that they work for her because they are poor and unemployed?)

Somehow the tone with which Sarton takes these 'dear friends' to her bosom makes it worse. Thank god living so close to nature keeps them from becoming vulgar, she says. 'A few moments of desultory conversation with dear Arnold Miner, when he comes to take the trash, may calm an inner storm.' In later journal volumes, 'dear Nancy' appears to do the typing, organize all the files, answer some of the letters... One must assume she paid these people. At least, I hope she did. But is there a clearer example of bad faith than believing that your cleaning lady is a member of the family? At the very least it demonstrates a profound lack of understanding about 'what work is.' It may be great fun to order hundreds of bulbs from catalogues, exhausting and exhilarating to put them in, to weed the beds... But one wouldn't want to actually *mow*. Nothing poetic about that.

Now, I must acknowledge one major

limitation: I don't know or care much about flowers or gardening.. I mean, I like them well enough but... I've been aware for years that when I read French I simply skip over certain words, the meaning of which I have never had enough curiosity to learn, and register only 'name of a flower ... name of another flower ... name of a tree ... name of a bird, in the tree...' It took May Sarton, with her long ecstatic lists of such things, to make me realize that the same thing is true when I read in English. It would take a much finer writer to correct it, to make me actually see something or other. But where a real nature writer would have been concerned to show me what she saw so that I too might be amazed and awestruck, Sarton simply recalls that she felt 'a stab of pure joy' — and often leaves it there (35). I find this self-congratulatory to the point of arrogance — does she think the trees and flowers need her to confer specialness on them by her arrangements? But yes, they do: I am reminded that 'nature' and 'garden' are (in literary theory anyhow) antagonistic opposites.

You may reasonably ask why, when so disappointed, I not only finished the book but went on to write about it. In fact, it's even worse. I promptly went out and acquired nine or ten of her other books, which are lying about the apartment as I write, and which I have been reading more or less continuously despite the fact that they are almost indistinguishable from one another. They are sort of soothing, in the way that watching the weather channel is soothing. Or in the way one reads the back of the New York Times, taking in (without really taking in) the marriage and death notices of



people one has never heard of, and about whom one actually finds out almost nothing. (Also, I'm enough of a scholar and enough of a feminist that to judge her without reading more of her work seemed unfair.) In fact *Journal of a Solitude* now seems better to me in comparison with the others — at least there was admission of anger and failure there, and one senses (though one does not actually see) a human being behind the posing. The later journals seem written for an audience that knows and loves her already; and of course any honest journal of an elderly, ill person will be composed largely of symptoms and visits to doctors... See *The House by the Sea* (1977), *Recovering: A Journal* (1980), *At Seventy: A Journal* (1984), *After the Stroke* (1988), *Endgame* (1992), *Encore* (1993), *At Eighty-two* (1995) (all published by Norton).

But my god. The style

A friend is never just a friend, always 'a dear friend'; people, and (more and more toward the end) pets are 'such a comfort,' 'such a help.' A good letter or a good book is a 'blessing'; a sunset is 'heavenly' or 'glorious'; a gift or a meal is 'lovely.' Italics and exclamation points abound! This woman, who had been practising the craft of writing for some forty years, and had occasionally taught it to others, is capable of beginning an entry with 'What a beautiful day!' or ending a paragraph with 'How true!'

And surely a serious writer would be embarrassed to include so many photographs of herself, feeling her words should stand for her, should stand on their own? (But this seems to be one thing her devoted readers long for. There's a whole industry of picture books: young May, old May, May with each different pet, May with flowers, the house in Nelson, *The House by the Sea*, the table set for dinner...)

AND my god, the animals. This is after all the same May Sarton who wrote *The Fur Person*, an almost unbearably arch little tale about a Gentleman Cat who finds his perfect home with two 'old maids' and becomes civilized, whose inmost thoughts are represented by little doggerel songs. (And this was not meant to be a book for children.) Even in *Journal of a Solitude*, she does not fear the cutesy-poo. '[H]ow marvellous it was to come home to dear shabby Cambridge [Massachusetts], to uneven brick sidewalks...to dear Judy [ex-girlfriend] and the pussies!' (51-52) She spends the winter interacting with a truly wild cat, feeding it,

trying to teach it to trust her, elevating it to the status of some sort of symbol (though I'm not sure of what). Then, in a (to me) inexplicable and outrageous move, at the end of the book, she calls in a 'gentle, kind man' from the Humane Society to have this cat — which now trusts her enough to let itself be caught — taken away and euthanized, seemingly because she is wild and mangy and her many untidy litters have become a nuisance.

Sarton makes us privy to a certain amount of agonizing about this, but never quite explains why it was necessary. (At the very least, she could have had the damn thing neutered and then set it free.) This is the country, and in the country one finds any number of semi-wild barn cats making their own way, as this cat had done quite successfully before Sarton interfered with it. Again I find the arrogance breathtaking. No, Sarton doesn't care about animals as such; what she likes is having a (controllable) pet, a satisfying aesthetic object to incorporate into her best of all possible worlds. Maybe like gardening this sort of 'love' for animals reveals a strong desire to play god — and maybe it is better for people who feel this desire strongly to have pets and gardens rather than children, or students. Or lovers. And maybe I'm reduced to feeling such deep outrage on behalf of an anonymous cat because Sarton never really tells us what is happening between her and 'X,' or indeed what has become of her life with 'dear Judy.'

Placemats and Pot Plants

But I really ought to like this woman better. I'm like her in many ways. For example, I can't write even a memo or a letter to the editor if there's anyone else in the whole BUILDING (let alone in the room); I'm capable of letting a whole beautiful day be ruined by the interruption of a distressed student, or even the arrival of a telephone repairman, at the wrong moment, just when I am trying to concentrate. I like a good meal, and a pretty set of placemats, as much as the next person. My irritation at May Sarton's (unmarked) class privilege comes ill from me, since I am similarly situated. My cat and I are pretty close, and I'm as capable as the next lesbian of elevating a piece of random feline behavior into a whole anthropomorphic Freudian bildungsroman. She is small and grey and her name is Rose. But why should you care about that? In fact, why should you care about me at all? So why is she so sure that people will want



to read endlessly about May Sarton setting the table, changing the sheets, staring blissfully at an amaryllis? And why is she *right*?

Maybe some of my (obviously disproportionate) rage comes from the fact that the underlying question of her life (at least as she states it) is of passionate interest to me, and perhaps to many women. It has been phrased in many ways: how to balance work and life, achievement and relationality, find the necessary solitude and centredness and yet have fruitful, not-wholly-selfish interactions with others; how to bring some control and order and balance into one's life without becoming a control freak. More gracefully, as Simone de Beauvoir put it in *The Prime of Life*: 'how was I to reconcile my longing for independence with the feelings that drove me so impetuously towards another person.' I am always very interested to meet people, in life or books, who seem to be managing this — and there are some.

But I don't think Sarton is one. For one thing, they don't talk about it all the time, and she does.

For another thing, I think she's a terrible liar. And she almost doesn't have to do the work of lying: she has chosen a style that lies for her. (Lazy as well.) She writes about her inmost being — 'how my life can mean' — in the style of a bread-and-butter letter. Now there is a biography of her by Margot Peters, which tells us some of the things Sarton left out — multiple love affairs, angry betrayals, unreasonable

demands on other people, fits thrown in restaurants — but this is not really my point: the mythologized self Sarton creates in her work is not only not like 'the real Sarton' — it's not like anyone who ever lived. Why take up the genre of truth-telling if you're not interested in telling the truth? And what of the readerly need to be so fooled?

I deliberately waited to get my own reactions down before I read *May Sarton: A Biography* by Margot Peters. It's not a classic hatchet job — in fact, it's a pretty good read, and well-substantiated as such things go — though die-hard Sarton fans will undoubtedly hate it. It did confirm my suspicions that the myth leaves a lot out ... Still, Sarton herself alludes to a certain amount of conflict with others. It's just that she says it in the tone of voice that means we're not supposed to believe it — it's troubles talk, self-criticism meant to elicit 'oh, no, you're not a bad person' from the person on the other end of the phone. Most readers have apparently complied.

A Small Cat Fight

Page after page of Sarton's memoirs are absolutely unrelieved by irony or humour of even the gentlest sort; when she does criticize someone (usually for disturbing her concentration or undervaluing her work) she often manages to turn it into a 'blessing' by the end of the paragraph. Curiously, the one disagreement Sarton does not omit or gloss over or moralize is her conflict with the poet and critic Louise Bogan, who at one time was her friend, but who never publicly supported Sarton's work in the way Sarton wanted (Bogan was the poetry critic of the *New Yorker*, respected by the literary establishment in a way Sarton never was.) Bogan was a relentless reviser of her own work, and was bothered by Sarton's sentimentality; she had the gall to write to her friend, Ruth Limmer, that 'I had her take out two mentions of "kittens" from one poem. "Cats," yes, "kittens," no.' And Ruth Limmer had the gall to reprint this letter; this calls forth a passionate outburst years later in Sarton's *After the Stroke* against Bogan's 'patronizing,' 'condescending' attitude. Sarton defends herself by 'setting the record straight' — she did not after all remove the kittens; she reprints the poem itself, which is sweet enough to satisfy any admirer of *The Fur Person*, and wretched enough by any poetic standards; and finally she 'forces' herself to believe — against her own generous impulses, we're supposed to



I will not
Remove
The Kittens.

Amara ©

think — that Louise's behavior was motivated throughout by jealousy of May!

The contrast between them is illuminating. Noone would ever think of calling Bogan a saint (no Carmelite convent could use her tormented, cryptic work in their meditations, as apparently Sarton's writings have been used). And few have called her a great poet (though she is). It would also be quite problematic to call Bogan a feminist; she was deeply ambivalent about being considered a 'woman writer,' and (like Sarton, in fact) was unable to appreciate the openness and anger of younger poets like Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. But that's not the issue here. While Bogan was a far, far better writer — more intelligent, more controlled, more technically and musically skilled, more original, ruthless against clichés, able to communicate an insight (as opposed to merely recording that on Tuesday she had one)—she 'produced' much less than Sarton, and is now nearly forgotten; her fine autobiographical writing is only known because Ruth Limmer published a well-edited selection of it after her death. Bogan's voice was a bitter, incisive one; usually unhappy, sometimes suicidally depressed, she pushed away sentimentality and self-pity by mocking it in herself as well as others. But lacking Sarton's assurance of her own ultimate importance to the universe — what I have called Sarton's arrogance — Bogan was blocked and stopped. Did Sarton after all have something Bogan lacked, something 'the woman writer' (whoever that fabled beast may be) actually needs? Is this the need that her journals answer in so many? (And what does it say about me if I prefer self-defeating modesty — a traditionally feminine virtue, after all — to world-beating self-assurance?)

Redeeming Features?

I must in fairness grant one claim that is made on Sarton's behalf: that especially in her novels she has written with honesty and dignity about ageing — the problems and the strengths — showed that older people have feelings and thoughts and sexuality, and that our culture treats them shamefully. She does deserve praise as an early raiser of issues other writers avoided, or were afraid of, including lesbian love and the problems of the wife and the woman artist. But perhaps I can grant this claim and still admit that I find the novels, too, unreadable, for some of the same reasons.

Probably her best book is *As We Are Now*

(1973), presented as the journal of Caroline Spencer, who has been confined to a nursing home against her wishes. The brutality of the situation is clear enough: the smell of urine, the hostility, the bad food, the absence of sympathy. The Yellow-Wallpaper stuff — having to deal with people who treat you as though you are crazy, when you know you're not (but how can you really know you're not?) And it is not hard to feel the indignity of having all one's usual occupations, books for example, taken away, of having to beg for notepaper and hide letters, of no longer being able to choose one's companions or in the last extremity to choose solitude. Moreover, in contrast to many of Sarton's other books, something actually happens.

Unfortunately, part of what Caro minds most is being shut away with people who are not her sort, not her class, dirty men who don't read or think. We are meant to love Caro, not just for her toughness, but for her gentility, which I can't stand. It is as though Sarton assumes that these characteristics will automatically be seen as positive by all readers, she assumes a shared set of values. Something called a 'tray cloth' seems to be very important — Caro actually falls in love with Anna because she has found a clean one to replace the ugly plastic mat. Any pleasure I might take in seeing an older lesbian 'represented' is taken away by the triviality of this, and by the unexplored and embarrassing class dynamics of this relationship.

The House by the Sea also deserves some credit for honest portrayal of the difficulties of watching someone one has loved fade off into Alzheimer's. But if the published journal stresses the tragic side of May's later relations to Judy, another aspect appears in a letter:

I am really worried by her inability to focus on anything...I have never loved her more — such a dear companion — but her presence here does not relieve me of any responsibility and that is, frankly, what would be good right now. She *three times* put out tray cloths rather than place mats when setting the table — each time I carefully and patiently explained the difference and showed her where each group is laid in the drawer — but this kind of thing is humiliating for her and hard on me.

Oppression by means of a tray cloth? I find it hard to understand, hard to take.

To Ask the Hard Question is Simple, But...

Again I am haunted by the feeling that I ought to

like these books because they speak of things I care about in a new way. My friend Amy likes and teaches *The Small Room* (1961) because it is the only book she knows that presents college life, and teaching, in a realistic way, from the English teacher's point of view. And indeed it does. How can one ever feel fully prepared? How close should one become to one's students, when is this helpful and at what point does it become a tyranny? What can and should be done for students 'at risk,' in psychological trouble? That some of the characters are apparently lesbians, and that no fuss is made about this by them or anyone, is noteworthy for the date.

And yet for me this book too is spoiled by smugness, by Sarton's apparent unwillingness to provide Lucy, her heroine, with humanizing flaws. She admits elsewhere — though admits may be the wrong word, since she doesn't see it as a problem — that in the books based on real people she has known, she did not include any feature of their character that would pain them or their families to read about. (To me this comment says worlds about the famous 'honesty' and 'integrity' of the writer.) I think here, and in a number of other novels, she identified so fully with her protagonist that she was unwilling to include any feature that would pain her to read about herself, just as in the journals.

The novel I am 'supposed' to like best was the one I came closest to throwing across the room. In *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing* (1965), two young writers, Peter and



Life is a
dolly
and
then
you die.

Amara ©

Jenny, drive to New England to interview the seventy-year-old poet, who bears a striking resemblance to the Sarton of the mythology, a sort of flashing Delphic oracle who also makes sandwiches and tea. The interview form insures that this book too is 'talking heads,' interspersed with flashbacks and Hilary Stevens' inner questionings, framed by two conversations with her teenaged neighbour, Mar, who is coming to terms with being a gay man. In fact, the book is less a novel than a lecture; obviously we are meant to spend the book in the same state of reverent, breathless awe as the young people who have come to interview her, we are meant to admire a sensitive, genteel, much-wounded, but still brave heroine.

And clearly many readers do admire her. Why can't I? Is it because of the way the dialogue, the emotions twitch about: a character cannot maintain a consistent emotional state, or way of speaking, for more than a page? Is it that while she does reflect on, and relive, the emotional storms of an emotionally stormy life, nothing and no one seems to seriously question her status as tortured genius impelled to seek one Muse after another?

And yet she does say straight out, to Mar and then to the interviewers, and then show us in the flashbacks, that she has loved women as well as men. In 1965 this was not nothing. It was also not nothing to be willing to take as the book's 'problem' the difficulties of the woman writer.

Yes, the question is important; but I don't find the answers satisfying, or even lucid, possibly because she frames them in terms borrowed from Robert Graves' *The White Goddess*. When she talks about things like 'the masculine side of her talent,' I'm simply not sure what she can possibly mean. Unless she really does mean that women can't write well and stay 'women.'

Real Problems in Real Life

I can think of two equally early lesbian novels, Jane Rule's *Desert of the Heart* (1964) and Claire Morgan's *The Price of Salt* (1952), whose characters actually live, make choices, face real problems in a social world... Sarton has said she was trying, with *Mrs. Stevens*, 'to say radical things gently.'

Here's the whole quote:

an original book, ahead of its time, written when I was fifty-five. Because of it, I have become a sort of hero. I have lost jobs because of that

book....

I have been trying to say radical things gently so that they may penetrate without shock. The fear of homosexuality is so great that it took courage to write *Mrs Stevens*, to write a novel about a woman homosexual who is not a sex maniac, a drunkard, a drugtaker or in any way repulsive; to portray a homosexual who is neither pitiable nor disgusting, without sentimentality; and to face the truth that such a life...is rarely happy, a life where art must become the primary motivation, for love is never going to fulfil in the usual sense.

Sarton has a point; the self-congratulation grates but is partly merited. But 'such a life is rarely happy...love is never going to fulfil'?— a strange thing strikes me: she might be describing *The Well of Loneliness*, which is almost 40 years earlier; which has some of the same literary faults; but even with all its turgid sentimental melodrama, its hideously moralizing ending, etc., *The Well* (I suddenly discover) has a certain literary (and thus a persuasive) strength *Mrs. Stevens* does not: it actually hangs together ...

Others have remarked that in creating a lesbian heroine who was not crazy or deviant, who looked and thought and gardened much like other older middle-class women, Sarton was building a bridge to the 'ordinary' reader who might not have much contact with lesbians. And this seems to have succeeded; as Margot Peters says, 'perhaps no other lesbian writer has been more admired by the heterosexual community' (367). (Is this good?) One critic observes with disarming naivete that 'in refusing to categorize Sarton as a lesbian writer, we are freed to embrace the lesbian in ourselves' (and then goes on to misread Adrienne Rich): clearly 'ourselves' are heterosexual... Yes, in 1965 most of the available literary representations of lesbians were found in lurid pulp paperback fiction, and many of the lesbians shown there were evil and deviant. But at least they were alive; and sexual; had jobs; fought; felt; worked in the world. There is an honesty about the cheapest Ann Bannon book that is missing here.

So OK, all these issues, like the 'how should one live' questions raised by the journals, matter to women and thus matter for feminism, and maybe Sarton was the first to raise them. But she's hardly the only available voice now. How can I account for her staying power? (I found all four novels, and others, on the shelves in a massmarket bookstore.) I am beginning to suspect that what keeps May Sarton in print is not the same thing that keeps *A Room of One's*

Own and Adrienne Rich's essays and poems on syllabi and in feminist hearts. I think it's the same thing that makes a bestselling industry out of treacly tripe like 'Meditations for Women Who Do Too Much.'

As We Really Are Now

If I go into a mainstream bookstore, I find rack after rack of non-fictional, personal writing, mostly by women, some of it by feminists. (Mainstream critics call this the 'memoir boom.')

This should make me happy, but... As one of my lesbian students said, 'it's great that there are so many gay books in the big mall bookstores, but it feels odd to find oneself between self-help and recovery.' The memoir is coming to replace the novel and also the work of serious political analysis. I'm most familiar with the American scene, but I don't think this can be written off as simply another American disease — one of the most troubling examples I've come across was Rosalind Coward's *Our Treacherous Hearts*.

One quite traditional function of the memoir is the political recantation, and Coward is not the only example of this; there's an awful book by Anne Roiphe, mother of the egregious Katie, which similarly claims that 'we feminists' erred in devaluing the family. In these and other examples, the memoir genre seems to be called into being by the need to correct another genre called 'theory,' which is said to be incapable of bearing women's truth (and apparently un-reformable).

Still, the impulse to memoir has feminist roots, in the idea that every woman's life matters, every woman's life is interesting, everyone has the right and the ability to tell her own story rather than being an 'object' in someone else's book. Some might argue that certain issues (incest, domestic abuse) can really only have full impact when aired in this way. And some of this writing is very good. At one time, the very existence of such books would have seemed a miracle. 'What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?' The world would split open.' (These lines from 'Kathe Kollwitz' may be all most feminists know of Muriel Rukeyser, a wonderful poet of war, sexuality, and struggle, whose work is almost as hard to find as Louise Bogan's.)

Well, the world has split open. What did we find inside?

Looking back over classics of autobiographical writing from the first phase of 1970s



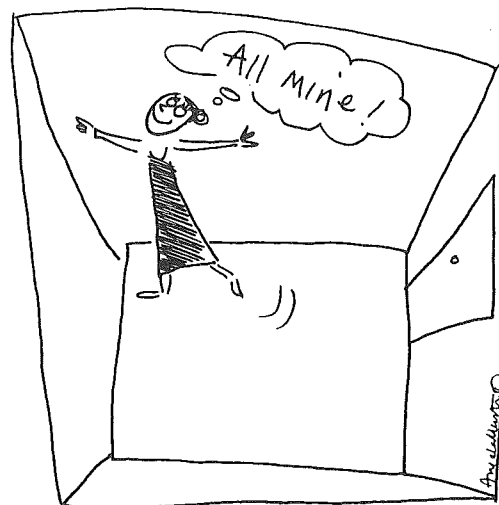
feminism, I am struck by the representation of chaos and conflict (external and internal), the fear and sometimes the presence of what feels like madness (Kate Millett, Jill Johnston, Robin Morgan). And the sense that it is important to give things their real names, even when cruel, to 'call people on things,' which importantly includes criticizing oneself when one has behaved badly. Now, I do not blame Sarton — who was already in her mid-fifties, and a formed writer, when these books appeared — for not changing in that direction. But the fact that Sarton is still very much in print, and very popular, seems to suggest that at least some women reading now have voted against chaos and in favor of meditations upon the sea and a beautifully set table with a centerpiece of ... oh, never mind what flowers they are. The point is that *Flying*, *Lesbian Nation*, and the others were shaped by a consciously political intention to change the world (not just the self) by showing what was wrong, by showing lives lived on the edge with all the pain and all the energy. I find the same shaping intention, the same intensity, and the same willingness to present problems that are not yet solved, in novels of that moment such as Marge Piercy's *Small Changes*.

A Change of Agenda

Today, most memoir writing is either not shaped at all — telling the story is meant to be its own justification — or (more problematically) is shaped by the need to tell the new master narrative, about coming to terms with one's 'toxic parents,' working through denial, overcoming addiction, reclaiming one's 'inner child.' In these stories, what needs to change — or what has changed already, making the triumphant memoir possible — is not the world, but the self.

A recent book I have found helpful in thinking about this is Elayne Rapping's *The Culture of Recovery*. She looks at all kinds of '12-step' program meetings, paperback books, TV movies, and other manifestations of the self-help movement, also at talkshows that popularize and promote this brand of therapy and use a similar language. It is almost impossible now, she says, to discuss for example interpersonal problems, or weight, or drinking, without falling into the language of addiction and codependency: this is 'the mental wallpaper that decorates our days and nights.' Rapping is less unsympathetic than some other feminist commentators to these movements; she underscores that the pain expressed is real and choking, that the problems are real and cannot be solved by injunctions to keep a stiff upper lip or pull on one's bootstraps. (It doesn't do an anorexic any good to hear that women are starving in China.)

Rapping sees many similarities between what goes on in 12-step programs and feminist consciousness-raising, and feels this is a success



for which feminists should take credit — we haven't been marginalized, we've been (partially) adopted by virtually everyone. And yet of course she makes the central criticism that others have: where feminism was a movement for social change, to uncover underlying causes and address them, this is about staying in the same place, it is individual and not collective, no collective consciousness can come out of it and the groups are not really groups any more than an aerobics class is. Ironically the groups she feels work best are the old-fashioned (mainly male) AA groups, where there is a focus on changing behavior. In the more female dominated groups, such as Overeaters Anonymous and Co-dependents Anonymous, the emphasis seemed more on 'fostering selflove' than on analysing and changing damaging behavior, let alone placing one's life in a social context. 'Sometimes speakers would just get up and shout 'Me! Me! Me! I matter!' to group applause.' Where participants in AA gain group affirmation by going a certain number of days without a drink, the CODA group member is encouraged to take inventory of occasions where she 'sets some time aside for herself, just to have fun.'

And of course Elayne Rapping is troubled too by the steps themselves: 'We admitted that we had become powerless over alcohol (or love addiction, or whatever it may be) — that our lives had become unmanageable; Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity; Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care and direction of God as we understood him,' etc. That mental work like this has helped, and even saved the lives of, many people (particularly alcoholics) is not in doubt. But whether a willed and ritualized passivity is compatible with any version of political consciousness and will is another story.

Rapping's final chapter, 'The Disease of Politics,' addresses the impact of self-help discourse on present-day activities within feminism and the left in ways that parallel my own analysis. She gives a particularly telling account of some feminist 'speak-outs' about rape and body-image issues: where once such events would have ended with a call to action and a plan for collective resistance, the events she attended seemed curiously depoliticized, seemed to see personal transformation as an end in itself (to be achieved either on the spot, through the simple act of speaking out, or through further

therapy). I too have sat with some discomfort at these events, which now tend to be organized by campus counselling rather than by independent feminist groups (or indeed by women's studies): the stories are heart-rending, gut-wrenching, and at the end of the event there seems to be nowhere to take them, nothing to do. But my unease, and Rapping's, should not be confused with the rantings of Katie Roiphe and others to the effect that speakouts are simply bitch sessions or elevated whine-fests about problems that don't actually exist. Rather, where Roiphe and others are critical of what they call 'victim feminism,' which wallows in oppression (which Roiphe minimizes by calling it 'self-pity') rather than building 'self-esteem,' Rapping is bothered by an absence of recognition that rape 'survivors' have actually been victimized by someone, that oppression, male power, exist and can't solely be addressed by therapy. I agree. Speakouts, and healing therapy, are essential, but sometimes they don't seem (anymore) to point out clearly that the person who has the 'problem' is the rapist, and that this should be addressed not by therapy but by punishment. (In the case of so-called eating disorders, I am almost willing to utter the feminist heresy that talking about the problem has made it worse.) But problematic as these events have sometimes become, their continued existence is a good sign in a dark time; and an absence of psychological closure, given that the material situation has not in fact been assuaged, may be a good sign as well.

(Katie Roiphe's book *The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism on Campus* is yet another example of the replacement of research by anecdote — Roiphe famously doubts a decade of professionally gathered empirical statistics about acquaintance rape because neither she nor her friends experienced it directly. Of course my own discussion of this particular issue is also based on one small (and hopefully atypical) campus. Rapping's picture confirms it, though since she herself uses 'qualitative' 'participant-observer' methods, there is still room for more quantitatively rigorous work on the issues she discusses.)

Indeed, this discourse is all around and it is easier to make fun of it than to know how to feel about it really. I had a student who wrote that the tragedy of Pecola, in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, was that she suffered from 'low self-esteem.' At first, this seemed like an utter trivialization of what the black women in that

book suffered at the hands of others; I wrote in the margin, the problem is not self-esteem but racism and sexism. I felt the student was (without meaning to) using the buzzword both to distance her (white) self from any complicity in the sufferings of the characters, and also to identify them (reductively) with her own issues: worries about boyfriends, weight, etc. (These issues are real — they kill kids — and on some level they're social, too. They're just not what Morrison meant.)

Still in fact it's not this easy. Because Morrison's book is about how people feel. It's about making us feel as bad as the characters feel, and then making us angry enough to do something. The term self-esteem seems to sanitize away the anger and the politics; so I'd say instead it's about internalized racism and self-hatred. But maybe I'm just saying the same thing...Feminism did, does promise to help undo the damage to the self that living in our world causes. It does promise to heal the wounds. Maybe it shouldn't. Maybe it has to.

The means or the end?

For a long time I've believed that women have to believe in themselves more, think better of themselves, deep inside, in order to work and live etc. A lot of how I was taught to teach writing depends on this, I have come to see — everyone can write well, it is just a question of affirming one's own right to speak, finding one's own voice, breaking down the blocks, recognizing things aren't your fault etc. — see once again Woolf. But now I teach at a place where sometimes we are so worried about encouraging our students that we forget to challenge them.

An important American Association of University Women study of young women in the USA identified low self-esteem as a core reason for lack of ambition and direction, and loss of motivation — something I do observe in my female students. Interestingly, one sign of low self-esteem among young women the study found was that they attribute their successes to luck, where their male classmates attributed success to their own talents and/or hard work — even though the actual success of the women, measured by grades, was equal or better. I don't dismiss this. But I also remember Adrienne Rich's famous comment in 'When We Dead Awaken' — first delivered as a speech at the Modern Language Association — that in our professional success we should also remember

the many women who failed through no fault of their own. 'Every one of us here in this room has had great luck — we are teachers, writers, academicians; our own gifts could not have been enough, for we all know women whose gifts are buried or aborted.' I and most of my students and colleagues *have* been lucky (for example, we didn't 'choose' to have middle-class parents). It may be the young men who are wrong. Sometimes self-esteem is not the same thing as self-knowledge.

In any case, I have decided that it is possible for a book (even a supposedly feminist book), and by implication a writer, to suffer from blind spots attributable to dangerously *high* self-esteem. Two recent examples are on my desk: *The Year of Reading Proust*, by Phyllis Rose; and *The Last Gift of Time: Life Beyond Sixty*, by Carolyn Heilbrun. Both are 'personal writing' by professors of English who have been acclaimed for earlier works of feminist literary criticism. Heilbrun in fact is May Sarton's literary executor, and was her friend, and has written more about her than any other academic critic; she was not blind to Sarton's faults as a stylist (or her difficulties as a personality) — her piece on Sarton is the most perceptive chapter in this book. Yet she still seems to have inherited more than the copyrights.

Like Sarton's work, these two books show that it is possible to engage in constant introspection, constant self-conscious reflection, without acquiring any distance or perspective on one's life. We are asked to care about Carolyn's dog, and Phyllis's indecision about whether to get a dog, or what sort of dog to get; to bask in their wonderful supportive husbands, their intelligent independent-minded children who seem to always call them. I've already been to the hairdresser with May; now I have to go to the (MUCH more upscale) hairdresser with Phyllis. Oddly, as with Sarton the details seem to be almost entirely domestic, or maybe I mean feminine: cooking, cleaning, shopping, thinking about one's weight. Heilbrun has retired; Rose seems to be eternally on leave. 'A woman's life' seems to have shrunk. The only way I can account for Phyllis Rose is to surmise that she is trying to write like Proust. But Heilbrun seems to be trying to write like May Sarton and I believe she has succeeded.

Looking for feminism

Now again as with Sarton I find Heilbrun's desire to show that an older woman's life is not a desert, can be filled with new ideas, new plans, new friends, etc., praiseworthy and important. (And perhaps an important audience of older women, to which I do not belong, does find it interesting and empowering to read about the rhythm of her days, does identify with the success she claims: though I imagine few have had the resources to achieve it.) But Heilbrun also believes she is writing as a feminist, perhaps even as the representative feminist, and thus I find her complacency harder to take. Sarton enables, perhaps most of all Sarton's success enables, a kind of lazy, self-absorbed personal reflection which is not connected either to actual research/findings/reality or to any actual political movement, but which takes on the voice of an ordinary (but informed) woman speaking to women about what women are. Clearly twenty years of feminist critique of the speaking subject have made no impression here.

Maybe this sort of mauling is basically harmless, even a pleasant way of passing the time — unless someone mistook it for what feminism is. In which case its lack of intellectual rigor or political edge become a problem. And people do make this mistake, especially with Heilbrun's *Writing a Woman's Life*, a leisurely, anecdotal ramble through the lives of some great women writers, including her own. It makes some good, basic points, such as that biographies of women tend to be bad because they over-emphasize romance and underemphasize achievement; it also has the strength of being readable and therefore teachable, which much feminist theory right now is not. *Writing a Woman's Life* can also be read as a powerful apologia for bourgeois marriage, but it does not state this argument up front: it is largely indifferent to the convention that examples should be marshalled to prove a provable point. I suppose this is what she means when she says she is not writing theory. But how it is possible to spend several decades as a very public and, in some ways, courageous defender of feminism without noticing that feminism is meant to be a movement for social *change*?

The Story of Me

Within feminist criticism, the move to personal writing, the move to 'I,' felt tremendously

liberating, as Heilbrun and many others report. And it actually was liberating. It brought down the myth of scholarly objectivity which had masked a large number of unsavory things, sexism among them. It made us possible. And similar things went on in other fields, in history, in philosophy, even (though only now) in classics. But now I feel like the whole genre is collapsing under its own weight.

At one time, writing the personal was harder, because it went against one's training as a scholar and as a woman. Now, nobody is trained to do much of anything, and I am beginning to think writing the personal may actually be easier. Many who did have a public voice have simply moved over to the memoir shelf: leaving behind the need to respond to, to assimilate, the critiques of the subject that came not just from theorists but also from women of color, working class women, etc. Those who turned to 'I' have not always been careful not to let 'I' slip back into 'we' or 'women.' — in a way that evaded the critiques about middleclass etc., — or seemed to. But working class women and women of color have been in the forefront of the memoir, too. In fact, that 'what do you mean WE,' that 'what about me?' may be the origin of the use of memoir to correct *feminist* theory, to keep theory honest.

Where do these two strands come together? Somehow, to write the personal — in that first breakout from the stultifying academic voice — one claimed to be writing from the margins. Claimed to be breaking a silence. This was necessary, and it was *true*; but as it has solidified into a writing convention it can sometimes be embarrassing. Toril Moi wrote about Simone de Beauvoir as a woman writing about her marginality from a position of centrality. Now it is possible to claim a marginality one doesn't (materially speaking) actually have, then say perfectly ordinary or even retrograde (Anne Roiphe, Rosalind Coward) things under the impression one is being radical, taking risks. A lot is said about risk-taking and vulnerability. But maybe this too can be subject to historical change; maybe Oprah has taken the edge off that risk. (Although especially for women, the risk of looking foolish is always there.)

Certainly the liberation of the personal voice has made possible this essay, made possible a certain tone of voice without which I probably couldn't have written it. What after all have I

been doing, if not writing about myself? If we (or at least I) can't speak without speaking the personal in *some* form, further distinctions must be made. Suppose I listed some personal writing I do like, and tried to figure out why.

The personal is political after all?

When I think about memoirs or journals I admire, I can identify the shaping intention behind the pen. Of the many volumes of Simone de Beauvoir's memoirs, my favorites are *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (the first one) and *A Very Easy Death*, the one about her mother. The first is concerned to show how an independent intellectual woman can grow and free herself from an utterly stifling milieu; it is also a testament to her friend who didn't make it through, an attempt to keep faith with Zaza and with her own young (rebellious) self. *A Very Easy Death* is an indictment, though a gentle one, of institutionalized medicine and in a way a revolt against death itself. It's also a critique of the way the mother was forced to live, a re-evaluation of the woman she was so angry at before. Both of course are intensely personal, and if we don't come to care about the narrator and the other people she's talking about we probably won't care to finish reading. Even if we do we may find ourselves disagreeing, or even find her self-indulgent. But at least there *are* other characters (in Sarton there is only ever one). In fact the social world is dense, like a good novel's. And there is always a social critique — things should be different, we should work to see death or adolescence fully and honestly so we can try to make it less awful. And while there is closure, there is no complacency here. There is no way of 'coming to terms' with Zaza's death, or with the unfulfilled life of the mother. There's no way to see a 'blessing' there, and no desire to pretend. To do so would be to betray her mother, her friend. (Compare Sarton on Judy: 'How happy we are together in spite of her loss of mind!' to Beauvoir's unsentimental accounting of what she has lost, Beauvoir's rage...)

Beauvoir's memoirs are part of her political project, though implicitly so, and so it's not surprising that there's a lot of overlap in examples and analysis between them and *The Second Sex* (and the novels, which are also built around social issues, complexly so).

I can think of memoirs I like where I disagree with the conclusion but respect the

author for trying to advance a point of view. I am not about to follow Alix Kates Shulman back to the land, but I respected her for struggling and carefully thinking through (as opposed to simply feeling through) what she was doing, as a feminist. I was fascinated by a book called *Miriam's Kitchen* by Elizabeth Ehrlich, which uses personal writing (and even recipes!) to tell the story of how the writer's mother-in-law came through the Holocaust. The book is structured around the Jewish holidays, and shaped by the writer's eventual decision to become more and more Orthodox and observant as a good way to raise her children in a bad world. This is not a choice I would make, but I admired the point of view, and I learned some Jewish history.

Another example of a memoir I really admire is Audre Lorde's *Zami*, even though Lorde is clear that she is not telling us everything about her life: there's an explicit intention to revalue



the lives of her parents, and to record lesbian history, we can learn certain things to do and not do as a movement and as individuals trying to build healthy relationships. And maybe my favorite is Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman*, which measures memory against theory and comes up with something bigger than both. Steedman almost invents a new form and style in her concern to avoid oversimplification, to resist the reduction and objectification of working-class lives and in the interest of returning a true subjectivity to her mother and to herself.

And there are memoirs that I value simply because they have told me about things (places, experiences) I simply don't know, that have showed me the limitations of my own experiences.

But you can't learn anything from Sarton, you can't even learn how to garden better... 'Here I am and this is what and how I am' — and that's it. Apart from the changes the season makes to the gardening, the entries could be in any order at all. The point seems to be simply to use the voice, to make contact — and it stops there. This too seems to be the difference between real consciousness-raising, a real group that might get together to learn and accomplish something, and mere Oprah-speak. So perhaps I am not after all condemning the personal, condemning the memoir outright. Perhaps I am beginning to sketch the basis for a political criticism including that genre.

Starting to Stop

Suppose Sarton needed to feel an exaggerated sense of her own importance in order to work and be productive, needed to silence self-critique to the point where she really couldn't revise at all. It may be that most women writers still need that, at least as an initial stage, to counterbalance the inner voices of woman-hating, to hold the mocker at bay. I hope it's clear by now that I'm of two minds about this.

People talk about things as questions of 'survival' that are not (materially speaking) about survival at all. 'I must have flowers about me' — I guess Sarton wasn't the only one who felt this way, though Beauvoir explicitly took it apart as a mystification of the feminine self, an attempt to substitute simple, static 'being' for actual *doing*. But, 'I must get away from these toddlers for at least an hour a day' — who could take exception to that? The rape crisis center puts

up posters that say, 'Tell Someone.' In other words, 'You! You matter!' Maybe the feminist pronoun problem for the nineties is not, after all, the relationship between 'I' and 'we.' Maybe it's the relationship between 'me' and 'you,' between 'me' and 'she' ...

Suppose we gave 'low self-esteem' its old name back. Suppose we just called it woman-hating: remembering that this can be done quite effectively by women themselves. Problems that have no names need to get names. But some names are better than others. Suppose we gave back their birth names to the problems we have not solved: violence against women (not, 'sexual miscommunication'); unfair divisions of labor (not 'balancing home and workplace'); male power (not 'male/female cultural differences'); racism (not 'multicultural diversity'); poverty ... justice denied ... Then we can see that the 'me' discourse may not be (anymore) about solving them. That we've mistaken the first step (speaking out) for the whole journey; and we've forgotten key parts of speaking out: anger, analysis, action.

And yet, an overwhelming conclusion from all my questioning is that some form of feminist therapeutic of the self is necessary and valuable, some way of dealing with individual pain (including irrational pain) and individual pleasure has to be found or the movement cannot move.

But we haven't found it yet. Perhaps the answer is that we are doomed to live in ambiguity, in compromise — but we are called to be saved, not by fantasy but by working for change. Not by complacency, but by irony. Not just by feeling but also by thinking.

Where does this leave poor May Sarton — whom this analysis hugely, unfairly overburdens with blame — and the readers who love her? I have written elsewhere that it is unfair to hold feminist writers to the standards of heroines. Much work on Beauvoir, on H.D., on Woolf is marred by this — by the initial overvaluation and the bitterness of the reaction as the researcher uncovers the feet of clay, the all too human failures to transform. In those cases, I saw and see this is a distraction from what really matters about them, why we care about them in the first place — the excellent writing, the attempts at honesty, and (at least for Woolf and Beauvoir) the feminist insight ... with Sarton, with many memoirists who follow her trend, I can't find these qualities.

One of the things I have been exploring here is whether it is permissible within a feminist context to say, 'this book is bad, this is bad writing.' Indeed it is easy to speak ill of the dead; it's a different matter to be willing to give a living writer pain, especially when it is so hard to write a book at all. I'm not sure this worry is wrong. But does it come from feminism? Or from femininity (politeness, insecurity)? Am I just a nasty girl, an angry daughter? A bad sister?

But in the end, I cannot pretend this stuff is good enough. We deserve better. We have to be more demanding of our reading and ourselves. □



May Sarton, *As We Are Now* (Norton, 1973); *The Fur Person* (Rinehart, 1956); *Journal of a Solitude* (Norton, 1973); *Plant Dreaming Deep* (Norton, 1968); *The House by the Sea* (Norton, 1977)

Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (Harper and Row, 1977); *The Prime of Life* (Penguin, 1974); *A Very Easy Death* (Penguin, 1983)

Ruth Limmer *Journey Around My Room: The Autobiography of Louise Bogan*. *A Mosaic* (Penguin, 1980)

Jane Rule, *Desert of the Heart* (MacMillan of Canada, 1964) 'Claire Morgan' [Patricia Highsmith], *The Price of Salt* (Arno Press, 1975, reprint of 1952 edition)

K. Graehme Hall, 'To Say Radical Things Gently: Art and Lesbianism in Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing,' *That Great Sanity: Critical Essays on May Sarton*, edited by Susan Swartzlander and Marilyn R. Mumford (University of Michigan Press, 1992)

Rosalind Coward, *Our Treacherous Hearts* (Faber and Faber, 1992) Anne Richardson Roiphe, *Fruitful: A Real Mother in the Modern World* (Houghton Mifflin, 1996)

Muriel Rukeyser, 'Kathe Kollwitz,' *Out of Silence: Selected Poems*, edited by Kate Daniels (Triquarterly Books, 1992)

Kate Millett, *Flying* (Knopf, 1974) Jill Johnston, *Lesbian Nation* (Simon and Schuster, 1973)

Robin Morgan, *Monster* (Vintage, 1972); ed. *Sisterhood is Powerful: an anthology of writings from the women's liberation movement* (Vintage, 1970)

Phyllis Rose, *The Year of Reading Proust: A Memoir in Real Time* (Scribner, 1997)

Carolyn Heilbrun, *The Last Gift of Time: Life Beyond Sixty* (Dial 1997)

Alix Kates Shulman, *Drinking the Rain* (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1995)

Elizabeth Ehrlich, *Miriam's Kitchen* (Viking, 1997)

Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1982)

Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman* (Virago, 1986)

Labour pains

In May 1997 Britain got its first Labour government for almost 20 years, including a record number of women MPs. For feminists hoping to influence public policy, it seemed like a new era of opportunity. But has the government's record on gender lived up to its rhetoric? Jennifer Marchbanks thinks New Labour could do better...

Now, don't get me wrong — I am delighted that we have a Labour Government, something I've been waiting for all my adult life, something that I have worked for and a Party to which I used to belong. So, on May 1 1997 I lived in hope of the great changes that would be made and the great advances which would accrue for women. Now what do we hear? Accusations of the new New Labour MPs being robots and Stepford Wives, of pre-programmed Millbank mannequins for Mandelson, of 'staying on message' and, let's not forget that wonderful sexist appellation 'Blair's Babes', which of course, is never once used to refer to the first time MPs who happen to be men!

May 1 was wonderful, for most it was seeing Twigg beat Portillo, but for me, a Scot, it was the demise of Michael Forsyth that precipitated

the pouring of the first celebratory drink. Then, the election of all those women — and 101 of them for Labour — seemed to justify the affirmative action policy of women-only shortlists and to herald a new way for politics. The next morning, still jubilant, I contacted Labour Women in Australia to share our good fortune, and in that communication I trumpeted my belief, and Labour's promise, that we would now see the establishment of the UK's first Ministry for Women — how wrong I was.

Ministers for Women

So, we didn't get a Women's Ministry, what we did get was 'Ministers for Women' — namely Harriet Harman and Joan Ruddock. In addition, the Ministers for Women are supported by a Women's Unit in Whitehall and by a Cabinet Sub-Committee for Women. Now, I recognise

that the title Ministers for Women is a positive move, it reflects the lessons learned from the experience of Women's Officers in local government and much feminist academic writing. Those lessons tell us that separate Women's Initiatives can suffer from marginalisation in political bureaucracies and that it is only already committed feminists who will wish to dedicate time to the cause since the whole area is viewed as a promotional void. The experiences of Women's Units in Local Government have been many and varied, with some more successful in creating change than others. What my own research has led me to conclude is that marginalisation is less likely to occur when women's interests are placed in the centre of policy making and not left to be 'add-ons', revisions and appendices. Therefore, a generous analysis of the creation of Ministers for Women, with their declared aim to: '...ensure that women's concerns are core business, not "Any Other Business", for every government department' (Ministers for Women website, 20 January 1998), would be to see this move as ensuring the centrality of women's interests in the creation of all policies in all fields.

However, I am more cynical. That cynicism began with the realisation in June last year that the appointment of the Minister for Women, Joan Ruddock, MP had obviously been an afterthought, Blair realised that Harman could not possibly manage to act both as Secretary of State for Social Security and Minister for Women. What doesn't seem to be recognised is the contradictory policy demands which must face her as she tries both to promote the interests of women whilst simultaneously, due to her more senior position in Social Security, reshaping welfare policies in such a way as to differentially affect women (i.e. removing lone parent benefit may look genderless but as the majority of recipients are women the effects certainly are not). I have to say that it didn't take me long to work out which role would take precedence if a conflict arose. Welfare to Work started with lone parents (read single mums) and the interests of these women to choose to be mothers not workers without being vilified, simply evaporated. Despite Brown's Budget pledge to U-turn on this by providing lone parents with a 12 week 'linking rule' which means that they won't be disadvantaged financially if they take a short term job and which is designed to protect these people's benefits rights, the very fact that this

had to be a U-turn and not part of the initial policy design indicates a lack of understanding of the needs of single parents.

So, it is vital that a dedicated Minister exists to represent the interests of women. Yet the appointment of Ruddock, an appointment without pay, surely points to the fact that her post is viewed as less important than other Junior Minister posts, (all of) which are paid at the full £67,483 whilst Ruddock is expected to represent the interests of more than half of the country without any additions to her MPs' salary. Money is far from everything but it is an indication of the differential value placed upon policy areas and is further evidence that pursuing women's interests will not advance one's career. Ironically, Ruddock recognises this when referring to the gender balance on public bodies:

there are now more women on public bodies than ever before. But men still dominate on many bodies — and especially in the more powerful and best-paid posts. We are determined to change that. (Ruddock, speaking at the National Council of Women, Annual Conference, 18/10/97) [this reference and all others from Ruddock are from Press Releases available on the Ministers for Women Website]

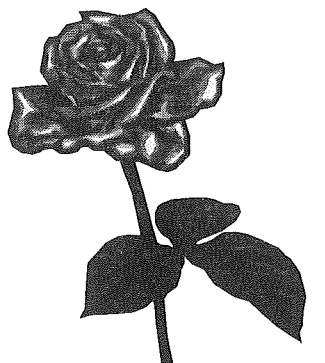
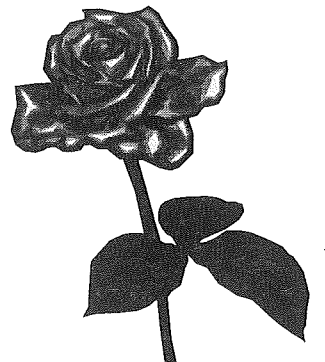
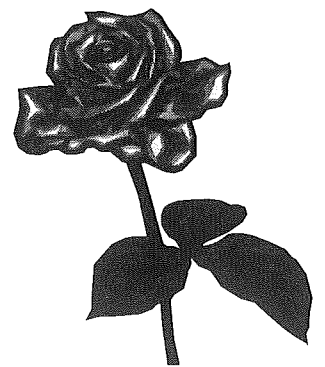
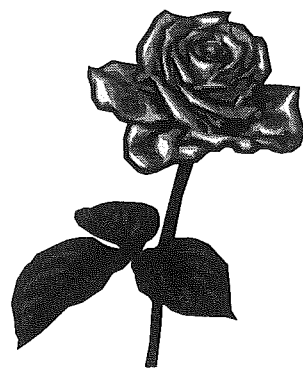
Shame that the most powerful public body in the land treats her as a second class member, and by association, the interests of women as secondary.

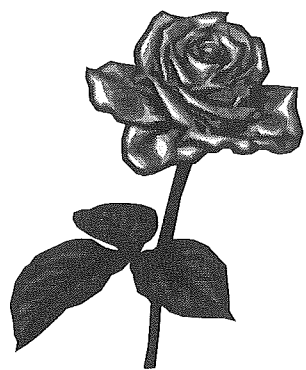
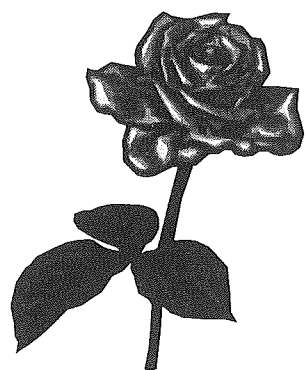
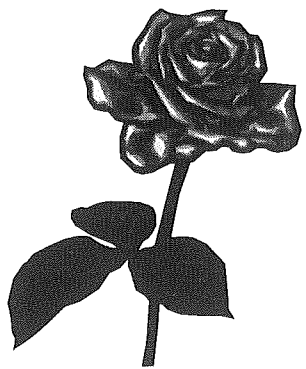
So, what are the aims of the Ministers for Women? Well, a visit to their web page is informative to a degree. Six aims are listed:

1. Childcare
2. Family friendly working
3. Tackling violence against women
4. A new dialogue with women
5. Women at the heart of government
6. Women's representation

Aims 5 & 6: Women in Government

It is clear from the last two aims that there is a real feminist acknowledgement that to be effective *all* policy areas must consider the effects policies will have on women and that women need to be represented 'at all levels of government and public bodies' (Ministers for Women, Website). This bodes well and should really act against the marginalisation of WII's (Women's Interest Issues — a phrase I use to denote that all issues, whether gender-specific or not, have gendered effects), allowing the Ministers for Women (and others) to raise gender and feminist issues in the initial stages of policy making. This is a far preferable situation





to that which often pertained in many local authorities where Women's Initiatives were simply grafted onto existing bureaucratic structures without any other adjustments being made. That ensured that WIIs could only be raised as revisions to existing or completed policies in such situations, a practice which the sceptic could conclude was a deliberate attempt to reduce the effectiveness of the Women's Unit in certain Councils.

This process of placing women at the heart of government is referred to as mainstreaming, which, in Ruddock's own words means:

ensuring that the interests and concerns of both women and men are taken into account in the design and implementation of policies at all levels and in all areas. (Ruddock, to Commission on the Status of Women, March 1998)

To achieve this all Government Departments are to be issued with revised guidance on mainstreaming (Ruddock, Women's National Commission, Edinburgh, 22/10/97).

A former Dutch civil servant and now writer on feminist policy making, Joke Swiebel's experiences and analysis are very relevant here. She shows how various factors within a bureaucracy can hinder policy making which is women-orientated, one of which is the existence of tensions within the administration and the fragmentation of the bureaucracy which could be overcome by mainstreaming. However, I am sceptical that Ruddock's aim of mainstreaming women's issues can be achieved when it seems that the rest of the political structures have not been modified; guidelines may have been issued but it is unclear exactly what authority Ministers for Women have over civil servants in other departments and other Ministers. Without such authority the diffusion of responsibility for including a gender perspective on policy making is abrogated into the hands of policy drafters who are non-specialists in gender and who have no reason to believe that developing such an interest would be rewarded within their own department. As such, there is a danger that in attempting to 'write women into' all policies what could occur is simply that women become marginalised and hidden within departmental briefs. It appears to me that the Ministers for Women, and the members of the Cabinet Sub-Committee on Women, will expend much energy on simply achieving and monitoring bureaucratic changes and arguing for adjustments in policy making practices before any meaningful gains can be made. However, I really do wish them

luck (I think they'll need it) for, as Swiebel argues:

[policy making] for women is not recognized as a professional activity in its own right.. [and].. the bureaucrats responsible for women have no stronghold of their own to defend and lack the weapons to impress their adversaries

Let's hope that the Ministers for Women can employ their seniority, can overcome generations of traditional policy making machinery and use the political process to further our ends. Nonetheless, the lack of recognition that Blair has given to this process, as indicated by his treatment of Ruddock, must surely send unspoken messages to both politicians and civil servants that WII's are of lesser importance to the affairs of state than other matters.

Aims 1 & 2: Childcare and Family Friendly Employment

As someone with an academic, political and social interest in the development of policies which will facilitate the creation of decent, affordable and desirable childcare I encourage the Ministers for Women in their prioritised aims to develop family-friendly employment and childcare policies. It is obvious that both Harman and Ruddock recognise the vast backlog in provision. However, I hope that the presentation of the issue as an economic requirement is simply that, a presentation which will be acceptable to non-feminist audiences. There is a real danger in WII's being redefined away from the original agenda. The way an issue is defined is vitally important. Joyce Outshoorn has shown how Dutch feminists refused to allow the passage of an abortion policy which permitted abortion on medical, sociological or psychological grounds rather than on feminist terms, and who eventually won the argument. Similarly, there is great jeopardy in permitting childcare to be defined and presented in economic terms for, once economic arguments are diminished then so too is the case for childcare. As feminists we must argue for childcare policy and provision on the basis of the rights of women and families to utilise these services when they choose.

However, my worries are increased when I reflect back on the origins of childcare and family-friendly employment policies. That source is to be found in the document *The Family Way* (written for the Institute for Public Policy Research by Anna Coote, Harriet Harman and Patricia Hewitt and which was critiqued in

Trouble & Strife, No. 20, 1991 by Jayne Egerton).

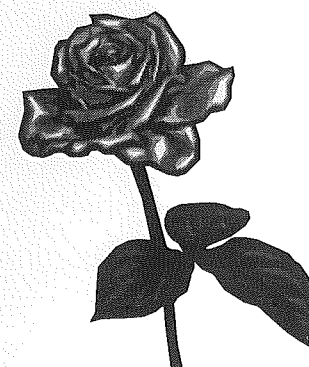
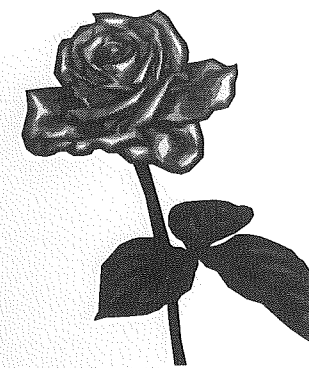
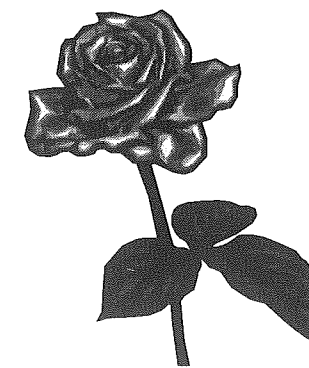
This document seems to remain the basis for Labour's policy on the family. Surprisingly, given the feminist credentials of the authors, the paper marginalised women's rights by equating them with the rights of the child, not considering that the two often come into conflict. The prioritisation of the reasons for increasing childcare provision illustrates the secondary place of women. Firstly, it stated that childcare was needed to improve the education of the pre-fives. Secondly, that changes in work patterns of adults create a demand for childcare as this can lead to children being placed in inadequate facilities and thirdly, 'the promotion of equal opportunities for women'. The place of women's rights in *The Family Way* reflected the Labour Party's attempts to outflank the Conservatives on family policy in the early 1990s, and it is a shame that there doesn't seem to have been a revision in view of Labour's more powerful position.

Even when promoting policies to enable families to manage their lives there is an assumption that it is mothers who are being served and, of course, pragmatically the majority of those directly affected will be women but it still implies that policy is being made in an environment which is not wholly accepting of feminist demands:

family-friendly employment and flexible working patterns.... are vital if women are to balance their home and work responsibilities (Harman, TUC Conference, 9 September 1997, emphasis added)

However, on the positive side it has to be acknowledged that Labour have recognised and support the Working Time Directive which, as part of the Social Chapter, is intended to reduce the number of hours worked by Britons. Although not a formal policy to enable men to perform their share of family duties it could assist them to do so.

The presentation of childcare in economic terms also permits the presentation of the solution in economic terms. So, the development of the new jobs which will be required to fulfil the National Childcare Strategy can also have a specific economic role within Welfare to Work. Childcare is to become the domain, not of mothers who might wish to stay at home but, of young adults trained through voluntary organisations as childcare assistants. The message that



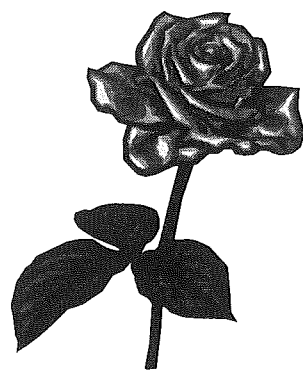
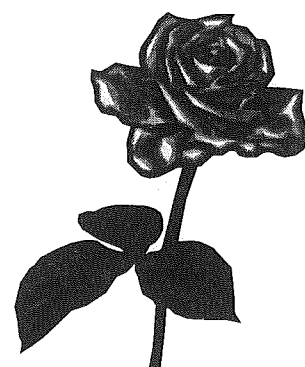
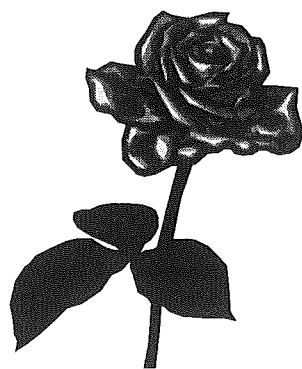
this sends out is that childcare is something that does not require a professional qualification, and can be left to the low paid and the marginalised within our workforce. As such, it indicates and reinforces the lowly status (and consequently the financial rewards) accorded to the care of children in our society.

Thus, although the Labour Party has instigated Britain's first National Childcare Strategy there has been no overt recognition of childcare as a parental, let alone a women's right. Much of the rhetoric has been couched in terms of economic efficiency and returning people to work. Perhaps this is a pragmatic dilution of actual beliefs in order to have a policy accepted by an anti-feminist public agenda. Even so it could be argued that any childcare gained on these terms remains a pyrrhic victory. The suppression of specifically feminist voices in the creation of childcare policies does more than marginalise the validity of women's demands on the polity it also diminishes the nature of that childcare. Original feminist childcare demands were for facilities which were locally controlled, flexible and provided choice. No matter how good state nursery education is, or how good the New Deal childcare assistants are, this Strategy does not meet these criteria. Further, as women witness their needs being ignored once more, or their arguments being sidelined in favour of economic and fiscal benefits, another layer of suppression and marginalisation is created.

Aim 3: Violence Against Women

The inclusion of the issue of violence against women as a priority for the Ministers for Women is only right. According to their own publicity it is the aim of the Ministers for Women to ensure that each Government department takes effective action on this matter, including measures to assist survivors, to ensure swift and effective legal recourse and to educate on prevention. I have no quarrel here.

However, I do have a quarrel with the Labour Party generally. Since the 1980s feminists and activists have worked alongside local government Women's Officers on the policy of Zero Tolerance, a policy with its British beginnings in Edinburgh with large scale, pro-woman, anti-violence publicity campaigns. As Susan Hart tells us, this policy employed the fruits of feminist research on violence against women and children and developed a real, effective feminist praxis to tackle the myriad



concerns around male violence. What makes me spit is the (mis)appropriation of the phrase Zero Tolerance by Labour, and in particular by Jack Straw, to refer to socially unacceptable behaviour of all descriptions. As such, what has been created in the national consciousness is the impression that this is not a campaign specifically addressing feminist concerns regarding male violence. It is hardly a women-orientated act to obscure this innovative and effective policy behind autocratic restrictions on deviant youth!

In addition, there is no mention or recognition in the press releases on violence against women regarding funding and supporting strategies which are not controlled by Central Government. As is obvious from the spread of Zero Tolerance across local authorities, from the work of Women's Aid, Rape Crisis etc. it has not been Central Government which has developed policies and services in this area. Rather if it were not for the actions of women's groups in establishing, and illustrating the need for, such services violence against women would not have made it onto the agenda. I hope that the Ministers for Women will use this expertise and ensure that local authorities continue to be adequately funded so that they can, in turn, continue to financially support refugees. As I write Midlothian Women's Aid is under threat of losing its funding due to the cash-strapped status of the local council. Central-local government relations may not initially appear to be a concern for feminists but it is all too frequently the case that those lobbying for funds for refuges and services are told that deficiencies in the Standard Spending Assessment (grants to local councils) are the cause of cuts. Try as I might I could not find any reference to these matters amongst the priorities of the Ministers for Women.

Aim 4: A New Dialogue with Women

In an attempt to reduce the alienation felt by many women regarding Parliament, often seen as a male-dominated environment, Ministers for Women have established a new strategy for communications with women's organisations and plan to review the Women's National Commission which is the body traditionally trusted with channelling the views of women to Government. They have also committed themselves to '...reaching out to all those other women who are not in organisations and whose voices are almost never heard' (Ruddock, IPPR

Conference, 3rd July 1997). This has already begun, with the first 'Women in Scotland Forum' being held in April, chaired by Scotland's Minister for Women, Henry McLeish.

Referring back to the six priorities it is clear that this aim is part of any campaign to develop gender-sensitive policies, via the creation of a new dialogue, a new bond of trust between women and the Government. Unfortunately, for this woman, that bond of trust which I offered up unquestioningly on May 1 (and before) has been severely dented, not just by the treatment of the Ministry for Women but also through the policy steps taken by our 'New' Labour Government, and the actions of many of our new MPs, both women and men. Having now discussed the priorities for the Ministers for Women I now address the areas where I feel women have been let down.

Welfare to Work

As part of the Government's commitment to reducing unemployment they have devised a Welfare to Work programme offering a New Deal for lone mothers. Last July it was announced that this New Deal would invest, according to DSS figures (DSS Press Release, 2/7/97), £150 million from the windfall tax to assist lone parents into work and off welfare. This was a very commendable aim, an aim which acknowledges the barrier of lack of affordable childcare which forces many women not to work. Extra allowances will be made to lone parents, including increases in the amount of childcare payments disregarded in the calculations of such benefits as Family Credit, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. In the words of Harman, this is an attempt to offer a 'hand up' not a 'hand out'.

It was clear from the last Budget that Labour were trying to present not only a fundamental reform of the taxation and benefits system but also to help those viewed as socially excluded into work. In certain places this policy explicitly related to the position of many women — e.g. the exclusion in the past of the female partners of unemployed men from training programmes and recruitment schemes and the development of childcare assistance for lone parents.

As laudable as all this sounds — in that it is an attempt to remove certain barriers which prevent women choosing employment as an option — there are some problems with it and its presentation to the public. First of all, despite

Labour's condemnation of the stigmatising of lone parents as the harbourers of all social evils, their concentrated focus on this issue did not indicate the importance of creating a nation of economically independent women and families, nor highlight the absolute necessity of developing a genuine National Childcare Strategy, but reinforce the idea that the major social problem to be tackled is women having babies on benefit. Of course, part of the blame for this presentation has to be laid at the door of the media but the undue haste with which the policy of cutting future lone parent benefits payments was pushed through Parliament did little to encourage feminist confidence. Fortunately, due to the response this proposal elicited from the public and from women's groups the aforementioned U-turn was announced in the last Budget. Nonetheless, the Budget clearly indicated that the road to citizenship in the UK is not to be via a recognition of the value of caring but only of the value of participating in paid work.

Despite this U-turn, this debate points to another concern of mine. At the time of the original proposal I read a very informative article by Ann Clwyd, MP (*The Observer*, 14/12/97) in which she detailed the tactics with which opponents of this measure were silenced and ignored: from the refusal to delay the debate to the actions of the Labour Whips in closing the parliamentary debate when at least 15 Labour MPs were still waiting to speak. It is little wonder that the press refers to 'Blair's Babes' and I think of 'Mandelson's mannequins' when Labour MPs who wished to speak for women and their children were denied a voice through the privileged use of parliamentary procedure. It is difficult to see how the Ministers for Women can achieve a real dialogue with women when dissenting voices *within* Labour are silenced from the centre. Furthermore, just how supported are feminist opinions when, despite 101 woman MPs for New Labour, there appears to be no move towards establishing a woman's caucus within the Parliamentary Labour Party — what implied retributions exist which have ensured that no such gathering has been created?

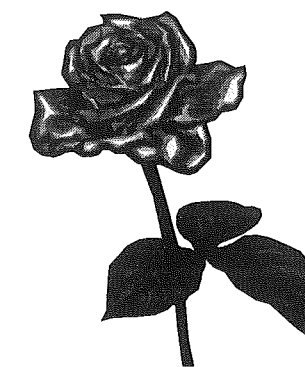
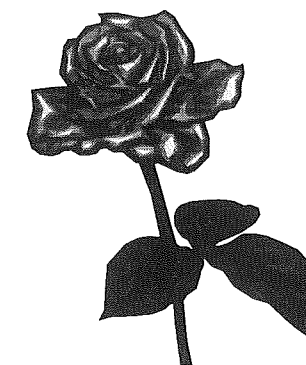
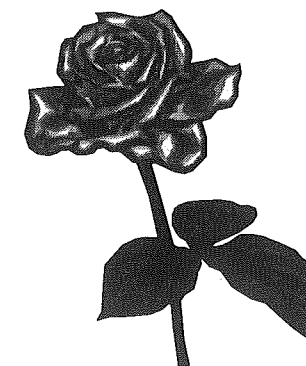
Budget '98

I have already referred to a couple of aspects of the recent Budget, however, I think it is worth discussing a few more. Gordon Brown very clearly stated that his Budget was to offer four things to the country: firstly economic stability;

secondly, an encouragement to enterprise with the promise that work will always pay more than benefit; thirdly, reform of the welfare state to offer opportunity for all and; lastly the creation of strong public services. As I listened to the Budget and these pledges I initially felt elated, yet underneath all of this lurk dangers for women.

Obviously, economic stability will benefit the whole country (though the methods of achieving such stability could result in the reduction of certain rights, e.g. trade union recognition). Further, making work pay must be a positive step — though again it is an indication that individuals can only achieve the status of citizen through paid employment. The development of opportunities for all via the welfare system is, to my mind, admirable. The recognition that women partners of unemployed men have the right to services which could enable them to find paid employment if they so wish indicates that Brown does not see such women as economically dependent upon 'their' men but believes they should be treated as individuals. Despite what he said about the family being viewed in this budget as Beveridge had viewed it this is not the case. Beveridge situated married women as economic dependants and as a separate class of people (the other two classes being the employed and the self employed); at least Brown has gone some way to indicate that the Government sees people as individuals not as dependants within a family unit. Nonetheless, despite Brown's presentation of this as an opportunity for women, it is possible to view it as yet another attempt to reinforce the view that membership of civic society comes with earning a wage.

It is probably not surprising that I have another gripe about the Budget. This time it is with regard to the announcement that Family Credit will be replaced by a Working Families Tax Credit. The aim of this move is to ensure that, as stated before, those who work will be rewarded for doing so — that work will pay. As such, it is intended to remove the anomaly whereby people in low paid jobs can claim Family Credit and, due to the construction of the system, be financially penalised if they start to earn a little more. By this measure the Chancellor will guarantee a family income of £180 per week with no taxation being due until a threshold of £220 is reached, if one adult in the family is in full time paid work. In other words, it is the



removal of an anomalous tax system which disproportionately taxed the lowest earners. So, what is my concern? It is simply that it is the replacement of Family Credit, a benefit, with a tax credit, that is, an allowance of earnings before tax is calculated. Despite Brown's insistence that families will be able to choose whose wages are advantaged with this tax credit (man or woman) it strikes me as obvious who will receive it. Given that women still earn only around 75 percent of men's wages and that any tax credit will be more useful attached to the larger income, it is clear that, on the whole, this will mean that rather than a family collecting a benefit, a boost will be given to the male wage packet — with no guarantees that it will ever reach the family purse.

Similarly, I am disappointed in the Budget plans for Childcare to be covered by a tax credit rather than a benefit payment or free provision. Once more this means that those who earn and who can arrange for, and choose to have, formalised childcare will benefit.

Statistics and Policy Making

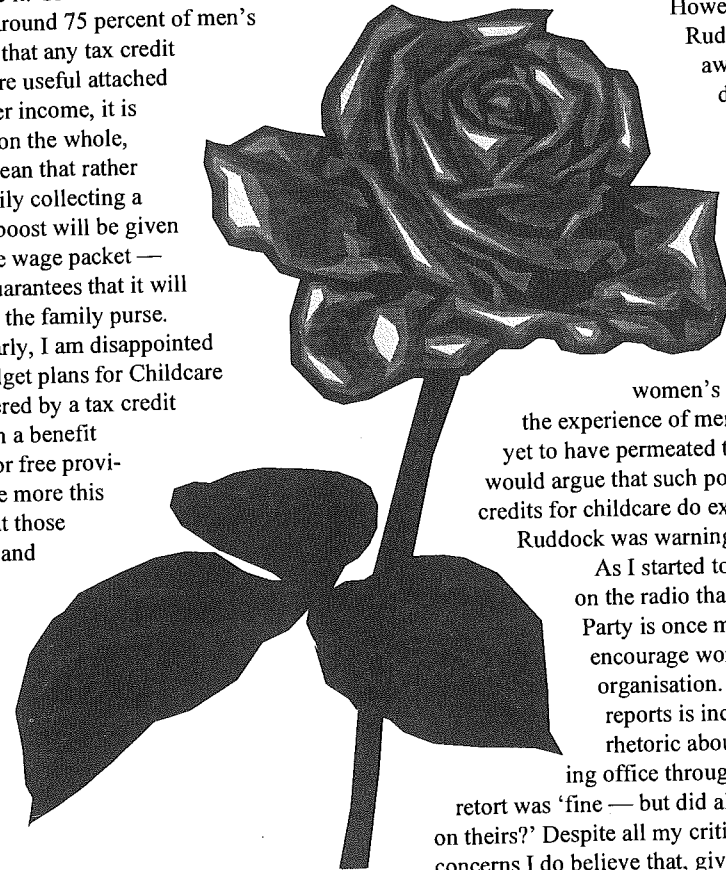
One of the first lessons I learned about policy making is that it is very difficult to develop a convincing argument when 'hard' data is not available to support your case. The next lesson that I learned is that the refusal to gather such data can be a deliberate act of obfuscation. As such it was very welcome to learn that Joan

Ruddock, at the Gender and Statistics Users Group launch conference (31 March 1998), argued against the masculinist assumptions in current data collection and committed Ministers for Women to a 'policy statement which will promote the collection and dissemination of statistics broken down by gender'. As she has recognised, 'without a statistical base that is recognised by those in authority women's needs remain hidden'.

However, despite Ruddock being aware of the dangers of assuming gender neutrality in the collation of data and warning against the dangers of subsuming

women's experiences under the experience of men this seems not yet to have permeated the Cabinet, for I would argue that such policies as tax credits for childcare do exactly what Joan Ruddock was warning against.

As I started to write this I heard on the radio that the Conservative Party is once more trying to encourage women within their organisation. Within these reports is included the usual rhetoric about women achieving office through their merits, my retort was 'fine — but did all the men get there on theirs?' Despite all my criticisms and concerns I do believe that, given our current political system, New Labour provides the best route for the promotion of WIIs and that some form of alliance between feminists in and out of the bureaucracy with traditional bureaucrats and politicians might achieve the degree of change we seek. However, neither we, nor New Labour can rest on our laurels. □



EVE'S Back

Only
£1!

BI-MONTHLY

MANCHESTER WOMEN'S NETWORKING MAGAZINE



News, articles, reviews...

Comprehensive Women's Listings

For Sale in Frontline Books,
Cornerhouse, On the Eighth Day &
many other outlets in Manchester

Eve's Back, Dept 65, 1 Newton St, Manchester, M1 1HW

Trouble & Strife

Subscription rates/
Back issues

Subs for one year/2 issues:

Individual

Britain and Ireland £8.50
 supporting sub £25.00
 unwaged sub £6.50
 Surface mail worldwide £10.00
 Airmail worldwide £13.00

Institutions

Inland £25.00
 Overseas £35.00

Subscribers outside the UK, please
 pay by International Money Order.

Prices are for 1 issue/3 issues

Back issues nos. 3-18, 20-24:

Britain and Ireland £2.50/£6.00
 Surface mail
 worldwide £3.50/£9.00
 Airmail worldwide £5.00/£12.00

Back issues from 29/30 onwards:

Britain and Ireland ... £4.00/£10.00
 Surface mail
 worldwide £5.00/£12.00
 Airmail worldwide £6.50/£15.00

Outside the UK, please pay by
 International Money Order.

Please send me Trouble & Strife for one/two years, starting issue # _____.

I enclose a cheque/money order for £ _____, including a donation of
 £ _____.

Please send me back issues nos. _____

Name _____

Address _____

Postcode _____

Trouble & Strife subscriptions. PO Box 8, Diss, Norfolk, UK IP22 3XG.

SEPConnection Newsletter for Dyke Separatists only

**SEPConnection is a newsletter for, by, & about Dyke Separatists.
 It is published four times a year. The purpose of the newsletter
 is to provide support for and
 connections among Lesbian Separatists.**

For information, send a long self-addressed, stamped envelope to:

SEPC
 P. O. Box 1180
 Sebastopol, CA 95473-1180
 USA

NO POSTCARDS

Summer 1998

Letters	2
Sizing up the arguments <i>Debbie Cameron</i> reviews <i>Fat and Proud</i> , a new book about the politics of body size	5
Between context and continents Feminist activists in South Asia are making connections between forms of sexual violence. <i>Liz Kelly</i> reports	12
Making a big noise <i>Magda Ang-Lygate</i> talks to members of the Scottish women's percussion group, SheBoom	23
What the papers say <i>Hilary McCollum</i> reads between the lines of newspaper coverage of child sexual abuse	31
Courtroom dramas <i>Denise Mina</i> and <i>Jane Scoular</i> examine the rise of false memory stories on the stage and in the courts	40
Space: The feminist frontier As high summer approaches, <i>Dianne Butterworth</i> cruises the science fiction shelves	46
Slick Willy and the silent sisters <i>Andrea Dworkin</i> speaks her mind about Bill Clinton's exploitation of women	50
A navel of one's own <i>Meryl Altman</i> has her doubts about the women's 'memoir boom'	52
Labour pains <i>Jennifer Marchbanks</i> assesses the new Labour government's stance on women	66

£4.50