

Trouble

The radical feminist magazine

& Strife



Viagra: A bitter pill

Germaine Greer reviewed
Young women and heterosex
Vegetarianism: a feminist issue?
Domestic violence as torture
Difference: overstating the case?

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

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Contents No. 39

Trouble & Strife

Letters.....	2
The price of fame <i>Germaine Greer's The Whole Woman</i> reviewed by <i>Debbie Cameron</i>	4
An audacious idea <i>Kathy Cusack</i> reports on a major research project on violence against women in Ghana.....	13
Local heroine <i>Margaret Mary Issaka</i> interviewed by <i>Linda Regan</i>	17
Bad press? <i>Tabloid sexism</i> dissected by <i>Isla Duncan</i>	26
Different decade, same old shit <i>Stevi Jackson</i> is not surprised by new findings about young women's experience of heterosexuality.....	30
Balancing the budget <i>Debbie Budlender</i> explains the Women's Budget Initiative devised by feminists in South Africa.....	41
Chewing it over <i>Feminism and vegetarianism</i> debated by <i>Dianne Butterworth, Debbie Cameron, Liz Kelly and Joan Scanlon</i>	46
Cruel but not unusual <i>Claudia Hasanbegovic</i> argues for understanding domestic violence as a form of torture.....	57
Difference is not all that counts <i>Purna Sen</i> takes issue with the emphasis on difference at the expense of what women share.....	64
A cock and bull story <i>Julia Parnaby</i> finds Viagra a bitter pill to swallow.....	70

Letters

Women's conditions in Iraqi Kurdistan

Since the Gulf War and as a direct result of this brutal war as well as economic sanctions, living conditions of millions of Iraqi people have worsened, thousands have died and many more have fled the country. Kurdistan has suffered the consequences of this war too.

Just after the war the allied countries set up a 'safe haven' for the people of Kurdistan under the auspices of the UN. Since then Kurdistan has become a large camp administered/controlled by nationalist militia parties. The largest of them are the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Democratic Party of Kurdistan (PDK) as well as an Islamist movement.

This meant that Kurdistan was transformed from a normal and civilised society to a society with no regard for law and order. The nationalist parties were not only unable to answer/solve the questions posed by the society such as poverty, hunger, unemployment, diseases, displacement and housing crisis, but they began a savage onslaught to detract civil and human rights from the people of Kurdistan and instead answered the people's demands with steel and fire.

The nationalists and Islamists have revived tribal, ancestral customs and restored religious traditions and values. Male chauvinism, patriarchal relations, are some examples of the state of affairs in Kurdistan.

In this climate women are the first victims of this culture. Freedom to choose a partner, the right to divorce or separate, wearing the clothes you choose and travel are all detracted from women to the level of beating, insulting, mutilation, stoning, enforcement of the Islamic veil and murdering women. In this atmosphere the number of women committing suicide has increased dramatically.

Since 1991 more than 4000 women have been killed in different parts of Iraqi Kurdistan. According to the latest survey by the Independent Women's Organisation newspaper *Yaksani*, every 24 hours one woman is either killed or commits suicide and every minute six women are beaten or insulted.

Despite this dark picture, a radical women's movement has started in recent years to fight against this oppression, terror, indiscriminate killing and the Personal Status Law which is based on the Islamic code (Al-sharia).

At present women in Kurdistan are in need of your support and the support of women's organisations to combat this backward, regressive

culture and establish a society that respects equality and freedom.

Sawsan Salim

* Spice Girls

I am writing in response to the article 'Spicing up Girls' Lives' by Krista Cowman and Ann Kaloski (T&S 38). I, too, have recently conducted research into the 'Spice Girl phenomenon'. Whilst my methodology differed from that used by Cowman and Kaloski, I also drew some positive conclusions about the band.

My research was based solely on an analysis of Spice Girls lyrics and their fan magazine *Spice*. I compared the content of these with a sample of young women's magazines, namely *Bliss*, *Mizz* and *More!*

It was the recognition of their potential as role models for young women that inspired my research on the Spice Girls. The initial impetus sprung out of anger at what I perceived to be yet another highly sexualised model of femininity being conveyed to young women. Through the process of the research, however, this negative stance re the Spice Girls changed, somewhat unexpectedly.

Within the Spice Girls texts I found a prioritising of female friendship and support, challenges made to passive femininity, a reinforcement of notions of equality of the sexes and a centring of women and women's history (albeit still within the confines of the discourse of heterosexuality). Through their song lyrics and magazines, the Spice Girls acknowledge various aspects of young women's experiences such as the pressures to be sexually active, the double standard applied to sexually active women and sexual harassment.

By contrast, within the sample of young women's magazines, there was very little challenge made to traditional gender roles. They particularly reinforced heterosexuality and the dominance of men and boys as the objects of female desire. Obtaining and securing a relationship with a male, whether romantic (for the younger magazines) or sexual (in the case of *More!*) took precedence over female friendships. In the sample studied, sexist norms and values, issues such as pornography and violence towards women were disguised, hidden or presented as information only without any political analysis.

I found little reference to the Spice Girls in the young women's magazines. It could be argued that as the research was conducted some eighteen

months after the band's rise to stardom, their 'newsworthiness' was diminished. However, I would like to suggest other possible reasons. Firstly, the presence of an all-girl band would have been an anomaly for the boy- and men-obsessed *Bliss*, *Mizz* and *More!* Secondly, and related to the first point, when the Spice Girls prioritise female friendships over romance and make challenges to traditional gender positioning under patriarchy, they are not in accord with the dominant tone of the young women's magazines.

I would argue that the Spice Girls offer challenges to dominant patriarchal discourse in their centring of women's experiences, their privileging of female friendship over romantic encounters with men and their criticism of the double standard. They present some positive messages to young women who are called upon to be confident, assertive and to believe in themselves.

The contradiction, or, should it be said, challenge, for feminists presented by the Spice Girls is that this 'non-traditional' stance could be undermined by the guise of a sexualised femininity traditionally associated with pleasing the 'male viewer'. We live in a post-modern world where young women are alienated from traditional feminist politics and bombarded with sexist discourse. It is hoped that, in this context, young women will see through the superficial/commercial aspects of the Spice Girls and be able to receive and use the positive messages offered by them.

Denise Hutchison

New Women's Therapy Centres in Albania

The women of Medica, a women's therapy centre in Bosnia-Herzegovina, are well known to me from five years of working with them. Many of you know them even better. I think everyone who knows them has great respect for them. They are themselves overwhelmed with new arrivals of Kosovan refugees in central Bosnia. In spite of that they are carrying their careful and caring approach to war-traumatized women to the support of Kosovan refugees in Albania.

I am attaching an emergency appeal for financial support for their excellent, practical, appropriate, gender-sensitive project. Please post it around widely.

Cynthia Cockburn

MEDICA KOSOVA "Woman to Woman" — Support by women for women traumatized by rape and other acts of terror in the nationalist aggression in Kosovo

Please give generously to this emergency initiative which involves: 1) Rapidly training a team of professional Albanian/Kosovan women in appropriate, gender-sensitive, medical and psycho-social responses to rape and other forms of war trauma; 2) The trainers will be Bosnian women professionals who gained their knowledge in the earlier war and currently run the hugely successful 60-staff Medica Women's Therapy Centre in central Bosnia which has helped more than 20,000 women and children since 1993; 3) Establishing six tent clinics in refugee camps in Albania through which the team of women professionals and auxiliary staff can locate women in special need and administer emergency psycho-social care; 4) Obtaining, equipping and operating a mobile clinic to take women's reproductive health care and trauma therapy to other areas of Albania in which refugees are scattered; 5) Documentation of violations of women's human rights in the ethnic aggression in Kosovo, to enable prosecutions. Lawyers will work closely with psychotherapists to ensure the necessary sensitivity to women's feelings, self-respect and future safety.

Medica's principles: women who have been sexually abused need care in the first instance from women; they must be respected and their stories believed; medical treatment should always be accompanied by social care; and self-healing is possible with the help of skilled and appropriate therapy.

Medica Kosova is a purpose-built partnership between Medica and Albanian and Kosovan women's organizations. These women speak the language and share the culture of the women they wish to help. In supporting them you will be making a direct and immediate investment in local women's skills, learned the hard way in the war in Bosnia.

Please, please pin up this text in public view, do some fundraising at local events, approach trusts and other givers you think might help, or just simply write a cheque to 'Medica' today and send it to: Medica, PO Box 9560, London NW5 2WF Account 'Medica', No.0562837, Lloyds Bank, London NW5 2LP. Sort Code 30-94-66 Further information from:

Cynthia Cockburn, Tel (0171) 482 5670, E-mail: c.cockburn@ktown.demon.co.uk

The price of fame

Today's publishing industry is controlled by huge conglomerates, driven by market forces and obsessed with the bottom line. Increasing pressure to maximise profits has encouraged a publishing 'cult of celebrity': books are sold on the strength of the author's name rather than on the strength of the ideas inside them, and the effort put into promoting a book is directly proportional to the fame of the writer. Feminism is not exempt from this tendency. In the 1990s, a great deal of public discussion of gender issues has revolved around books by 'celebrity' feminists (and celebrity antifeminists like Camille Paglia and Katie Roiphe). Big names may generate big profits, but do they produce anything feminists might actually want to read? *Debbie Cameron* put one of this year's most hyped celebrity offerings, Germaine Greer's *The Whole Woman*, to the test...

Mary Ellman once observed that male criticism of women's literature often boiled down to 'a literary measuring of busts and hips'. Critics ignored the writing and focused instead on the attributes of the writer. This rule now applies to feminist writing too: you can bet that any review of a book by Andrea Dworkin will at some point contain the word 'dunarecs'. What has changed (and this is not an improvement) is that the critic, nowadays, will probably be a woman.

In her latest book *The Whole Woman* Germaine Greer remarks on male editors'

apparent delight in setting women to attack other women, so she probably was not surprised when women reviewers lined up to trash her. 'What would Germaine Greer know about the whole woman, she's never been married or had children' was one common response. 'What would she know about the whole woman, she's a rich overeducated media celebrity' was another.

I can't remember anyone suggesting that Camille Paglia cannot speak for or about women, though exactly the same arguments would apply to her too. And I can't imagine that if Mrs

Cartoons by Angela Martin

Germaine Greer, *The Whole Woman* (Doubleday, 1999)



Nobody, an obscure housewife and mother, wrote a 350-page treatise on the condition of women today, the Natashas and Nigellas would deign to notice it. It's because of Germaine Greer's celebrity status, and her reputation as a mad old bat (rather than a happily married mother of two) that her book is a media event and gets reviewed in every newspaper. Yet according to the reviewers (many of them media personalities themselves) it cannot be a good book because the woman who wrote it is a single, childless celebrity.

If that's objective or illuminating comment, I'll eat next week's *Observer*. If a book is that bad, why bore us with the details? The answer is, 'because Germaine Greer is famous'. However idiotic the utterances of the celebrated, the one thing they cannot be denied is the oxygen of publicity. This means that many interesting books by people we haven't heard of never get reviewed at all.

I am not saying Germaine Greer's book is idiotic — just pointing out that if it was, one perfectly reasonable response would be to ignore it. Before I saw the reviews I was planning to do just that: I had no more desire to engage with *The Whole Woman* than with any other product of the celebrity blockbuster industry (women's issues subdivision). But the hostile media responses made me want to read it; they made me want to take it seriously; they even made me want to like it.

The promotional posters were promising, emblazoned with the rallying cry: 'It's time to get angry again' And I was pleased to note that the book had indeed got certain readers angry —



power-dressed post-feminists, unreconstructed Trots and surgically reconstructed transsexuals, for instance. Sad to say, though, my own blood did not boil when I read it, and my intellect was not fully engaged either.

Female Eunuch II: this time it's personal

Germaine Greer made her name with *The Female Eunuch*, first published in 1970, and *The Whole Woman* is billed as the sequel she swore at the time she would never write. In the first section, titled 'recantation' (all sections have one-word lower-case titles — 'body', 'mind', 'love', 'power'), she explains why she changed her mind. In a nutshell, she got angry again, notably with those women of her own generation who now whinge incessantly about feminism getting it wrong/going too far/achieving nothing.

Germaine Greer thinks feminism did not go far enough for long enough. As she sees it, we gave up the struggle for liberation (just as we gave up calling ourselves the 'women's liberation movement') and settled down to the more respectable pursuit of equality. This shift may have made feminism more acceptable in the mainstream, but it has undermined more funda-



mental challenges to a system based on women's subordination. The symbolic, everyday enactment of that subordination — the cluster of traits and behaviours that constitute femininity — has not withered away, but on the contrary seems to be flourishing and spreading. 'Thirty years on' Germaine Greer observes, 'femininity is still compulsory for women and has become an option for men, while genuine femaleness remains grotesque to the point of obscenity' (p.2).

To the extent that *The Whole Woman* has an overarching argument, this sentence will serve as a fair potted summary of it; and it illustrates one of the main reasons why my own response to the book is ambivalent. I agree with the argument about liberation versus equality (though I could wish Germaine Greer acknowledged that *some* feminists remain committed to radical goals — some of us don't need to get angry again because we never calmed down in the first place), and also with the argument about compulsory femininity. These points may have gone out of fashion but they haven't, alas, gone out of date.

What I don't like, however, is the way the argument is framed in terms of an opposition between the artificial (femininity) and the real ('genuine femaleness'). What is implicit in the sentence I quoted above becomes more explicit in

passages like the following:

...female is essence and feminine social construct. Deciding which behaviours mirror female and which the castrated form of feminine is not easy, until menopause burns off the impurities. What remains in the crucible after that proof is the whole woman (p.232).

The problem with this line of argument is, as soon as you assert that 'female is essence' you raise the question of what is female, and thus essential — a futile question which positively invites dodgy answers. (The answer actually given here — you'll know what's female when you've been purified by the menopause — is a good illustration of this dodginess.) The question is futile because there has never been and will never be a situation where women exist in a state of pure femaleness, outside a social context. Femininity as we know it is undoubtedly a worthless and oppressive charade, but this is not because it falls short of some state of female nature, it is because it forms part of a system in which women are treated as less than fully human. The opposition that matters is not between artifice and reality, it is between servitude and freedom; being free is not the same thing as being true to your supposed 'nature'.

The most obvious answers to the question

'what is female?' are unpalatable because they will inevitably tend to the lowest common denominator, namely biology. In the 200-plus pages that precede the statement quoted above, Germaine Greer explicitly or implicitly proposes that among the essential attributes of the whole woman are her body, heterosexuality, the capacity and desire to mother children, and a take-it-or-leave-it attitude to masturbation. Later she will suggest that women are in essence more cooperative than men. This catalogue of essential traits is more or less indistinguishable from what any old misogynist (or new Darwinist) would come up with if invited to pontificate on the same subject. But an equally important criticism of it is that we cannot know if it is true, precisely because it is impossible to separate out the effects of nature and nurture in any real population of human beings: they are inextricably interwoven.

On other issues (notably the question of whether male aggression has its roots in culture or testosterone) Germaine Greer makes this argument herself. On the issue of 'which behaviours mirror female and which the castrated form of feminine', however, she reserves the right to apply a simple rule of her own invention: if she approves of it then it must be 'essence', if not then it must be 'construct'. Apart from being intellectually unpersuasive, this is not a useful creed for a political movement seeking to build — that is, construct — a better world.

In general, Germaine Greer seems not too bothered about inconsistency. Writing about 'girl power' as a cynical marketing concept in an ever more sexualised western consumer culture, she comments: 'Nobody observing the incitement of little girls to initiate sexual contact with boys can remain unconcerned. ...the exposure of baby vaginas and cervixes to the penis is more likely to result in pregnancy and infection than orgasm' (p.319). I agree; but I also remember what she said a couple of hundred pages earlier about female genital mutilation carried out on Kenyan girls of about the same age. Although it would be inaccurate to say she defends FGM unreservedly, Germaine Greer refuses to condemn it outright, suggesting it needs to be understood in context, as a rite of passage to womanhood. But doesn't 'womanhood' in this context mean eligibility for marriage, and thus the exposure of a young woman's vagina and cervix to the penis of her husband? If heterosex and pregnancy are bad for the 'baby' body of her western counterpart,

why are they OK for her?

What's at work here, I suspect, is the venerable western tradition of idealising the 'noble savage'. The western feminist writer in search of the 'whole woman' is like the male enlightenment philosopher of the 1700s looking for the true essence of 'man', uncorrupted by the trappings of 'civilisation' (or in this case, western consumer capitalism), and she looks in much the same places. But this attitude just places obstacles in the way of feminists elsewhere, who are struggling, not for the imposition of western values but for an end to the local forms of women's oppression. If 'the whole woman' is a woman not subject to cultural norms



and practices that subordinate her, then there are no 'whole women', anywhere.

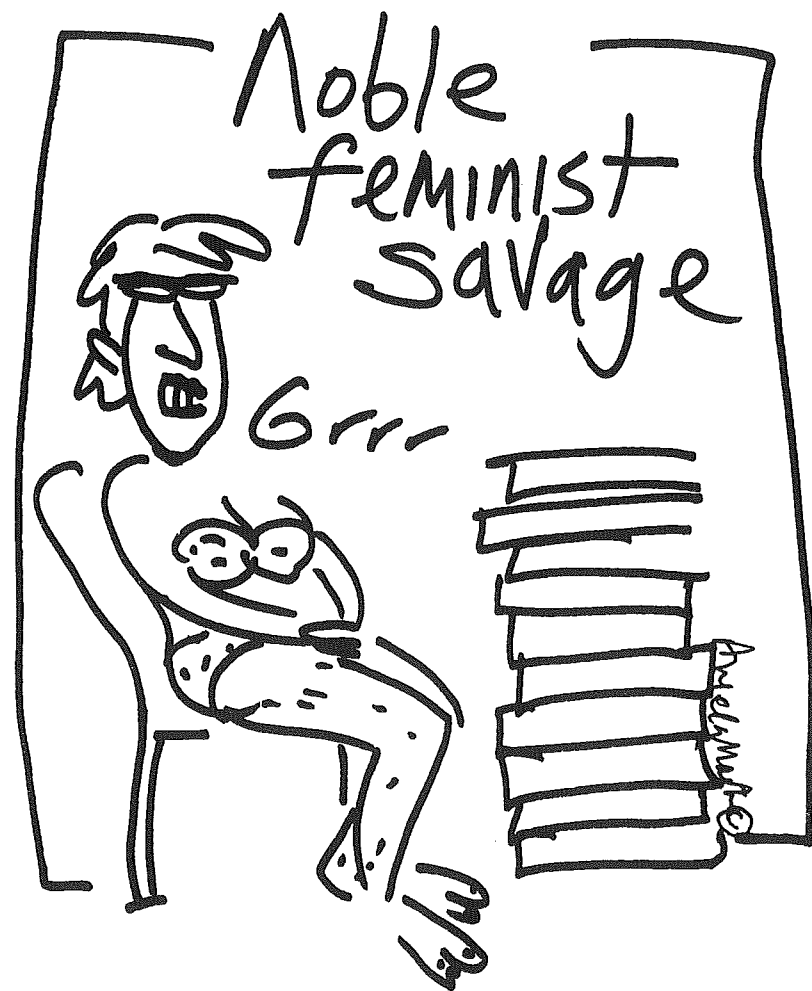
When she isn't tying herself in the knots of cultural relativism, Germaine Greer is capable of talking a lot of sense, without mincing her words. She is one of very few 1960s-vintage, straight and left-identified feminists I can think of who has not capitulated either to the maunderings of postmodernism or to the uncritical celebration of women's 'agency', which usually means their 'freedom' to get fucked by men. On that subject, Germaine Greer observes briskly that one major beneficiary of sexual 'liberation' has been the sex

industry, and that 'a person working as a prostitute to fund a drug habit is the least free individual on the planet' (p.6).

She is equally bracing on the issue of sexual identity, rejecting the idea that people are born gay or straight, so that a woman who becomes a lesbian must in some sense be discovering her 'true' sexuality. 'It is at least as likely that the woman has changed, that she has developed from being the subordinate partner in a heterosexual relationship...and moved to a new kind of relationship between equals' (p.237). She also reminds us that not all love is sexual, and reasserts the value of women's friendships. Radical feminists will not find these observations revelatory, but they may appreciate the elegance and force of the expression.

But I digress...

The words above were written soon after I finished reading *The Whole Woman*. I then got distracted by other things for about a week; and when I returned to writing this review I realised there was nothing more I wanted to say about the ideas in the book. If I had really hated it I would not have had this difficulty, any more than if I had really liked it. But it failed to stir any kind of passion; reading it was like eating something generic and uninspiring, a bowl of cereal or a limp pre-packaged salad. When you start it tastes OK; half way through you're getting bored (though you're occasionally perked up by a stray raisin or a sliver of garlic); by the time you finish you're not hungry any more, but you're not



exactly satisfied either.

So I started thinking about why I was so half-hearted about *The Whole Woman*. And reluctantly, I concluded that it did have something to do with the identity of the author. The truth is, many of the things I found troubling, or unsatisfying, or just plain irritating about it are attributable to its being a book by 'Germaine Greer'. (I put her name in quotation marks here to signify that I am talking not about the person Germaine Greer, whom I do not know, but the publishing commodity 'Germaine Greer'.) If 'Germaine Greer' were an isolated case the point wouldn't be worth dwelling on. In fact, though, more and more of the books we are urged to read, the exhibitions or performances we are urged to see and even the charitable and political campaigns we are exhorted to join or contribute to, are conceived and marketed on the basis of commodified personal celebrity. If you want to raise standards of numeracy, don't look for an outstanding maths teacher to front your campaign, get Carol Vorderman from Countdown. If you want the public to give money to a good cause, it isn't enough to show them people in obvious need, you have to associate the cause with some popular personality (like Princess Diana with landmines).

I think this cult of celebrity is a bad thing in general, but its effect on feminism seems to me particularly pernicious. So with apologies to T&S readers who were looking for a more exhaustive account of *The Whole Woman*, I'd like to go back to the point I began with: the problem of Germaine Greer's celebrity, and more generally of the celebrity feminist book.

The cult of celebrity and the pitfalls of popularity

Like any other market commodity, 'Germaine Greer' has her brand image. She is expected to shock, to utter controversial views and take up unorthodox positions whose distinctive feature is that no one 'respectable' agrees with them. In *The Whole Woman* she repeats many of the views that have bolstered her claim to outrageousness in the past: that women make too much of rape, that no sex is preferable to bad sex, that HRT is a swindle with few real benefits to most of those who take it, that women are liberated by the loss of sexual desire as they age. She has also found a couple of new things to be controversial about, notably cancer screening programmes (ineffective at saving lives but very

effective at keeping women fearful) and transsexuals (you do not produce 'genuine femaleness', or maleness, through surgery, and FTM transsexuals have no business representing themselves as women).

Actually I agree with some of these sentiments, and I imagine many other radical feminists will too. What bothers me is less the conclusions Germaine Greer comes to than the way she gets there: the sweeping quality of her arguments, her failure to spend long enough on anything to tease out the full complexity of it, the way she expects us not to notice or care if what she says on page 99 is inconsistent with what she says on page 300, her sometimes careless and cursory research. Since she cannot be writing exclusively for the very small audience that agrees with her already, her apparent disdain for the apparatus of reasoned persuasion might suggest that she is not actually trying to persuade, but merely setting out as usual to be provocative in the style of 'Germaine Greer'.

The structure and format of *The Whole Woman* just encourages the resort to easy aphorisms and sweeping statements. It is a relatively long book composed of very short chapters (the jacket copy refers to them, ickily, as 'chapterkins') in which no topic can be explored at sufficient length to do it justice. I have already commented on the stylishly minimal section and chapter titles; another stylistic tic is the insertion throughout of bits of boxed text, which range from poems to lists of masturbation techniques. These items are not commented on directly, just dropped in for us to make of them what we will. In some cases I made nothing much of them, and after a hundred pages or so I was tired of the whole device.

I imagine the format was a marketing decision, aimed at making the book both 'cool' and accessible to a wide audience. But this notion of 'accessibility' is one I have some problems with, since the main assumption behind it appears to be that the intended reader has the concentration span of a gnat. She cannot process long continuous stretches of prose, but needs her reading-matter broken up into bite-size 'chapterkins', with a box every couple of pages to distract her. At the risk of sounding like an old schoolmarm instead of a multimedia-literate, 21st century kind of gal, I doubt whether serious political analysis can usefully be couched in a style which is the printed analogue of MTV.

When Germaine Greer spoke at an event

promoting the book in London, she said that she had deliberately set out to write a 'non-academic' book. She acknowledged the value of at least some work produced by feminist academics, but pointed out that the work of academics has very little impact on mainstream public discourse, because almost no one reads it. As I interpret what she said, she figured she could *exploit* the cultural conditions in which only celebrity sells, using her own celebrity to advance the feminist cause. I think her intentions were probably good. But I also think the strategy is a miscalculation.

I should probably declare an interest here, in that I am myself a feminist academic (as indeed is Germaine Greer, who was described on my ticket to her promotional talk, introduced and very pointedly addressed as 'Professor'). But still, I want to ask how much is really gained, in current economic and cultural conditions, by feminists adopting the trappings, not of 'accessibility' (which I would define simply as writing in a way readers can understand) but of *popularity*, which is defined by the standards of the mass media. Media coverage and subsequent sales are a measure of what matters to the publishing industry — profits — but for several reasons I would question if they measure what matters, or should matter, to feminists.

Famous for fifteen minutes?

First of all, I think 'impact on mainstream public discourse' has come to be far too closely identified with being noticed and discussed in the small, self-referential world of the media. If your book is reviewed in the upmarket Sunday papers and discussed on *Start the Week* and *The Late Review*, have you really had an impact on 'public discourse'? Or have you simply made yourself famous for fifteen minutes, among people whose opinions and behaviour are unlikely to change as a result?

Most media discussions are superficial, uncommitted and ephemeral — tomorrow the same pundits will have moved on to something completely different. Media publicity has a short-term effect in terms of sales, but that need not translate into anything more profound. Many of those who buy a book because they learned from the media it was currently 'hot' will not read it, while many more will skim-read without thinking at all deeply about what they are reading.

Unfortunately, to obtain this commercially useful but politically empty result, the feminist

author will have been encouraged by her publisher to do various politically questionable things. Write in media-friendly soundbites (or 'chapterkins'); go easy on the footnotes; court controversy for its own sake; agree to the use of her 'image' as a marketing tool. Germaine Greer has done all of these things, and no doubt they have had the desired effect from the publisher's point of view, but they have also caused her to write a book that is not as useful as it might have been for feminist purposes, while making her fair game for every kind of personal abuse.

With that in mind, I think it's time to question the feminist tendency to reserve our deepest suspicion for 'academic' writing. Pretentious incomprehensible writing is a bad thing wherever it may be found (and that isn't just in academia); but in today's publishing industry, I would argue that an even greater threat is dumbing down for the bottom line. Actually, you could argue that these apparently opposite faults are essentially just two sides of a single coin (and the word 'coin' is apt, because we are talking about publishers' profits). Pretentious books and dumb books are each aimed at their own market niche: they are, respectively, the Giorgio Armani and the Top Shop of publishing. And between them they are squeezing out the kind of nonfiction publishing that is of most use to most feminists: books which are at the same time informative, decently researched, thought provoking and readable. Books that wouldn't be out of place on an academic reading list, but which could also be read with pleasure and profit by any woman with a modicum of curiosity and intelligence. Overall *The Whole Woman* falls short of that standard, not because (on the evidence of some of her other work) Germaine Greer is incapable of meeting it, but because of the constraints of 'popular' publishing.

When I say the book is not as useful as it might have been for feminist purposes, one of the things I'm thinking of is the number of statements which are totally unsourced and unsubstantiated: you turn to the notes for the relevant chapter and find...nothing. An example is the statement (p.66) that 'many transsexuals work in the sex industry...in some countries the number of transsexuals working as prostitutes equals the number of women'. How many? What countries? If you make a claim like this, I think you should cite the source, so the reader can judge for herself if the claim is well-founded. In this instance the

standard academic practice is also the only politically defensible one. Feminists are not supposed to believe things uncritically on the basis that they are said by somebody famous or charismatic. And feminists of all people should resist being talked down to, along the lines of 'there, there, dear, we know proper notes would overtax your fluffy little brain so we decided not to bother with them'.

I also found mistakes. For example, though in general the arguments about medicine are the most thoroughly referenced in her notes, Germaine Greer refers to drugs like Prozac as 'selective serotonin uptake inhibitors' (p.173) when it should be 'reuptake inhibitors'. I suppose this could be a copy editor's error rather than the author's, and it may also sound like a petty point to take her to task about, but the significance of it is, *reuptake inhibitor* describes how the drugs in question work. Every discussion of SSRIs explains this, so a mistake that indicates the writer does not understand it calls into question whether she has actually done her research.

Too many facts for my taste are sourced to reports in newspapers and magazines, as opposed to the original sources from which the journalists took them. To find this problematic is not mere academic snobbery. Anyone who has ever dealt with the media must be aware how selectively, simplistically and sometimes downright inaccurately they use their sources. Germaine Greer has often been misrepresented herself: she must know you can't believe everything you read in the papers.

An 'academic' book does not have to mean a scholarly history of sixteenth century cheese-making of interest to seventeen readers worldwide, with two thousand footnotes and a price-tag of £54. It can mean a book read by thousands of students — the sales will not tell you how many, since some copies will be sold to libraries — with a potential shelf-life of many years. An important difference between students and media pundits is that students read books with a view to actually learning something from them. They are open to having their views changed by what they read, and they are also in a situation where the ideas they encounter can be absorbed into their thinking over time, as complex ideas need to be. To my mind the ability of students to profit from a feminist book is a better measure of its value and potential influence than whether Julie Burchill slags it off in a Sunday paper. If you

write with students in mind (and let's remember here that 'students' no longer denotes a tiny elite consisting mainly of young white men) you will certainly need to be accessible in the sense of 'clear and understandable', but that is not the same as pandering to the media appetite for simple soundbite arguments.

I can think of several books that cover one or more of the same topics as *The Whole Woman*, but which I would rather recommend to students even though their facts and figures are out of date (and they themselves may well be out of print). The books I'm thinking of are accessible, and were certainly not written as academic treatises, but the amount of information in them, the cogency of the arguments and (not least) the thoroughness with which the writers reference their sources just underlines how much dumbing down has affected more recent feminist nonfiction publishing.

The earlier book which *The Whole Woman* resembles most strikingly — in format as well as subject-matter — is Susan Brownmiller's *Femininity*. Although Germaine Greer's examples are more contemporary, I don't think her book is



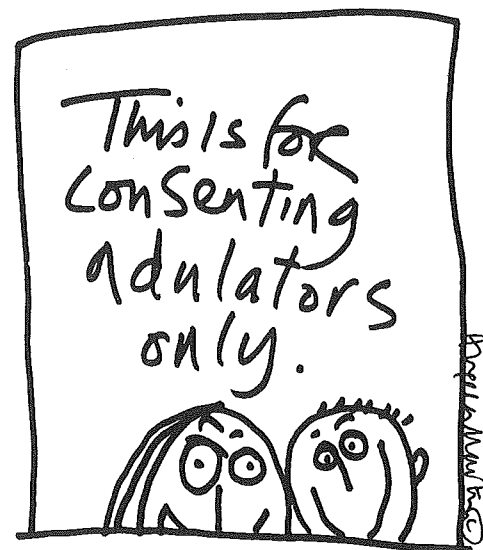
better than Susan Brownmiller's. Moreover, she does not seem to me to have superseded the analysis offered in Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English's *For Her Own Good* of the medical profession's perennial need to control women, nor improved on Gena Corea's meticulously detailed, chilling account of reproductive technology in *The Mother Machine*, nor gone beyond Janice Raymond's discussion of transsexualism in *The Transsexual Empire*.

Arguably, the resources put into producing and promoting *The Whole Woman* would have been better used re-issuing updated editions of these works — all of which first appeared between 1978 and 1986. But of course, they would not be blockbusters or media events, so no publisher would bother.

Let us not praise famous women...or not too much, anyway

Though the publishers are definitely the villains in this story, with the other media as accomplices, it seems to me that we, that is feminists, too often collude in the cultural tendency I've been describing. When I went to hear Germaine Greer speak about *The Whole Woman*, a large majority of the mostly-female and presumably feminist audience behaved like fans at a pop concert. Well, they didn't scream or throw underwear, but they laughed and clapped like anything, and many questions from the floor were strikingly sycophantic. I've seen the same thing happen when Andrea Dworkin speaks in public, though in her case there's usually also a significant minority of people who come specifically to attack her.

I'm not opposed to giving individual women credit for their talent and their courage, and I think Germaine Greer has both (Andrea Dworkin too). But there is a kind and degree of personal adulation which, in my view anyway, corrupts both the adulator and the object of adulation. Many histories of the WLM argue that its aversion to 'stars' was mean-spirited, but there were some good reasons for it. It encouraged feminists not to let a few women do all the thinking, and it kept the most 'visible' women grounded in the ideas and values of the community they belonged to. Today, by contrast, the cult of celebrity makes a virtue of separating 'them' from 'us', and the result is bad for everyone, including the stars themselves.



Someone who becomes the object of star-worship can easily start to believe in her own infallibility and world-historical importance (the Camille Paglia syndrome); or she may get trapped in the venerated persona (for her fans do not know her as a *person*) and be prevented from developing beyond it.

Ultimately I think Germaine Greer is as ill-served by her fans as by her critics. Both groups want her to shock; neither group provides the kind of constructive criticism that might encourage her to think ideas through more carefully. She is allowed, even expected, to periodically change her mind (a mad old bat's privilege), but not her basic persona: we all keep putting her back in her box. This strikes me as not unlike the mechanism which keeps women compliant with male-defined femininity — Germaine Greer uses the metaphor of 'castration', though for reasons which I hope are obvious, I would prefer 'domestication'. The wilder she seems, the tamer the threat she really poses. And the pity of it is, this wastes a considerable talent: she is smarter and far more radical than all the Natashas put together. If publishers, editors, journalists and — not least — readers were less dazzled by the outrageous and celebrated 'Germaine Greer', perhaps Germaine Greer would write better books than *The Whole Woman*. Heaven knows we need them. □

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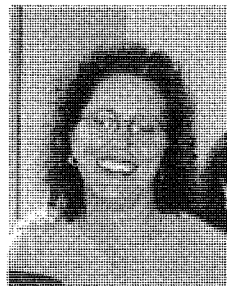
An audacious idea

In 1998 the possibility of doing a piece of research to demonstrate the prevalence of violence against women in Ghana became a reality. The national study — which involved searching agency records, focus groups, interviews with key people, and a survey of women — was audacious in its scope for any context. When you take into account that many of the participants were illiterate, that Ghana is a huge country with many different languages and patterns of family relations, the achievement is even more remarkable. The final report is being written: here we print a speech by Kathy Cusack, the Project Coordinator of the Ofamfa Project, to WomanKind Worldwide on the challenges they faced, and some of the key themes that have emerged.

There is only time in this presentation to give you some tasters of the research project. I will give a very brief overview of the why and the how of what we did, then outline three themes in our findings, and end with a brief discussion of how we intend to move forward.

One of the constant themes in our project has been starting points. Violence against women is a 'new' issue in the public arena in Ghana, and there have been and continue to be many new starting points. Almost two years ago to the day, a group of women came together to discuss the issue of violence in Ghana. When the Gender Centre picked up the issue in their work two years ago — the issue was unnamed, unacknowledged, unidentified, but it was not unknown. But since it was never named it was invisible, this

was true even amongst groups working on women's issues or working with women. In our initial discussions with these groups there was a complete lack of awareness about violence and its consequences for the women and children they were working with; no one was talking about it. So there was an almost complete lack of information and documentation about the extent and depth of the problem, and my organisation was also relatively new to this area of work. Our plan was to develop a national campaign. But we all agreed that this needed to commence with research to help us to understand the patterns, causes and remedies in the social and cultural context of Ghana. This had to be a national study in order to recognise and include the ethnic diversity in the country. We also wanted to



Kathy Cusack

contribute to an international body of research on violence against women from the west African experience.

The research was always understood as the first of many phases of work to tackle the issue. What we have completed to date is the data collection and some of the preliminary analysis. This is enough for us to put together a draft report and to have recommendations which enable our project partners to begin to plan approaches to resolving the issue

Creating a research practice

The guiding principle of the research was that it would be action based, and one of the ways we tried to achieve this was by involving NGO staff as research assistants. This had two purposes: there was so little understanding of the issue and little recognition of the depth of its existence or the need for efforts to eliminate or prevent it, so working on the study would be part of our introductory efforts at sensitizing the NGO sector to the issue of violence against women, and participation would involve them in planning and implementing a response to the multitude of issues related to violence against women and children. We did this mainly by using women's testimonies.

Our aim was to gather a nationally representative understanding of the prevalence of violence against women, and to some extent against children, and to investigate social responses to violence. We collected data from three different sources in order to ensure greater accuracy and a representation of multiple perspectives. We began with a five year review of official records including police, health, courts and social welfare. We used these official records to see what types of violence were being reported, the numbers of reports, what information was recorded by agencies, and what they did. We conducted 205 focus group discussions and 70 key informant interviews, which we used to discover the perspectives of community leaders and workers on the use of violence and to identify factors which influenced and restricted women's responses, and to explore the way forward. The final part was a survey of women, which had 349 questions.

Where to draw the line

The first big theme which we have struggled with is defining violence. There was no easy starting point for us, since in Ghana there is not a culture that says that violence is unacceptable in any

form. So whilst there are strong moves in many western societies to say 'no tolerance', we had to begin from the point that in Ghana there is a fundamental belief that violence is unquestioned and therefore acceptable. More than this, that chastisement is a parental and spousal right. One participant in a focus group of social welfare workers said:

Children can be beaten by anybody in society. As we see it there is nothing wrong with spanking, caning, and banging their heads together when they misbehave. A child is your property to correct in any way that you want.

The group of educationalists confirmed that traditionally the child is considered the property of the parents. One said: 'a child must feel pain as a consequence of his bad actions'. Beatings are used to correct or to get immediate change in a child's behaviour.

Very similar attitudes emerged about women or wives, as these quotes illustrate:

The man thinks that as the woman is his wife, she is his property and therefore he can do whatever he likes to her.

or more graphically:

One thing that has been established by our tradition... is the fact that man and woman are not equal. This tradition allows the superior to abuse the inferior, it assigns specific roles to both sexes, for example, digging graves for men and cooking for women. Therefore, there is no reason for the man not to slap or beat the wife if she fails to cook having been given chop money.

We found a great deal of confusion and difficulty in drawing a line between chastisement and abuse for both women and children. This surfaced first in our initial training session and was a constant theme throughout all of our discussions. It became clear that the project itself was, to a large extent, about developing an understanding of where that line is perceived to be in Ghanaian society.

What we have discovered is that it is considered acceptable to correct and discipline women and children, so long as the chastisement is seen as proportionate to the disobedience or the failure of women and children to fulfil socially defined expectations. These include, for instance, obedience, respect, submission, and duties such as cooking and cleaning, and for women also childbearing and sexual availability. Violence is only unacceptable when the chastisement was disproportionate and the measure of this was often the nature of the injuries sustained, such as the drawing of blood. This was

the common defining line between appropriate and inappropriate, but such distinctions are entirely subjective. It was also clear that the unacceptable line is reached more quickly in relation to children than with adult women. One social welfare worker explained that whilst society in general does not approve of wife beating, it depends on the cause. If it is a case of the wife flirting, the community may ignore a beating whatever the injuries sustained.

We had expected that when we asked participants to define violence, they would focus mainly on physical force. But the focus group discussions indicated that there was a broader understanding, including aspects of psychological, sexual and socio-economic abuse as well as some traditional practices which were considered to be harmful and degrading to women. We even had new terms introduced to us such as 'sexual neglect' which was described by one Queen-mother¹ as:

men can go out for other women to satisfy themselves, but a woman cannot do that. When a woman does that the whole community will curse her. So some women are staying with their husbands, in the same house, for years without having sex.

What a woman is

Another emerging theme has been the social expectations of women. The acceptance of chastisement and punishment for disobedience, raises the question of what counts as disobedience. Many of the behaviours deemed as ones that would warrant correction, such as refusing to do or complete some household duties like cooking, cleaning, washing, looking after the children, involve refusing to be submissive to the male head of household. As one female elder put it 'when a man says one word and the woman will say three'. Another example of disrespect was women refusing to seek permission to trade in the market, visit friends, parents or relatives and/or visit the family planning clinic — over 83% of our participants said they required their husband's permission to do these things. Many of the women experienced these restrictions, and their men's refusal to be sexually available, as forms of violence.

Many women indicated that it was difficult for them to live up to the expectations placed on them socially; there were many reasons which militated against their actually being obedient or living up to their defined responsibilities. For example, women's financial dependence on

husbands meant they had to ask for 'chop money' which would in turn lead to beatings. The result of some women's attempts to break out of this pattern of financial dependence, was described by one chief:

When men are unable to find work and women are forced into petty trading and in effect become the head of household serious conflict erupts, often with violence being the result, because men in this situation begin to feel disadvantaged.

Another area of tension was family planning and reproductive control issues. Women have little control over when they get pregnant and the number of pregnancies. This creates an ever increasing workload that they find difficult to keep up with. If they do keep up with it they are often exhausted and not interested in sex at night, but will be beaten for refusing.

Despite women's perceptions that their gendered responsibilities were unattainable, they (like almost all other participants) saw the causes as predominantly women's fault. This victim-blaming whereby women see themselves as the principal cause of men's violence, at the same time as excusing perpetrators, was a fundamental theme running through all of our discussions and research. As a consequence women's proposed solutions to violence often involved them taking responsibility to ensure that there is nothing to give rise to men's use of violence; they had to be more tolerant, more patient, more understanding and less demanding.

Out of control

The last major theme was the extent to which women recognised that they lacked control over their lives. There were three main structures which accounted for this: the family; tradition; and state (institutions).

It was very clear that women have internalized the message that they are inferior, and that children still absorb the dominant ideology that man is superior and woman is inferior. One participant argued that a wife should see her husband as 'lord and boss, mothers should provide for the needs of their children'. At the same time in our focus groups with children and adolescents, alongside these stereotypical views, they thought they had rights, and called for parents and teachers to respect girls and treat them as they would their own children. We found little evidence amongst men of an understanding of women's experiences of particular forms of violence, such as sexual harassment, or women's

¹ Queenmothers are either the mother, the sister, the aunt, or cousin of the reigning Chief of King. She is the most highly placed woman of the royal lineage and rules with the Chief or King and is elected by the same people who elect the King or Chief. The Chief must be named by the Queenmother first. The Queenmother nominates him and he is presented to the Council of Elders for their approval. When it comes to choosing the King she is the most important person. The Council of Elders consult her first; they either veto or accept her nomination. Usually they accept.

She is the one who knows the genealogy in the selection of the Kings or Chiefs. She enjoys great prestige as a genealogist and is responsible for maintaining tradition and preserving custom. She also has her own stool, holds her own court (the silver stool) meaning she is like a Chief in her own right. She holds prerogative far greater than that of any man, being the only person who can reprimand the King to his face or in public. She is like an advisor *par excellence* and has her own Council of Elders. She is the head of all the women. She directs and supervises all matters concerning women. She is also the custodian of the consecrated stools — i.e. the stools of all the royal predecessors of Kings, Chiefs and Queenmothers. She has her own palace. She has the privilege of naming the successor to a vacant stool. She will act as Chief or King when the stool is vacant. The title Nana shows her position — like 'Her Royal Highness'. She does not officially marry. Since she is supposed to be a menopausal woman, this is not a big factor. She does not become Queenmother when young. Not much importance is thus attached to their partner. It is her children that are important.

From: Dr. Mansah Prah 'Nana Yaa Asantewa' *Women in World History* (Yorlkin Publications, 1998)

position on polygamous marriages.

In traditional communities there is a very entrenched view that men's violence against women is a private matter. But we did pick up the beginnings of a difference between fundamentalist traditionalists and some fairly radical views. From fundamentalists we heard opinions such as that women should humble themselves and be patient, follow traditional values and norms, pray to resolve the issues, and learn how to deal with violence. There were extremely strong messages about subservience from this group, yet despite this, even here we began to see some acceptance of the need to address the issue of violence with programmes. Even in the most unlikely places, there was a bit of a shift, recognition (although not publicly) that the issue existed and needed addressing. Suggestions included: counselling skills for chiefs; community meetings; conflict resolution in communities; and awareness raising about the issue of violence. This has to be understood, however, in the context of not seeing men as responsible, but locating the problem with external factors such as the lack of jobs, poverty, foreign films, and the economy.

Some of the more radical responses from traditional communities came from the queenmothers. They talked about the need for: properly registered and legalized marriages; a one man one wife policy. Here there was also a shift away from victim blaming, and some recognition of the need to break the culture of silence and shift the status of women. It has to be said though that no traditionalists really addressed the issue of men's use of violence.

Slightly greater awareness of violence against women was found amongst practitioners, but at the same time, they were also immersed in the social attitudes of the communities they were part of. The depth of knowledge varied and was fragmented, based mainly on what they knew from practice. For example, social workers and health saw violence as very common, reflecting the fact that they deal with a lot of maintenance and paternity cases and cases of severe injury. The judiciary, on the other hand, view it as uncommon, only isolated incidents, probably reflecting the very limited access that women have to the criminal justice system and the stigma and ostracisation that women experience if they make a formal report. In addition institutionalized factors, such as having to pay for a police

investigation, also militate against reporting. It was in the worker group that explicit talk about rights of the individual was evident, but awareness of the issue is impeded by their perspectives on the causes of violence against women and children which drew on a much more traditional perspective, that women and men were not created equal. Whether this was ascribed to biblical writings such as women being created from the rib of man or to traditional roles — that men dig graves and women do the cooking — the end result was that the perception of women as property in effect gives men the right to chastise, to use violence against women and children. We found no evidence amongst agencies of men being called to account for their violent behaviour and institutions do not see it as their role to directly confront the perpetrator.

The possible solutions offered by practitioners reflected these tensions and contradictions. A large number focused on women's behaviour as a means of preventing further violence, including: learning patience; accepting and fulfilling their traditional roles; dressing appropriately; learning to uphold moral values; even instilling the fear of God into women and children. At the same time violence was recognised and other proposals included: the provision of counselling; education in anger management and conflict resolution; provision of community care services; arguments for wages on which a man can support his family; arguments for women to make a wage and thus to be less dependent upon their husbands.

Where we go from here

In thinking about responses, our guiding principle for response will be a collective approach which targets both victims and perpetrators. We have to move violence against women and children from being a private issue to a social issue in Ghana.

Our thinking at the moment involves a three phase intervention using the 'three p's' from Zero tolerance — prevention, provision and protection: a mass awareness raising campaign aimed at prevention; upskilling practitioners and strengthening infrastructures in order to ensure the provision of services; advocacy and legislative changes to increase the protection of women. Within these we will attempt some inter-agency work with police, health and social welfare. □

Local Heroine

Mary Margaret Issaka works for an NGO in Ghana — CENSUDI — which aims to move women towards resisting their oppression. In this interview with Linda Regan, she recounts her own story of struggle and describes her current work.

Linda Regan: Can you start by telling us about the organisation that you work for?

Mary Margaret Issaka: My name is Margaret Mary Issaka. I come from the north eastern region of Ghana and I'm from a town called Bolgatanga. I work for an organisation called the Centre for Sustainable Development Initiatives (CENSUDI). It was set up by a former government minister who found herself in very difficult situations whilst in government as a woman, not having enough knowledge to deal with some situations, like getting resistance from the men even accepting her ideas, and helping women to be active participants in various bodies. The resistance was always there and she very often got frustrated so after five years in the government she decided that she would found an organisation that would be committed to

educating women, first of all to know their rights, also hoping to equip them with skills that would enable them to actively participate in whatever committees or management positions. She wanted to make sure other women didn't have her experiences — that every time she wanted to do something she just didn't know how to go about it, she didn't have anybody she could talk to, to get advice, so a lot of her ideas just didn't go anywhere.

Fighting for women's rights

So CENSUDI was founded on that basis, I am the director of the organisation. All my life I have also found myself to be, if you want, innocent, and maybe to a certain level ignorant, because I also didn't know what skills and knowledge you needed to be able to fight for women's rights.

But, for instance, I started as a teacher in a secondary school and with girls, boys were asking them to be their girlfriends and if they refused and the boy was a senior boy, he would do everything to taunt her in every situation and every place that he met them. Sometimes these girls were raped — now I know it is rape — at that time which is about 20 years ago I didn't know it was rape, but at least I knew they were forced to have sexual relationships with the boys against their will. Some of these girls came to me, some even got pregnant, and I found myself having to deal with all these different things. I was having to fight with the individual head master to make sure that the girls were given the chance to go back home and deliver and that the school would take it as their responsibility to find another school for them after the delivery. I should say that I'm catholic and at that time I was not allowed to help them to abort; abortion is not legal in Ghana in any way

Linda: Sorry, can I interrupt, is it still not legal in Ghana?

Mary Margaret: Yes as far as I know it's still not legal in Ghana. So I was always fighting face to face with the senior house master or the head master, who would say 'well we cannot allow this girl to stay with the pregnancy' and I would say 'sorry but you see already we don't have many girls who have the chance to go to secondary school especially in the north and if we are going to say that this girl should go away, first of all we would not prevent her from going through the back door to have an abortion, and then her schooling too would have been stopped'. So why didn't we do something to help? I must say I always got through because I never gave up. But I also found it a very big stumbling block because in trying to find another school for this girl after giving birth to the child the other schools would say 'oh no she may get pregnant again'. I had to use all the knowledge and the information at my disposal to convince the new school to take these girls. So back then that's how I found myself working with violence against women without really knowing it at that time.

After teaching for about ten years I went to do a course in radio journalism and again I was to make programmes for women and children. It was a new station and the resources were not all there, so after the training for about two years we were not doing anything and I'm not that type who can just sit doing nothing go to the office

every day and read papers or whatever. So I moved into the health field because there was a catholic sister who was working in the health department for the diocese of my area. She was giving a talk one day to a group of christian women, somebody was doing the translation, it wasn't going quite right and I found myself interrupting you know with the translation. The nun got hold of me and after and said I have to work with you. I jumped at this opportunity and we worked mostly with rural women on how to generate income, how to feed their children on a balanced diet with few resources. I had studied home economics in school so I was quite handy there. The nun had to leave to come back home to England and highly recommended to the bishop that I should take over the work. There again we found ourselves having to give refuge — not physical refuge but in the form of counselling — to some of the women that we worked with. Most of them weren't being given what in Ghana we call 'chop money' by their husbands, so if we were demonstrating a dish that was good for them, some of them had no source of income. One of the things we did was to try and help them with some form of grants or loans so that they could be selling something to be able to make an income for themselves.

Any time a woman came and looked very unhappy we made a follow up only to realise that somewhere along the line the husband was making her get pregnant at a rate that she didn't like but she didn't have a say because traditionally she is the property of the husband. Also many of the children were dying. Some men were beating them for committing an offence that the husband thought they had committed. You know although traditionally it's allowed for the man to beat the wife, the women realised it was not right for him to be beating them all the time. They said that even if she had committed an offence, at least the man should talk to her. At that time I would say all we managed to do was to try and find the man without even letting him know that it was the wife that had sort of reported him, and in some informal way make him say himself what he did to the wife if the wife offended him. Sometimes we were able to make the men themselves see that it wasn't right for him to beat the woman or to refuse her the grain of the day or whatever punishment he meted out to her.

I was in this field for another ten years and I often had to talk with men to convince them to send their daughters to school instead of keeping

them to get four cows if they gave them up for marriage. I was doing these things but little did I realise that I was working in the woman's rights area.

Gender as usual

My next work was in the water sector, I was a liaison between some selected communities involved in planning and establishing a particular water system that they wanted and then managing it themselves. Our role was to keep the link between the communities and the project, and to facilitate the process of communities forming a committee of some sort. Again I happened to be the only woman among the liaison officers and in facilitating the formation of the water committees realised that again the men wanted to be there alone. Meanwhile water, at least in my country, is synonymous with women; women are the carriers of water, they are the managers of water. I don't say, like some do, that women are the users of water, because when they fetch the water or they carry the water to the house about 70 or 80% of it is used for the benefit of the man — in feeding, bathing, washing his clothes, then the children. The woman is the last, the least user of the water. So I don't agree when people say women use more water than anybody else, I prefer the terminology 'managers of water' because that's exactly what they do. So again I found myself taking on this — should I call it self imposed role — of making sure that women were at least put on the committees. The project agreed a quota system, that 30-50% of the composition of the committees should be women. But that was in itself a big hitch, because what we found out was that the women had much less knowledge and skill compared to their male counterparts. So even though they were put on the committees, they had nothing to contribute. Then the men turned round and said 'well you see why we don't want women on the committees they can't talk they can't think'. I said 'look something has to be done, it is true the women don't talk, they don't contribute, but let's look at it more critically. Why don't they talk, why don't they, as you say, think, why don't they contribute or attend the meeting'. The response would be 'well they just don't come they are not interested'. I disagreed, they were interested, but the education gap between men in general and women, especially in the north, prevented them. I argued that we needed to find some extra resources so that at least the women

had an orientation on how to even be on the committee — skills of participation, skills of getting knowledge or information, skills on how to negotiate, how to make a presentation.

There is always this talk in so many projects about 'mainstreaming' gender in their project but it's only talked about; when it comes to the reality there are never any resources to make it happen. For me, to mainstream gender means to recognise the limitations that women have, and if you say women should be part of projects then resources should be made available to give training so that women can be effective participants. But that's not what happens.

For instance, in the water project there was a very brilliant gender and development strategy, but when it came to implementing some of the recommendations, the bottom line was that there were no resources. To such an extent that I only managed to fight to get one training session for the women members of the water and sanitation committees, and in fact I only succeeded in getting this because I kept on fighting. The women came out with a lot of wonderful recommendations and we wrote up a very big report. It ended there, we never we never went further than that. Some women did take part in the other training we offered the committees, on management, finances and technology. But again because the men were already advanced in knowledge and skills it was not easy for the women to catch up.

Moving on

I was in this water sector for six or seven years. I had already planned to leave the by the year 2000 and to get on to this organisation that I'm now working for. But as fate will have it the project decided that they didn't need my services, so I had to leave earlier. Again as fate will have it Womankind Worldwide, which had been working in the north of Ghana for the past ten or so years with women's groups on income generating activities, were looking for somebody who would co-ordinate their activities in Ghana. They came to Ghana in June 98 and I was approached by them to take up this co-ordination work. I accepted because CENSUDI has no core funding so I'm working for my lunch really, and I needed some source of income that I could at least feed myself and get the energy required for me to go on with my work. So I accepted the Womankind position and the agreement is that I will work three days for them and two days for

CENSUDI.

CENSUDI is committed solely to doing whatever is needed — be it training, campaigning, running seminars — whatever that we can do to make sure that women know not just their rights, but how to exercise those rights. Especially in an area where what I always call this so-called tradition and culture is so deeply ingrained in the society, to such an extent that the men make us feel blame. They always blame us for whatever wrongs happen, so much so that women don't even sometimes see that their rights are being trampled on.

Culture and tradition

Linda: Tell us a little about the traditions in Upper East region in northern Ghana, I know it's a very poor area and polygamy is common isn't it?

Mary Margaret: It is geographically the driest area in the country and with the least amount of rainfall, and not just the least amount but also unpredictable. I always say that everything is to the extreme — if the rains come sometimes they don't come at the right time and when we don't need it the rain, the rain will come in torrents and wash away everything that we have done including our homes, when the sun is going to shine as I always put it you can cook an egg in the sun.

It's what the English people call a patriarchal



Mary Margaret Issaka is the woman standing on the right.

society, men are the bosses of everything. In marriage it is men who bring women to their villages and men pay dowries. The dowry makes them feel women are their property, it's part of the language — an acceptable norm — that women are the property of men. So polygamy is allowed because as long as the man can pay the dowry he can have as many women as he thinks he can get. The polygamous way of life is quite often not a very happy one; because every good polygamist will use divide and rule tactics, in this way each woman will do whatever she has to do to get his attention. The attention can mean even just sexual attention because in a polygamous home every woman has her room, so if the man decides not to come to your room and decides to be going to the other woman's room all you would know is that he doesn't come to your room, that's it. You can't ask him why are you not coming, you dare not, it is his decision not yours. You have no rights, because he's not your property, you have no right to find out if things are not going the way that you want them to go. It can create very bitter rivalry among the women, the wives, to such an extent that in very horrible polygamous families you see the women fighting each other, and I mean physically fighting each other, because the man has paid some particular attention to one of the women to the total neglect of the others. Women have nowhere to go, they can't go back to their

father's family because the dowry has been paid and the father wouldn't like to be asked by the husband to bring back the cow. It's a whole cycle of violence at various levels that the woman finds herself in the middle of, I call this a cyclone — she can't go anywhere. She can't go back to her father's house she goes back to the husband's house and the husband says well sorry but you are my property and you just stay here and you don't go anywhere. It's very rare to get a monogamous marriage especially among those who worship in the traditional religion.

Linda: So polygamous marriage tends to be in those communities who are still practising traditional religions?

Mary Margaret: Yes, but in reality some of the Christians, who are not supposed to be polygamous, are. I know some Christians who have more than one wife — they would have would have gone through the marriage ordinance and married one woman in church and then they will marry another woman and perform the customary rite which is also recognised in Ghana.

Linda: Would most of the polygamous marriages be customary marriages?

Mary Margaret: Yes because when you are married under the ordinance in Ghana it is a crime to have a second wife. What I'm saying is most men do that — they marry one of the women under the ordinance or in the church and they also marry another woman. It was only quite recently when I was giving training to women on their rights that I discovered that is wrong for a man to even perform the customary rites on a second woman if he has contracted marriage under the ordinance. But the men do it, and they take advantage because we the women, we ourselves don't know. The men know, but because they know we don't know they take advantage. I would say it's about 60/40 in terms of polygamous marriages: 60 for the polygamous and about 40 not. Because in the upper east Islam is quite a strong religion there in addition to Christianity, the Muslims too are allowed to marry more than one wife so as for them it's a very common thing to find there's always more than one woman belonging to one man. I'm not too sure but looking at it on the ground that's how it looks.

Linda: What about education of girl children?

Mary Margaret: Primary education, even I would say where I live is the region where we

have the least number of girls having access to formal education. A female child is viewed as the future property of another man, so traditionally it's unwise to invest in her because she will carry all that you have invested in her and the husband's household will benefit. Based on this belief, if there is a choice it is the boy who will be sent to school. Recently some organisations like mine campaigned that girls should be sent to school, but it's very very slow. Now it's about 50/50 for girls and boys starting school but the drop out rate is outrageous and it will be the girl who has to drop out. This is not just because the family can't afford it, but maybe an arranged marriage, or she's being asked by the father to go and live with another relative to help them, the mother of the girl might have a new baby and needs help. Girls with helping their mother at home and also going to school, it has a negative effect on her progress in school — if for instance if she has to be in school by eight she will be lucky if she is in school by ten by which time something has happened she has missed. Then again the blame will be put on her 'well she's not brainy enough'. So the excuses and the reasons for girls not being in school are complex, there are so many reasons.

Linda: You said something about arranged marriages. At what sort of age do girls get married in your region?

Mary Margaret: I would put it about 17 or 18, but in the case of arranged marriages they can start as early as 5, 6 or 7 years old

Linda: Is that a promissory marriage?

Mary Margaret: Yes, what happens is that the father of this child claims that they are desperately in need of money or cattle to dowry a son's wife, and the assumption is that girls grow very fast after they are 5 or 6. So this man would promise this little girl to a family where there is a young man who would need a wife and would say 'OK if you can give me one cow or x amount of money then you can take my daughter and when she's old enough you can marry her'.

Linda: So does the girl stay in her father's house until she's old enough to marry or does she have to go when the cow is given?

Mary Margaret: Oh when the cow is given. They don't take chances. She has to go to another man's house as young as 5 or 6. But the man is supposed to wait until she's grown enough. But experience has shown that is not

what happens, because when the girl is about 12, 13, 14 and you see the signs of the girl maturing into womanhood, the man usually becomes afraid that if they don't have a sexual relationship this girl will run away, and they have in fact 'bought' her. So what we are finding out is that in especially the rural areas 14 and 15 year old girls are mothers. When you trace the history she was probably given up to marriage.

Marriage between women

I saved one little girl. There was an old woman, may she rest in peace now, who was living in the same compound house as me, and there was this little girl I think she was just about 12. The father said he was poor and was going to offer her up to a man who was ready to give him two cows because the girl's mother's parents were threatening to take their daughter away because he was too poor to pay the dowry, so he had to do something otherwise they were going to take his wife away. So he just said 'well this girl is old enough to get married' and was ready to take whoever would give him anything. This old lady hinted to me about it because at that time I was looking for a house help, she said 'well you can go and take this girl but the father wants something'. So I said 'fine, but I don't want it to look like I am buying the girl'. The old lady said 'no I know you but please go and save this little girl because she's just too small to be given up to marriage'. I had to negotiate with the father and I agreed that I would pay the cow, I would either go and buy a cow or I would give him the equivalent of a cow's money and the girl would be my wife. That's the language I had to use, because if it was just that I was going to save the girl the father wouldn't have agreed. I had to use this negotiating language to say that I want to marry the girl. It is allowed among those people, a woman can marry another woman but would have to look for a man to father children for her.

Linda: How does this work, why is it allowed?

Mary Margaret: Well if a woman is — by the standard of the people — rich, which means she's financially independent and is also the daughter of a man who hasn't got sons, if that woman should get married it means that the name of her father will die, because our inheritance is through the male line. So usually what the woman does in that case is stay in her father's house, and she can marry a woman. She can't father children to carry on her father's line but

she can either ask the woman to look for any man of their choice to father children for her or the woman might already have a male friend and they would negotiate with the male friend to father children for her.

Linda: But those children will have her wife's father's name and stay within his family?

Mary Margaret: Right

Linda: So this is about keeping property and the name within the patriarchal line?

Mary Margaret: Yes with the hope that in the children born at least some of them will be boys and when that happens the lineage can continue.

Linda: Even though in actual fact those children have absolutely no biological relationship at all to the family?

Mary Margaret: At all at all, but the fact that she dowried that woman means the children are hers and it's accepted. Until recently what happened was that the children were brought up not to recognise their biological father, so as soon as the woman got pregnant there was a break in the relationship, and the man understands that he's only fathering the children but he cannot claim them as his children.

Linda: So he can't claim the children and he can't claim her presumably?

Mary Margaret: No he can't claim her

Linda: Because she is another woman's property?

Mary Margaret: Because she is another woman's property so.

Linda: So under customary law it was perfectly acceptable for you to marry this girl?

Mary Margaret: Right, it was perfectly acceptable for me to marry the girl and then whatever I did with her later was not her father's business. But I only did that to be able to save this poor girl, she lived with me for four or so years, just for me to be sure that she would be grown enough to do whatever she wanted to do. I made sure she learnt how to trade in some way, she learnt some techniques of trading. Then I had to let the father know that really I didn't mind if the girl fell in love with a man of her choice and got married to the man and if he wanted he could still come and collect his cattle because I only gave one cow. The man was surprised; he said 'oh madam are you sure?' I said 'yes, I have no

problem with that if you want to go for your dowry' He asked if he should return my cow, but I said that was my contribution to the household: 'this girl is now my daughter'. The girl is now married and I think she now has two or three children, every now and then she finds time to come and visit me and to let me know that she is OK.

Right now, when I go back I have a case of a woman who got married to another woman which I am going to follow up. Let me call the woman Anna and her 'husband' was a woman. Her 'husband's' father didn't have a son but had two daughters born, the eldest decided her sister should get married but she would stay and make sure the father's name continued. So in the process she married Anna, according to Anna because her 'husband' was a woman they had a very good loving relationship and she was allowed to choose a man within the community to father children for her. The first child was a girl, and unfortunately for Anna her 'husband' died. Anna kept the relationship with this man and had another two children, a girl and the boy died. So she never had the boy, even though that was the aim of the late 'husband'. At the moment the family are harassing her. And they are kicking her out of the house. She has become such a destitute woman if the catholic church doesn't feed her she doesn't get to eat. The most recent event is that her daughter has given birth to a boy and she is being harassed because the family see her as a threat to the property, they had forced Anna's daughter to marry but this man just totally neglected her and she nearly died; she got pregnant and she was starving. That is how I came into contact with them: the first child and the mother came to me to plead for help as the daughter who had given birth was starving. We brought her to the presbyterian sisters who have made sure she is fed and there is milk for the baby and then the husband's house people came and said they wanted her back. It's quite a complicated story and because this girl has given birth to a son the cousins of Anna's late 'husband' see this son as a threat. They were happy that Anna herself didn't have boys because it meant that that line would have died, but now that there is a grandson who is a boy it means that the family line can continue. I got so fed up with them that I sent the case to the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice. And even there they are trying to handle it as negotiable if possible, because they

are saying if we use aggressive methods or take them to court what will happen when the woman goes back to that community? But I made it very clear because I brought in the police and I got a lawyer, what I have asked is for us to use very calm language but at the same time we must let them know that this woman's rights should not be trampled on.

Linda: Because legally presumably she was married to this woman and so therefore she's entitled to the property?

Mary Margaret: She's entitled to stay there, she has every entitlement to stay there. But while I am away nothing is being done.

Struggle not submission

Linda: And what about FGM, how does that impact on your work?

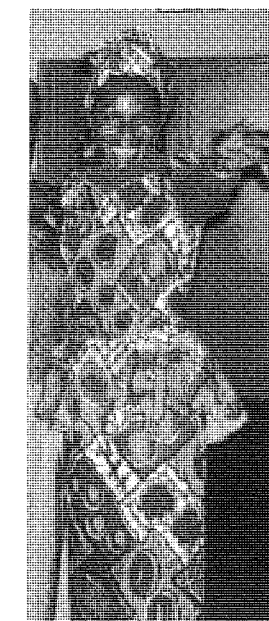
Mary Margaret: It's an issue both among the moslem community and the traditional community. For the moslem community they do it when the children are so young from about one year old up to between one and ten years old, but for those who do it in the traditional community its part of an initiation into womanhood so they do it to teenagers who are about 15 or 16

Linda: Post menstruation?

Mary Margaret: Yes you should have started menstruation, saying you are now a mature woman but you also have to prove that you have been a virgin and then there are funny beliefs that women who are not circumcised or whose genitals are not mutilated cannot plant certain vegetables because if they do the vegetables will die, all sorts of things.

Linda: What has been the impact of making FGM illegal in Ghana?

Mary Margaret: Among the traditional communities there's a lot of campaigning going on and a lot of education. There's a lot of collaboration between some NGOs and the Ministry of Health. We have the body which is called the National Council of Women and Development and this body is linked to that, working where the practice is very prevalent. What is happening is that the practice has gone underground especially among the moslem communities. Because with the traditional communities because there it involves grown up girls, and because it's painful, and because there has been a lot of campaigning, some of the girls



themselves run away from this. So that's a good point, but still in the rural areas where the older women, especially the grandmothers, still have a very big influence on the growing girls, they are usually able to convince the girls to go in for this. It used to be a celebration. There used to be a day and they would bring this man — it's usually a man who performs the operation, and a certain number of girls would have the operation performed on them and then there would be a celebration, drumming. That no longer happens now it is illegal, so it is done quietly with no more making the supposedly happy noise and having girls dance to show that they are brave girls and all that. This celebration caused a lot of bleeding, and sometimes these girls have bled to death. When that happened of course the blame was put on the girl — that she wasn't a virgin and her mother could be in trouble because they would say 'why didn't you take good care of your daughter', that type of thing.

Linda: *Do you think the numbers are going down in traditional communities?*

Mary Margaret: Yes I think so, but not among the moslem communities because there they always do it before you know what is happening. I tried to find out once from one area which is predominately moslem and the report was that where Ghana borders Burkino Faso and also Togo, it was the women from those areas who still carry on the operation but not the Ghanaian women. But these women live in Ghana and don't consider themselves from outside the country, they consider themselves Ghanaian. They also claim that it's within tribes that were already doing it before Islam came, so now they find it very difficult to stop it.

Talking informally with some of the health personnel like the community health nurses who work in the rural health areas, what they try to do is when these girls come for pre-natal and ante-natal services they make sure that they warn them about going to circumcise if the baby is a girl and they have at the community level once a week health delivery services. So at least the women who have come for the pre- and ante-natal services they do a follow up and they make sure that these women don't do it to their daughters.

Linda: *You said something about your work in CENSUDI needing to achieve 'critical mass'. Can you explain what you mean?*

Mary Margaret: What we are trying to do is get a group of women who have gone through a series of training and workshops on women's rights, who have skills in lobbying, negotiating and can organise a campaign. They can then raise issues, especially women's issues, lobby and put pressure on government agencies to do something. This group would be more or less a permanent group, made up of women across the board, who know what they are doing. What we mean by critical mass is that they are always there and they don't have to rely on somebody to come and tell them what is happening — they will find out themselves and they will carry out the action that is needed.

Linda: *So the work the organisation is doing is working with women so they become activists?*

Mary Margaret: Yes, so they become active, for us when we say empower women we don't mean just financial freedom, like most development agencies. Financial empowerment is useless, for instance, if a woman is a trader and is making a lot of money, yet the husband can just beat her, take the money, and because she still believes that she is the husband's property, she doesn't know that she can do something about this.

Linda: *I know your organisation was involved in the research on violence against women, but how does it come up in your work?*

Mary Margaret: We are collaborating with an organisation in Scotland called the Active Learning Centre and we have brought 18 or so locally based women (some men) leaders from NGOs and given them training on women's rights and they in turn have gone back and held training with their group members at the community level. All of a sudden it looks like it has woken women out of a sleep. Now women come to the office saying 'Madam my husband has been beating me and doing all sorts of things to me', for the first time openly telling us things like this, and that they want to do something about it. Violence against women has been going on all these years but the women who have been experiencing it have never been able to say it; at least now some of them are beginning to talk about it. We are hoping that these women can also form another critical mass in their communities so that they can help other women in violent situations.

Linda: *If a woman was trying to get out of a violent situation from what you have said before*

it looks like she actually has very few options.

Mary Margaret: No, she has nowhere to go, so often it comes down to the fact that you gave them a listening ear. We ask 'if you go back what will happen' and usually they say 'well now that I know that he hasn't got the right to beat me, when he comes home and he's provoking me, I will walk out of the room'. So the women themselves find strategies for dealing with it until they can take it to the human rights league for it to be addressed.

Linda: *And is there anything at a community level in terms of messages that this is unacceptable?*

Mary Margaret: No, not in that way. The NGOs that we are collaborating with are supposed to, that is part of the training, to convey that message, but within whatever activities it is that they do.

Linda: *So the idea is to integrate work on violence against women in with work on all sorts of other things?*

Mary Margaret: Yes, in all sorts of things like income generation, skills training, even festivals using things like drama, which some of them have already done.

A Ghanaian feminism?

Linda: *I know there have been a lot of questions and confusions about the words feminism and feminist in Ghana — and in West Africa more widely, would you say there is a sense of a women's movement in Ghana?*

Mary Margaret: Yes there is a woman's movement, but we haven't used the word feminist. You have to understand that in Ghana feminism has been made to have the same meaning as lesbianism. So if you used the terminology 'feminist' some of us, the women ourselves, and the men especially, would just brush you aside as a lesbian; because to be honest

with you in Ghana lesbianism, homosexuality is not accepted, it's not accepted. But I would say all the activities of those of us who find ourselves in the forefront of this fight against violence against women are feminist. Now I must confess that I myself did not know the difference between feminism and lesbianism until I attended this seminar. Now I know that a feminist is simply a woman who refuses to be downtrodden by the men, it's as simple as that.

Linda: *Is homosexuality talked about at all?*

Mary Margaret: A bit, a bit. A few months ago, one of our newspapers had a picture of two gay men who were indulging in sexual activity. I don't know how the newspaper got the picture, but it just caused some hair raising even in Accra. So really it is not talked about because it is not accepted, especially lesbianism. My sense is that it is not OK for men to be indulging in being gay, but as for lesbianism it shouldn't even be mentioned.

Linda: *Do you think it might be possible for women in Ghana to claim the word feminist?*

Mary Margaret: Yes, now that I know its meaning it will be important that I bring it into whatever forums or activities I am working in with women. And maybe together with ideas from these women we can see how we can defend our feminist activities, that feminism is just us trying to fight for our rights and saying 'no you suppress us so much, now we want to end this oppression'. It will take some time, but in any case we have had to go on fighting for our rights all these years and we can never give up, if we give up then we are worse than at square one.

Linda: *So you've got a reputation now of not giving up?*

Mary Margaret: Yes, they know that they would never succeed in brushing me aside, I am just like a leech, you have to just stick there and make sure that you get what you want. □

Bad Press?

In February this year, The Mirror printed a lengthy report on a sensational murder case. Jennifer Cupit had killed another woman, Kathryn Linaker, in what the judge referred to as an act of 'lust and jealousy'. That the events of this case were represented in stereotypically sexist terms will come as no surprise to feminists. But Isla Duncan thinks we can learn something by analysing the text more closely...

The popular press is a significant influence in many people's lives. Politicians recognise the ideological clout wielded by media magnates like Rupert Murdoch, and court their favour unashamedly. Between them, the best-selling newspapers in this country, *The Sun* and *The Mirror*, attract eight million readers, who are identified in surveys as working class, conservative and predominantly male. The editorials of both newspapers imply traditional, insular and male-centred ideologies; events and people referred to in news reports are made comprehensible by the use of categories like 'mad dogs' (Colonel Gaddafi and his allies), 'mother of three', 'thug', 'schoolgirl mum'. Complexities are reduced to simple oppositions like 'Brits' and 'foreigners', 'law abiding citizens' and 'evil criminals', 'home builders' and 'home wreckers'.

Here I am particularly concerned with the

construction of categories for women and the portrayal of female experience in the tabloid press—a subject that is well illustrated by close analysis of a report that appeared in *The Mirror* on 3 February 1999.

The story

The subject of the report is the murder, in Cheshire in 1998, of deputy head teacher Kathryn Linaker, by her husband's lover Jennifer Cupit. Jennifer Cupit was found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment. The judge who presided over the six day trial concluded that the murder had been committed 'out of lust and jealousy'.

Chris Linaker, the husband of the murdered woman, had conducted a sixteen month affair with Jennifer Cupit. He had also, it emerged, participated in group sex sessions with her and

her husband Nick Cupit. Chris Linaker occasionally invited his brother-in-law Neal Allcock to these sessions. The Cupits and the Linakers had met at the Warrington Amateur Dramatic Society, of which all four were members.

Allusions to the opera and the theatre recur in the *Mirror's* report, which is headed, on its first page, 'Opera Killer's Sex Secrets' and on subsequent pages 'Murder at the Operatic Society'. In keeping with the 'dramatic performance' theme, photographs of Kathryn and Chris Linaker, Nick Cupit and Neal Allcock, appear under the caption 'Cast of a Tragedy'. The melodramatic quality of these headings, and the emotive vocabulary of the first paragraphs (which use words like 'sex-mad', 'butchered' and 'temptress') set the tone for a sensationalist and salacious report.

The report is spread over five pages. It begins on page one, where the 'sex secrets' are labelled 'exclusive', and is continued three pages later under the description 'sordid secrets'. Three more pages expand on what is luridly called 'the tangled saga of sex, lies and videotape (because video evidence of the group sex sessions was shown in court). There is an account of Jennifer Cupit's life immediately prior to her sentencing, when she lived in a remand hostel and apparently enjoyed some degree of freedom. The next page assembles many direct quotations from acquaintances of the convicted woman and her husband, most providing unflattering details about Jennifer Cupit. On the final page, under the heading 'The Victim', is an appreciation of the dead woman, Kathryn Linaker.

Guilty of murder...or just sex?

Throughout the lengthy report, Jennifer Cupit is portrayed as not only murderous, but *sexually* depraved. At no stage do the reporters consider the culpability of the men involved in the story, though it is clear Chris Linaker has been unfaithful, deceitful and exploitative, while Nick Cupit seems to have played a role akin to that of a procurer. On the first page is a quote from Jennifer Cupit's lawyer, who suggests that Chris Linaker "'degraded and used" his mistress'. This charge loses potency in part because the newspaper has used the pejorative word *mistress*, connoting immorality and treachery. The men in the case apparently remain untainted by their involvement in group sex sessions. Meanwhile the women in the 'drama' are easily slotted into the familiar categories assigned to

women in patriarchy: either dutiful mother/carer or promiscuous sexual adventurer.

A headline on the third page, 'From Blushing Bride to Sex-Crazed Killer', is typical tabloid language, in which opposing stereotypes of female sexuality—modesty and excess—are exaggerated to the point of caricature. 'Blushing bride' perpetuates the patriarchal stereotype of a bride's bashfulness and purity. 'Sex-crazed killer' is a description

based, it later transpires, on the information that Jennifer Cupit 'had sex with three

different men while on remand at a bail hostel'. This hardly merits the hyperbolic 'sex crazed', which is reinforced by other references to Jennifer Cupit as sexually voracious: 'sex mad', a 'temptress' who 'bedded a string of lovers as she waited to be tried for murder'. The verb 'bedded' is worthy of comment. As the linguist Kate Clark also found when she analysed the reporting of sexual violence in *The Sun*, women are accorded sexual agency by tabloid writers only when they are depicted as promiscuous and/or murderous. Whether Jennifer Cupit did 'bed' three men is not proven and not likely to be (the newspaper hedges with 'it is claimed'), but the impression of her as extremely promiscuous is imprinted on the reader's mind from the outset. The sentence 'the petite blonde had sex with three different men while on remand' uses two words ('petite' and 'blonde') that serve to further sexualise Jennifer Cupit.

By contrast, Kathryn Linaker is depicted as a paragon of personal and professional virtue. She is called 'a wonderful mum and an inspirational teacher', words that praise the principal functions—maternal and pastoral—allotted to women in patriarchal society.

Supporting actors

It is worth examining the way the report constructs the identities of the other four people in the story: Chris Linaker, Nick Cupit, Neal Allcock and Kathryn Linaker. The photos that appear under the heading 'Cast of a Tragedy' are captioned with sparse details intended to personalise the main characters. By providing such details as age and occupation the report attempts to make each individual seem more ordinary, more like *Mirror* readers themselves. But if we look at the details of these captions and

'romped with Tim and three other residents of the hostel'

at the photographs themselves there are subtle forms of bias at work here.

First, it is important to note that Jennifer Cupit is removed from the 'cast of a tragedy'. Altogether there are four photographs of her in the report, but none is included in the column listing the 'cast', to which she is not admitted. This woman is far beyond the pale, an alien in the territory of 'ordinary' people, Chris, Nick and Neal, who are on first name terms

'from blushing bride to sex-crazed killer'

with each other and with the reader. In their photographs they smile affably and engagingly at the camera, while in every shot of Jennifer Cupit she looks down or sideways. The reader is not allowed to look her in the eye; she cannot meet the reader's gaze because she is a disreputable liar.

In the reporting of the details of the sexual relations involving Jennifer Cupit, Nick Cupit, Chris Linaker and Neal Allcock, more than 'personalisation' is going on: some of the worst prejudices of a male-centred value system are being disseminated. All three men were participants in sexual activity where the woman was an object of exchange; yet there is no discussion of this, no attempt to investigate its significance in the case. It is clear that one of the men must have taped some of the sex sessions, but the voyeuristic nature of that act is diminished by the form of the sentence 'She was videoed having sex with him [Chris Linaker] and her husband Nick, 27', where there is no *agent* made responsible for the videotaping.

In order to lessen the stigma of association with the murderer, and mitigate Nick Cupit's involvement in group sex, his acting skills are trumpeted ('a talented actor'). This commendation is offered by a woman who 'preferred to remain unnamed', who knew the Cupits in their early amateur dramatics days. She is quoted by reporters saying that Nick Cupit was 'extremely talented', basing her evaluation on the fact that he appeared 'as an extra in *Coronation Street* and *Brookside*'. She remarks that 'he could have gone on to do the big musicals but he didn't make it because he married her [Jennifer Cupit]'. It is not made clear how the anonymous woman arrives at such a conclusion.

Unnamed interviewees provide much of the substance of the report of the case: they are either inmates of the bail hostel where Jennifer Cupit lived, local residents who chanced to see

the woman in the neighbourhood, selected members of the amateur dramatic society or past and present associates of the convicted killer. A nameless woman from Jennifer Cupit's past, who admits that she disliked her, supplies ten paragraphs of comment, disclosing details that suggest a close acquaintance.

None of the informants is made to appear in any way individual. The words which introduce them are consistently indefinite: 'a pal', 'one friend at the hostel', 'one resident', 'a woman who knew Cupit in her teens', 'a friend', 'a former member [of the dramatic society]'. This lack of explicitness is unusual in the tabloid press, where personalisation is an important tendency, a way of presenting the world as a collection of easily categorised individuals and events. The process of 'individuation' or personalisation is applied mainly to Jennifer Cupit. Both the informants and the reporters describe her as a thoroughly objectionable, immoral, cunning and dangerous killer. She is characterised in the reductive language of sexism as 'man mad', 'a little madam', 'a spitfire', 'a terrible flirt', 'a petite blonde' and 'a mother of two'.

'3 lovers while on bail'

Another story?

Jennifer Cupit was found guilty of murder and will serve a life sentence for her crime. Her guilt, and the innocence of the woman she killed, are not at issue. The issue is the *Mirror's* unfair and simplistic presentation of female behaviour and experience. If this goes unexamined and unchallenged it only becomes more extreme.

There is scarcely a reference in the entire report to Chris Linaker's central role in the drama. He was Jennifer Cupit's lover; a man, it would appear, who was deceiving his partner while enjoying the benefits of the 'loving and stable home' she provided. The reporters do not examine what the defence barrister called his 'heavy responsibility for the events that led to his wife's murder'; they attach no blame, nor even agency, to him. There is no discussion of the 16-month extra-marital relationship or the sex sessions. On the page of the report that concentrates on Kathryn Linaker, there is a photograph of the Linakers taken on the day their two young children were christened, some five days before Kathryn Linaker's death. The photo caption

'it was at these times Cupit enticed a succession of lovers'

reads: SPECIAL DAY. One might have expected some observation on the hypocrisy of a man who is able to position himself as a proud, devoted husband and father while at the same time being a cheat and adulterer.

Nothing whatever is written about Chris Linaker's background, no details gleaned from interviews with colleagues, friends and neighbours. The following reference appears early in the report: 'Mr Linaker, who now lives with his parents and the children, walked from the court with head bowed, refusing to comment'. Once again the journalists' language reveals their biases. Of all the members of the 'cast', only Chris Linaker warrants a title (Mr), and in the sentence quoted above, the respectability suggested by the title is reinforced by the whole context. The reader is reassured that Chris Linaker is not alienated from his parents and that he is mindful of his responsibilities as a father. The word 'bowed' has connotations of dignity, as well as contrition (what a difference 'lowered' would have made). Presumably the *Mirror* regarded it as inappropriate to press the grieving husband for a comment, or ask the 'devastated' Nick Cupit how he enjoyed the group sex sessions.

In effect, then, Jennifer Cupit assumes all responsibility for the sexual dissipation of her partners. Testimonies to her lust and treachery are secured from various sources. Readers infer that because she was so 'manipulative' and beguiling, all the men were helplessly seduced and suborned. That there is, in this report, evidence of her mental instability, does not seem to be considered relevant or valid. It is revealed, for instance, that Jennifer Cupit is bulimic, that she suffers from depression and that she has tried to commit suicide more than once. One interviewee (less hostile than the others), a member of the dramatic society, explains that 'most [of the members] were genuinely concerned for her welfare'. Yet despite these indicators of mental distress, there is no attempt to present her as anything other than a demonic, sexually voracious, brutal murderer.

She is depicted as the polar opposite of Kathryn Linaker, whose presentation is also distorted by sexism. Kathryn Linaker's profes-

sional achievements as a deputy head teacher, a writer of children's books and an actor are accorded less importance than her functions as a wife, mother and home-maker. The police superintendent who led the

inquiry unwittingly articulates the ideology of the press by describing Kathryn Linaker as 'an exceptional woman who led an ordinary life—one which we can all identify with'. Popular newspapers are concerned to ensure that their readers identify with constructs of ordinariness, and that they are suitably repelled by constructs of deviance. Anything that threatens that comforting binary opposition must be moulded and adjusted to conform to an appropriate category, whether it be social class, ethnicity or pattern of sexual behaviour.

Prurient, biased — and insidious

My intention in this piece was not to exonerate Jennifer Cupit nor show disrespect to Kathryn Linaker. Rather I wanted to show how the linguistic choices made by *Mirror* reporters convey their male-centred prejudices. Jennifer Cupit is designated an undesirable right from the start, when she is labelled a 'sex-mad temptress' who likes to 'bed'

several men, in succession or simultaneously.

After that kind of defamation it is difficult for her to attract any kind of understanding from the reader. This is

to treat her unfairly, because it does not address the question of the role played by the men in this affair, and it does not admit the possibility that she is someone more complex than a 'sex-crazed killer'.

'Murder at the Operatic Society' is both prurient and biased. It is also insidious, for it relies on the reader's unquestioning acceptance of sexist and male-centred ideologies. Its presentation of stereotypes is comfortingly simple: the angel in the house, the vamp, the philanderer, the family man—they are all there in the cast, playing their gender roles, displaying the appropriate gender attributes. These gender categories are fundamental in patriarchal society. Sexist discourse such as that which flourishes in *The Mirror* ensures that those categories remain fixed and durable. □

'she seduced Andy Welsch after the pair had spent a boozy night together'

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Different decade, Same old shit

Is it true that young women are becoming more sexually assertive and that heterosexual relations are becoming more egalitarian? Are radical feminists misguided in insisting that heterosexuality is a site of male domination? Research on young women's experience of heterosexual sex suggests not. The Male in the Head by Janet Holland, Caroline Ramazanoglu, Sue Sharpe and Rachel Thomson reveals that young women's sexual lives are still constrained by heterosexual practices which deny them the status of sexual subjects. Here Stevi Jackson explores their findings.

I have been waiting for this book for some time, having long admired the work of the Women Risk and AIDS (WRAP) team, who have produced the most comprehensive British research yet on the workings of male power in heterosexual relations. Much of this is already in print in the form of articles, book chapters and working papers, but *The Male in the Head* draws their ideas and findings together into a compelling critique of heterosexuality. This is not a dry academic research report: it is informed by, and speaks to, central feminist concerns. The voices of the young people interviewed are taken seriously,

but not at face value. What is not said — and what cannot be said within the confines of a male dominated language of sexuality — is also noted, as are the tensions, contradictions and ambivalences in the young people's accounts of their experiences.

For those *T&S* readers who are not already familiar with the WRAP team's research, some background might be useful. As the title of the project suggests, the original impetus behind the research was the need for a feminist perspective on AIDS, and especially heterosexual transmission of the HIV virus. In the late 1980s there was

widespread public concern about the possible spread of AIDS to the heterosexual population and a felt need for public health education. The advice provided, however, was grossly insensitive to the fact that safety in heterosexual relations has always been problematic for women, ignored the power relations between women and men and failed to challenge dominant definitions of what sex is. However, the health education agenda did provide funding opportunities which the WRAP team took up. Rather than looking at sexual risk in isolation they placed it firmly in the wider context of heterosexuality as an institution and practice. The original WRAP team, Janet Holland, Caroline Ramazanoglu, Sue Sharpe, Sue Scott and Rachel Thomson began interviewing young women in London and Manchester in 1989. In all they interviewed 148 women aged 16-21 from a range of ethnic and class backgrounds. Later the WRAP team (minus Sue Scott and plus Tim Rhodes) carried out a smaller comparative study of 46 young men. Their research generated an enormous amount of data on heterosexuality, giving us far deeper insight into what goes on in heterosexual relations than any other single project.

What they learned from both the women and the men they talked to flatly refutes optimistic ideas which some, including feminists, have peddled about the sexual assertiveness of today's young women (usually based on media representations and observations of goings on within the metropolitan club scene). What has always struck me about the WRAP data is how little has changed since I conducted a much more modest piece of research on young women's sexuality in the early 1970s. Young women may have access to more sexual information than any generation in the past, are probably more sexually experienced and are more likely to espouse sexually egalitarian ideals, but the vast majority are still trapped within the confines of heterosexual relations which privilege men's desires and pleasures at their expense. While some are finding ways to resist, this resistance has done little to dislodge the power of 'the male in the head' referred to in the book's title.

Why 'The Male in the Head'?

Some women I have spoken to find the title of this book perplexing. What do they mean by 'the male in the head'? The term is intended to capture the ubiquity and pervasiveness of male power within heterosexual relations and the ways in which that power governs every aspect of

young women's and men's sexual desires and practices. Many of the ideas behind this conceptualisation of male power will be familiar. Feminists have long been aware of the ways in which heterosexual practices are structured in terms of men's desires and are predicated on the assumption of an active male subject and a passive female object — indeed on a male-centred definition of what sex is. These ideas go back at least as far as Anne Koedt's *Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm* and the emergence of lesbian feminist critiques of heterosexuality in the 1970s. Moreover, we are also well aware of sexual violence and coercion as well as more subtle manifestations of male power within heterosexual relations. We have also been alert to the ways in which our own desires have been shaped by the patriarchal and heterosexist culture within which our sexualities are formed.

The idea of the male in the head, however, takes this further. It is not just that heterosexuality is male defined and male dominated; it doesn't just privilege masculinity, it *is* masculinity. Usually the contrast between the understandings of sexuality expressed by young men and women are understood as two separate masculine and feminine worlds of meaning which collide when a heterosexual couple meet. This, indeed, is how the WRAP team at first saw their findings. However, they became increasingly aware that rather than there being two contrasting masculine and feminine versions of heterosexuality, young men and women were taking up different locations within the same institution and were actively 'constituting and reproducing male dominance.' (p.11). Both men and women were simultaneously creating and being regulated by 'the surveillance power of this male dominated and institutionalised heterosexuality'. The phrase 'the male in the head' is intended to capture this internalised power of surveillance, the way in which male dominated heterosexuality affects not only sexual practices, but the minds and desires of women as well as men. There is no alternative feminine or feminist conceptualisation of heterosexuality; furthermore, while young women may at times resist and some may actively challenge or seek to disrupt the masculinity of 'normal' heterosexuality these 'strategies of resistance ... seem elusive and unstable' (p.171). Such resistance is contained by the male in the head:

Heterosexuality is not, as it appears to be, masculinity-and-femininity in opposition: it *is* masculinity. Within this masculine

heterosexuality, women's desires and the possibility of female resistance are potentially unruly forces to be disciplined and controlled, if necessary by violence. (p.11)

The WRAP team are not saying that resistance is impossible or that young women are passive dupes. Rather they are suggesting that the power of the male in the head is such that even as active participants in heterosexuality young women contribute to its recreation as a male dominated institution.

What is power?

There is a curious tendency in some recent feminist writing to psychologise power, to argue that if men don't feel powerful, or experience vulnerability in sexual relations then male power in heterosex is unstable (this, for example is an argument pursued by Lynne Segal in *Straight Sex*). Alternatively, adopting a perspective on power derived from Foucault, power is seen as dispersed, not capable of being held by any individual or social group, not linked to any form of structural inequality. Hence power is ripped from its social roots. Those versed in social theory might have noticed a little Foucauldian terminology creeping into the account of the male in the head, especially in the notion of an internalised surveillance. However, while the WRAP team borrow some Foucauldian concepts where they find them useful, they see male power as thoroughly institutionalised at all levels of society.

The persistence of male dominance in the face of wider social change, its immense impact on women's lives, requires that we understand the many, complex and interrelated levels or layers at which and through which it operates. The WRAP team identify five of these:

1. Language, ideas, beliefs, norms, values and their effects, through which particular truths about and meanings of sexuality, masculinity and femininity are produced, sustained or resisted.
2. Agency and action: what happens in heterosexual encounters, how people produce their relationships, the extent to which young men and women resist or collude in particular constructions of sexuality.
3. Structured, institutionalised power relations between sexual partners: how heterosexuality is constructed as hierarchical, how it is organised, how it is sustained by the family, law economy and the state.
4. Embodied practices, sexual experiences and

i OH IT'S A
PRESENT FOR
MY BROTHER

ii I COLLECT
THEM FOR
THEIR GRAPHICS

iii THIS IS MY
SISTER'S BAG -
IT MUST BE HER'S

iv THE MACHINE IN
THE LADIES WAS
GIVING THEM
AWAY

v OOOH THIS OLD
THING.. MUST BE
PAST ITS SELL
BY DATE



EXCUSES FOR A YOUNG
WOMAN WHO HAPPENS
TO FIND A CONDOM
IN HER HANDBAG

their meanings: how sexuality is lived, what happens when two people 'have sex', not just in terms of what they do, but the meanings these practices have for them.

5. As historically specific and subject to change — and therefore open to challenge.

These different levels or layers of male power are manifested in every aspect of young people's heterosexual encounters.

Safer sex?

Calls for the practice of 'safe sex' have always had a hollow ring for feminists since heterosexual sex has never been particularly safe for women. Quite apart from the threat of sexual coercion and violence, and the risk of pregnancy, for young women sexual activity has always provoked fears about gaining a 'reputation'. The spread of HIV provoked unprecedented public discussion of sexual practices and led to a series of public health campaigns around 'safe sex'. In an ideal world this might have been expected to raise questions about the privileging of vaginal penetration, but in the context of heterosexuality most of the advice given boiled down to a single admonition — use a condom — a solution which

offered the least threat to male-defined sexuality. Moreover, the promotion of condom use assumed a rational process of decision-making within egalitarian relationships, thus neglecting the complex gendered and emotional meanings of sex and the difficulties of managing 'safer sex' within fundamentally unequal partnerships.

The WRAP research reveals the difficulties which young women face in attempting to practice safer sex. While there was considerable diversity in young women's experiences, the constraints of gendered sexual relations were ever-present. Only a very small minority questioned the dominant definition of sex as sexual intercourse and even fewer were able to redefine sex within heterosexual relationships. Most of the young people, men and women, were aware of sexual risks and of the protection which condoms could offer them, and some could negotiate their use successfully. For many, however, knowledge was not enough. Putting knowledge into practice meant dealing with the cultural meanings of condoms within a society which privileges male sexual needs.

One of the most obvious problems young men and women face in using condoms is simple embarrassment.

One young woman, in an ironic comment on the government's 'Don't Die of Ignorance' campaign said: 'If I don't die of ignorance I will die of embarrassment instead' (p.33). Embarrassment is a gendered phenomenon since buying and carrying condoms implies a readiness for sex which is still not entirely respectable in a young woman and can still mark her as a 'slag'. For a young man carrying condoms can enhance his masculine status; indeed he can use or refuse condoms

SHE WAS AN ADVOCATE
FOR OLD FASHIONED VALUES



without his masculinity being called into question. For him the only source of embarrassment is revealing inexperience or sexual inadequacy. These gendered patterns of course reflect dominant definitions of sex as penetration and sexual intercourse as something enacted by men on women.

Underlying this idea of sex is the assumption that men are possessed of an uncontrollable sexual drive which should not be prevented from reaching its goal — and this view was widely accepted by the young people regardless of gender, class or ethnicity. Hence young women who might prefer alternatives to penetrative sex may feel they have no right to demand it. As one put it 'if you're with a guy and you are going to do everything but, it's obviously a big tease' (p.36). Women are conventionally expected to control 'how far' sex should go and to take responsibility for safety, but they're not supposed to interrupt a man's progression to orgasm. Insisting on condom use does just that. Some young women, however, are willing to flout these conventions and 'make him wear one'. Most found the easiest way to accomplish this was to assert fear of pregnancy. However, this can lead to further problems as the relationship becomes more established, when it is widely expected that a woman will go 'on the pill'.

'Trust' is supposed to make condom use easier, but in fact it has the opposite effect in that sex in a 'steady' relationship is assumed to carry no risks apart from pregnancy. Women also fear continued insistence on condom use may jeopardise the relationship. The other side of this gendered coin is that young men are more likely to use condoms with women they deem untrustworthy — 'slags' who are potential carriers of disease or women who they think might be lying about being on the pill. 'Trust' and 'love' it seems are not consonant with condom use.

Some women felt unwilling to pressure a man into wearing a condom because it might diminish his pleasure. Sometimes they themselves expressed distaste for condoms couched in a language of male sexuality. Using a condom was likened to 'washing your feet with your socks on' or 'chewing a toffee with the wrapper on' (pp. 40-41). While these perceptions were not presented as male, they were often voiced in contexts which made it clear that it was his pleasure rather than hers which was at stake and that they did not wish to displease their partners. Young women did not seem able to discuss how condoms affected their pleasure except insofar as his orgasm marked the end of sex whether or not they had experienced orgasm themselves. The majority of young men, on the other hand, had no

idea whether condom use affected their partners' pleasure — usually because they had never asked.

Patterns of condom use reveal that young people are not totally constrained by convention and not totally lacking in agency, but are actively producing male power. This occurs not only through men's conformity to heterosexual masculinity, but also on 'young women's active involvement in enabling male power through their own pursuit of femininity' (p.55).

The masculinity of sexual knowledge

The gendered identities and assumptions about what counts as sex which are evident in young people's accounts of condom use are reflected in the construction of and access to sexual knowledge. Learning about sex generally entails 'learning one's position in the power relations of heterosexuality' (p. 56). The ways in which the young people in this study had learnt about sex were diverse and patchy. School sex education varied in quality and quantity, parents were more or less forthcoming but the messages received from adults were generally couched within a 'protective discourse' in which men were positioned as active agents and women as potential victims of both physical and moral danger. Informal sources of information — friends and the media — were valued more highly, but indicated 'the surveillance of the male peer group which ... plays a pivotal role in inducting young people into the hidden power relations of heterosexuality' (p.56).

Most of the young women were highly critical of school sex-education, although those ethnic minority women for whom it was their first source of sexual information were more positive about it. Most young women reported that it had come too late to tell them anything new, that it focused exclusively on reproductive processes and that little or nothing was said about non-reproductive sex, desire, pleasure or relationships. Many also reported that the clitoris remains absent from diagrams of female genitalia. Sex, as represented in school sex education, is exclusively heterosexual and reproductive, reinforcing a passive view of the female body. A very small minority reported positive experiences of teachers who talked openly about pleasure and did not focus exclusively on heterosexuality. Young men received even less formal sex education, but were more inclined to report that they 'just knew' about it.

Within the home it is mothers and other female relatives who are the main sources of information for girls. Fathers play little part, but effectively contribute 'through their silence; by a shared understanding of what can be mentioned in front of them' (p. 61). Information which girls receive from mothers is often accompanied by warnings and cautionary tales. The 'protective discourse' while underpinned by real fears for girls' welfare in the face of predatory male sexuality also serves, once again, to confirm the normality of passive, reproductive heterosexuality. Parents also exercise considerable surveillance over their daughters' sexuality. This is the case even for more permissive parents whose surveillance strategies are more likely to focus on ensuring their daughters have access to contraception rather than trying to restrict their opportunities for sexual activity.

Boys sometimes talk about sex with their fathers, who often manifest 'complicity in their sons' notions of sexual prowess and male knowledge' (p. 61). Even so, mothers were more often a source of information and advice than fathers. Surveillance is much less evident in young men's accounts of sex education in the home. Where parents expressed concern, it was more often about emotional entanglements. Mothers had sometimes warned their sons about getting someone pregnant, and some encouraged them to respect women. In so doing they also implicitly accepted that their sons would be sexually active. Interaction with fathers about sexuality is often similar to talk within the male peer group. One young man made this explicit when he said that 'mothers tell you to "be careful", but with Dads it is "boys being boys"' (p.67).

For most of the young people, friends were important sources of information, but there was an awareness, especially among the young men, that peers were not always a reliable source of sexual knowledge. Informal talk among friends also serves to reinforce the masculinity of heterosexuality. The dominance of male sexual discourse circumscribes girls' talk. Girls' generally distance themselves from the ways in which boys talk about sex, but are then left without a language of their own. Their talk tends to focus on relationships rather than sex per se, and even when sexual knowledge is shared it is often piece-meal and shrouded with innuendo. What girls learn from their friends is not so much about sexuality as 'about the boundaries of feminine identity and the social mechanism of



sexual reputation' (p.68). Within adolescent culture it is boys who dominate 'the definition of the sexually explicit and of the female anatomy' (p.70).

The power to define

Male control of explicit sexual language is, of course, one of the means by which men can control and humiliate women. Occasionally a confident young woman can play them at their own game and win. One told how, when she was in the third year, a group of boys on the school bus had been harassing the girls by asking each in turn: 'Do you masturbate?' Their victims reacted with predictable embarrassment, but this young woman refused to be cowed. When they put the question to her:

I stood up and said 'yes I do, what about it!' The lads sat down and they didn't say a single word until the end of term. They were horrified, they were very embarrassed. (p.70)

Few young women, however, are assertive enough to engage in this sort of defiance. To do so entails flouting the norms of femininity and challenging masculinity. For the most part, explicitly sexual talk is monopolised by the male peer group.

Predictably, the main form of communication among young men was the telling of 'performance stories'. Many felt that they had little choice but to take part in this activity, but whether they did or not, the male peer group's understanding of sex had an impact on their lives. Here ignorance cannot be admitted and boys prove their masculinity through displaying their knowledge and experience in the stories they tell. While boys know that some of these stories are invented or exaggerated, talk within the male peer group remains 'a critical site for inducting young men into what it is to be a man.' Even those who do not conform to the norms of dominant masculinity 'are still complicit in the collective construction of the male peer group and subject to its power' (p. 71). So important is this talk that it is one of the reasons young men badly want to gain sexual experience. As one nineteen year old succinctly put it: 'Sex means I've got something to tell my mates' (p.86).

It comes as no surprise, either, to learn that pornography constitutes an important element of male 'sex-education'. About half of the young men mentioned pornography — without being asked directly about it. Not all saw it as educational — though some did — and many saw pornography as something they no longer

'needed' once they began having sexual access to women. This in itself suggests a 'conflation of the imagery of pornography and the practices of actual relationships' (p.78). Even if young men seem to retain a critical distance from the pornographic imagery they consume, it nonetheless informs their ideas of what sex is about. Moreover collective consumption of pornography, like the male peer group itself, is part of the construction of masculine identity.

While young men are consuming pornography, young women are also turning to books, magazines and films to fill the gaps in their sexual knowledge. These sources are often the only ones from which young women can learn about sexual pleasure, yet they often 'find it difficult to access embodied accounts of sexuality' — that is accounts which tell them anything about the physical realisation of pleasure in their own bodies. Much of what these young women read and watched was in the form of romantic narratives, which offer them little help in articulating their own desires. Once again, in these narratives, women's pleasure appears to be a passive response to men's performance. Their first experience of sex often fails to live up to these romantic expectations. Even if they do learn about pleasure through experience this often renders them dependant on a particular man, in a particular relationship: a form of sexual mentoring which once again leaves them relatively powerless. Whereas young women were often ambivalent about their first sexual experiences, young men were far more positive.

Love and sex

Tensions between love and sex are evident both in talk within single-sex peer groups and in the negotiation of heterosexual relationships. The instrumental language of the male peer group makes girls the object of performance stories and gives young men the power 'to dominate sexual language as well as to construct reputations' (p.86). Young women are well aware of this and in the interviews frequently expressed concern about becoming the subject of men's stories. Girls are critical of the immaturity of male sex talk and the exploitative sentiments associated with it, but often themselves collude with it, particularly in the construction of sexual reputations. They themselves often damn as 'slags' girls who are seen as too easy. This, of course, is a means of protecting their own reputations.

The main form of resistance to the male

language of sex is an alternative female language of love. For young women 'love' is a means of making sense of and legitimating sexual desire. It is also, however, a means by which they seek 'to temper the disempowerment of femininity' (p.100). In a world where men make all the moves from chatting up through to initiating sex, and where women who challenge this are readily labelled 'slags', women are left without agency: they can only say 'yes' or 'no' (although they may employ a variety of tactics to bend the gendered rules of the game). To be loved is to have some power over a man and to feel safe in expressing desire. This, however, has its dangers since it can lead to being used or gaining a 'reputation'. Young men know that the language of love may be a route to sexual access and may therefore use it cynically — a possibility which young women are well aware of.

Young men's attitudes to love are far more ambivalent. On the one hand love is seen within the male peer group as a threat to freedom and not something to be readily admitted. In relationships with women, and in the interviews, some young men are far more willing to endorse romantic ideals. This, however, helps to maintain the distinction between a public, male dominated language of sex and a private language of love — and does nothing to undermine the power of the former. Moreover, for young men schooled in instrumental sexuality, the distinction between 'having sex' and 'making love' becomes yet another way of enforcing double standards on women. Young men could articulate egalitarian ideas about love and sex when questioned by an interviewer, but would then often retreat into the distinction between 'good women' (those with whom it was acceptable to fall in love) and 'bad' women (those to be used for sex). One young man, for example, insisted that both men and women could want love and sex equally. Yet later, when discussing a woman who had claimed to love him but who had agreed to sex on the first date said:

You can't go to bed with someone the first time you get off with them and then expect them to give you respect and love. If you want sex you can have sex. If you want them to love you, you better sort it out and not go to bed with them immediately...I'm quite happy getting my end away from time to time, with someone I only see from time to time (p.99).

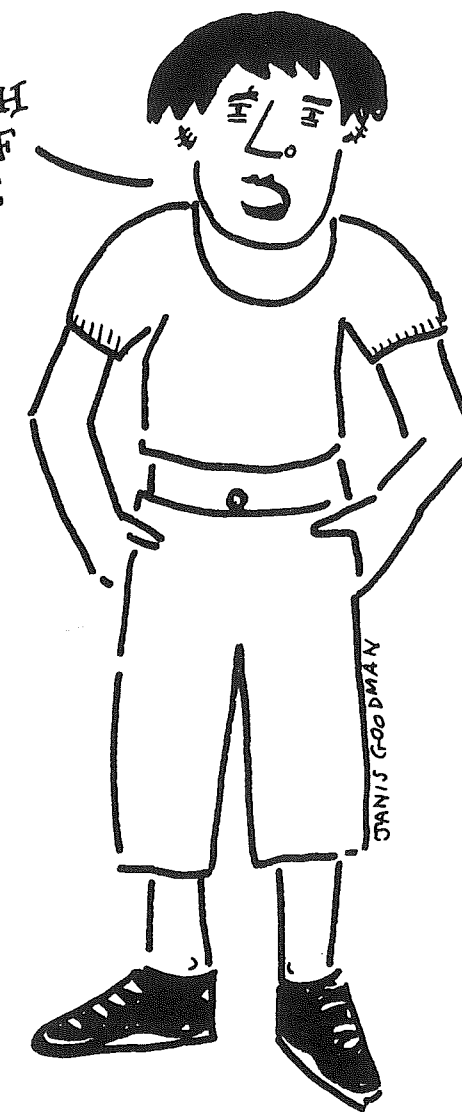
This comment (and others like it) should serve to warn us against taking men's endorsements of

egalitarian ideals at face value.

His pleasure and her compliance

This sexual climate is hardly one conducive to autonomous female sexuality. Young women may now be more sexually active than in earlier generations, but most are still constrained by the male-in-the-head. The WRAP interviewers asked detailed questions about sexual desires, acts, pleasures, and relationships yet the young women barely talked about sensual pleasure at all. They discussed their bodies in oblique and disconnected language and hence gave an account of female sexuality as disembodied. They tend also to think of the body as a set of fragments, parts

CHEAP SLAG
OR,
FRIGID BITCH
NOT MUCH OF
A CHOICE
IS IT?





which can be eroticised, but there is no sense of a fully embodied sexual agency. Their bodies are of concern to them primarily in terms of surface display: the sexually attractive body, the object of desire. It is this self-presentation which is often misread (by young men as well as cultural studies scholars) as a sexually knowing body. Young men may express some anxieties about appearance, but on the whole their bodily anxieties are performance related, reflecting the construction of masculine sexuality as active and embodied and as 'knowing what to do'.

Both men and women referred to their first experience of heterosexual intercourse as losing their virginity — but this had very different meanings for them. What young men lose is their negative status as inexperienced. Sex validates them as men, it makes a boy a man. However nervous a young man might be, however anxious about his performance, he comes through it having accomplished a status passage into manhood, one that confirms his manhood in his own eyes and those of his friends. Moreover the accounts the young men gave of their first sex were embodied; they clearly saw their bodies as active (whether performing well or barely adequately) and talked of pleasure. Women's

accounts of loss of virginity on the other hand were disembodied and they said little about pleasure or performance. Often they saw their virginity as a gift to be bestowed on a loved man: 'I'd give him anything ... I'd give him something I could never give anyone else, something special, and that's why I did it' (p. 185). First sex has little to do with confirming femininity, rather it is about managing femininity, protecting one's own body and reputation. Hence women make sense of first sex not in terms of a language of achievement, but in the context of a discourse of romance.

There were tiny minority of women in the WRAP sample who did actively assert their own desires within sexual encounters — and some of these also challenged the conventional equation of sex with penetration. For most, however, heterosexual sex was about pleasing their man accommodating to his desires — and for many this was reported as the most pleasurable aspect of sex. A few reported curbing their passion because men found it disturbing if they appeared to desire sex too much. More commonly, however, they pretended more pleasure than they felt, the most obvious manifestation of which was faking orgasms. Many enjoyed non-penetrative sex, but deferred to the male-defined view of such practices as 'foreplay', a prelude to the real thing. Often sex is valued more in terms of the closeness and intimacy it produces rather than sensual pleasure. In all these respects men are empowered in sexual encounters whether or not they actively seek to be so.

Male power becomes more explicit when they resort to coercion or violence. While the young women were not explicitly questioned about sexual violence or coercion, about a quarter of them talked about experiences of sexual violence or being pressured into unwanted sex. The young men were explicitly asked about violence and most claimed to abhor it — although many told stories about other men's violence towards women. Some did, however, admit to applying other from of pressure or 'persuasion', carrying on a war of attrition until their girlfriend 'consented'. Moreover, women can feel pressured simply by virtue of the dominant construction of male desire as a driving need; many men and women saw women as responsible for a man's arousal and hence under an obligation to satisfy him.

Women's resistance

The authors of the book, however, are not

portraying all young women as passively acceding to unpleasurable sex. Some young women do try to assert their right to sexual pleasure, do resist male demands and male definitions of what sex is about and attempt to take active control over their own sexual safety. Resistance, however, is constrained by a largely unquestioned norm of heterosexuality and the power of the 'male in the head'.

One chapter of the book directly addresses women's empowerment in negotiating safer sexual encounters and its limitations. When the WRAP team looked for examples of women 'who were able to exercise power and regulate safety in their sexual relationships' they found 'very few'. Instead they 'found women seeking to be powerful — employing a range of different and often contradictory strategies to gain some control over the meanings and practices of their sexual relationships' (p. 129). They found widespread inconsistencies between young women wanting to be powerful and their accounts of their practices. Reflecting on these accounts they conceptualised empowerment as a process; it is 'never simply or permanently achieved, but has to be struggled for constantly' (p.130).

There is a difference, too, between intellectual empowerment — a matter of expectations and intentions — and experiential empowerment 'the ability to manage their embodied sexual practice pleasurably and safely' (p.131). The latter was rare, and often 'context-specific' — a woman might achieve empowerment in a specific relationship, after a great deal of emotional labour, but it would not be 'hers' to take on to the next encounter. She would need to begin again, from the beginning. Young women's attempts to empower themselves did not necessarily challenge the conventions of masculinity and femininity. For example, some tried to use femininity as a source of power. This, however, is largely limited to refusing sex through a discourse of virginity as something precious to be preserved, or through subterfuge — for example pretending not to be on the pill in order to persuade their partners to use condoms. These young women remained within the confines of femininity (and often defined themselves as anti-feminist) and offered little challenge to masculinity.

Those young women who were relatively empowered compared with the rest of the sample reported more experience of sexual coercion and violence than average. Despite the disempower-

ing effects of violence these young women had learnt from their experiences and, in particular, developed a critical perspective which enabled them to redefine these experiences in terms of power. They thus came to question masculinity and the gendered inequality of heterosexuality. Yet this is 'a hard path to knowledge and one that can make female empowerment extremely fragile' (p.133).

Four possible strategies for empowerment are discussed through the stories of four young women — but only one of these offers any real challenge to conventional male-defined heterosexuality. One possibility is to adopt the male model of sexuality as one's own, to demand an equal right to pleasure and to seek personal gratification and empowerment through sex. This may challenge conventional notions of passive female sexuality, but it leaves the masculinity of heterosexuality unchallenged. Moreover, in practice the young woman using these tactics may well find that, in practice, she is still deferring to male needs. Here intellectual empowerment is not matched by experiential empowerment. Another possibility is the careful negotiation of mutuality within a monogamous relationship. Within this one relationship she may feel experientially empowered, but it is she who puts the effort into achieving this and it lasts only as long as the particular relationship. It may also be possible to achieve a fragile integration of intellectual and experiential empowerment through critical reflection on past negative sexual experiences and to try to carry this into new relationships, but how much control this may give a young woman is uncertain.

The only way in which it is possible to begin to achieve an integration of intellectual and experiential empowerment is to challenge the conventions of both femininity and masculinity and to redefine heterosexual sex. Very few young women achieved this. The one used to illustrate this strategy had 'a shrewd understanding of practical sexual politics', evinced a willingness to challenge men's ideas about their own sexual 'needs' and the assertiveness to educate them into alternatives to penetrative sex (although, of course, she was still doing the educating). She also had experience of 'non-heterosexual' practices and cultures and only an ambivalent investment in a heterosexual identity. This empowerment, achieved through hard work within heterosexual encounters did at least 'travel with her' (p.144). This, however, is rare. For most young women their attempts to empower

themselves offer only a very partial resistance to male dominated heterosexuality.

Facing the facts

Of course this book is based on qualitative research and therefore carries all the usual caveats about not necessarily being generalisable to the population as a whole. However, in terms of qualitative research the sample is large and probably as representative as you can get — and far more so than wild speculations based on such sources as teenage girls' magazines or what is currently chic among self-styled sexual outlaws. Moreover, this may be the largest study of its kind, but it is not unique.

Those who want to preserve the illusion that young women today are empowered to enjoy their sexuality and are exploring the opportunities offered by 'ambiguous' sexualities, do not want to believe what research such as this reveals. Lynne Segal, for example, accuses the

WRAP team of simply finding what they set out to look for having decided in advance that women could not enjoy heterosex and that men held all the power. Quite apart from the insult this represents to a team of researchers who have been so thorough and meticulous in the analysis of their data, it simply is not true. The WRAP team started with a more optimistic view than they concluded with. They expected to find young women influenced by feminist ideas who were developing more autonomous styles of sexuality. They coded for sexual pleasure, but found little to place in that category. Of course they did find women who resisted, who sought more egalitarian relationships, but the scope of such resistance was limited. Far from male power being unstable, as Segal would have us believe, instability is more characteristic of women's strategies for resistance. Male power in heterosexuality remains firmly entrenched. □



BALANCING THE BUDGET

Governments may proclaim their commitment to gender equality, but to make it a reality they must put their money where their mouth is, examining how resources are allocated and rethinking their priorities. Here Debbie Budlender explains how the Women's Budget Initiative in South Africa is documenting the impact of government budgets on women's lives and supporting measures that improve their situation.

Budgets are about money and economics. Most people, at least in South Africa, think of men in suits when they think of the economy, and of economists. This is because men have for a long time had both the opportunities and the power to run the economy and the country. They have done this — and continue to do it — in a way that often ignores women. For example, economists measure things by how much they cost in rands and cents. So they do not measure all the unpaid work done in the economy. This work is mainly done by women. It includes looking after children and other family members, shopping, cooking, cleaning, fetching water and wood.

Government policies and budgets have a big effect on the economic independence of women. Governments can, for example, pass welfare laws about providing social services such as childcare so that more women can go out to work if they

want to. It can have policies that make it easier for women to get training in the better-paying work that men usually have. It can insist that women are part of decision-making when it comes to land redistribution, and that land and housing are not registered only in the names of men.

But budgets are not only about economics. Every single policy of government depends on receiving adequate resources for its success. So it is not only women's economic well-being and independence, but their lives as a whole, that are affected by government budgets. This is why the Women's Budget is so important.

How it all began

The roots of the South African Women's Budget Initiative can be traced back to before the first democratic elections of April 1994. Two years

before that, in April 1992, women from different organisations and political parties came together to form the Women's National Coalition (WNC). Rich and poor women, urban and rural, black and white, and women from different religions worked together within the WNC on the 'Big Ears' campaign. This campaign asked individual women and women's organisations what they wanted, and what they thought should be done to bring about gender equality.

The responses were brought together in the Women's Charter for Effective Equality, which was formally presented to President Mandela after the elections. The Women's Charter proposed many important changes in how society should work. But it did not say much about how these changes could be achieved, nor where the resources would come from to effect them.



Birth of the Women's Budget Initiative

South Africa's first democratic elections in April 1994 gave important space to the women activists who became parliamentarians at national and provincial level. Before the elections, only 3% of all national parliamentarians were women, but after the elections, over a quarter were women.

A number of the new women parliamentarians who felt strongly about gender equality sat on the Finance Portfolio Committee. Members of this committee met with people from non-governmental organisations (NGOs). I was at the meeting where the idea of having a South African women's budget was born.

The meeting decided to do research on different departments' policies and budgets to see how women were affected. Parliamentarians and other people could then use this research to find out what government departments were doing to push for gender equality. The research could then be used to lobby the government to make changes that were important for women.

The research group does not have a fixed shape or form. It is a collaborative venture between three bodies — the NGO I work for, another NGO (Idasa) that does a lot of budget work, and parliamentarians in the form of the Committee on the Quality of Life and Status of Women. There is no office, letterhead, or anything. It is much looser than that, which is an advantage in many ways.

This core group draws on different researchers and reference group people each year, according to areas of expertise and interest. Many people have participated in the project. Each year members of a reference group assist researchers by providing advice and information and commenting on drafts. The reference group members include government officials, parliamentarians, and researchers and activists from civil society. By drawing on a wider group of people, the project hopes to both improve the quality of the work produced, and also to develop a bigger group of people who now know about gender-sensitive budgeting. By including economists and other more technically inclined people, as well as those with a developed gender understanding, the project hopes to share skills and promote new ways of thinking and understanding.

A few people have been involved for more than one year, but many have not. Some of those involved have taken the interest forward in their own work, in NGOs, in academia or in government. The most time-consuming part of the work is the research, which is heavy empirical work, mostly on primary data. The research looks at:

- ♦ the position of South African women and men, girls and boys in relation to the sector covered by a particular budget;
- ♦ the policy developed by the government

institution to address that position;

- ♦ whether the budget reflects that policy (assuming we think the policy is gender-sensitive); and
- ♦ whether the budget reaches those whom it is intended to reach.

That is the ideal, but it all depends on what is available.

In the course of the research each year we have two or three workshops for researchers and the reference group where they present their progress, share problems, etc. We also exchange work and are meant to comment on each others' work. Other work involves lobbying and advocacy around the Women's Budget. I would love to leave this to parliamentarians, and they certainly play a strong role there, but others also play a role, both out of choice and because we get asked to give input since the Initiative has become quite well known.

The research from each year gets published in the form of a book. The First (1996), Second (1997) and Third Women's Budget (1998) books have all been published. Each book focuses on different departments. By the third book, the Initiative had covered every budget vote of the national budget and, to a lesser extent, the provincial budgets. It also had chapters on budget reform, on public sector employment, on taxation, on a feminist understanding of economics and on intergovernmental fiscal relations (how national revenue is divided between national, provincial and local government). This year we will also have a popular book, looking at local government.

Despite attempts to avoid unnecessary jargon, the Women's Budget books are written in fairly academic or technical language. With the relatively poor levels of education in the country, they remain inaccessible even to many parliamentarians. As a partial solution to this problem, in 1998 the Initiative produced *Money Matters: Women and the Government Budget*. *Money Matters* 'translates' a selection of chapters from the first two books into more accessible language so as to make it easily understandable to those with a few years of secondary education. The Project is also currently planning a workshop materials development project together with a network of gender educators and trainers.

In this, its fourth year, the Initiative will for the first time be looking at local government — the third sphere of government which encompasses approximately 800 municipalities around



the country. It will also be looking at donor financing of government. Both of these topics are under-researched even in 'non-gendered' terms.

We hope these new initiatives will help women and men from NGOs, community-based organisations, local councillors, and provincial and government parliamentarians to understand our economy and government's national and international plans for it.

What is a women's budget?

Australia was the first country in the world to have a women's budget. The initiative started there in the mid-1980s, when the Labour government came to power and a number of progressive women entered the bureaucracy. It was these women who initiated the women's budget exercise inside government, and over time it spread from federal to state level. (In the last few years, under the new, more conservative, government, the initiative has been drastically cut back.) The Australian women's budget, like the South African one, does not propose a *separate* budget for women. Rather, it asks the question as to the differential effect of the whole government budget, and each of its parts, on women and men.

So why focus on women? The Women's Budget Initiative starts from the premise that women's interests and needs are often different to men's. Further, in many parts of their lives,

Gender and Income Distribution in Rands		
Income	Population — Female	Population — Male
R0 - R10,000	14,370,648	12,654,647
- R30,000	1,007,146	1,775,214
- R50,000	196,209	549,459
- R70,000	39,689	252,532
- R100,000	16,442	154,898
- R299,000	9,829	122,107
+ R300,000	1,657	12,261

women are at a disadvantage compared to men. We see this clearly in the paid and unpaid work women do, how much they earn, their access to property like land, how much violence is directed against them, and the traditional roles women are expected to play. Many government policies and budgets do not acknowledge how deeply this gender discrimination affects women. Women's budget analysis proceeds from the understanding that budgets must follow policy. The first step is for departments to formulate policies that take women's interests and needs into account. The second step is to ensure that enough money is allocated to these gender-sensitive policies so that they can be put into action.

In South Africa in particular, the initiative has not only been interested in the differential effect on women and men. It has also been interested in the effect on different *groups* of women and men. We are interested in women (and men, for that matter) to the extent that they are disadvantaged. The focus has therefore been mainly on black women, on poor women, and especially on those women living in the rural ex-'homeland' areas.

There are many areas in which women are not doing well — many areas in which policy makers ignore women's needs. But I think we are also very lucky in South Africa, as gender is so much an issue in general political discourse that most policymakers know that they are meant to look at it. Sometimes it is more not knowing *how* to do it than being opposed to it. Of course there are different understandings of what gender means, or what we are aiming at.

The framework of the women's budget

Rhonda Sharp is an Australian economist who assisted the government there to develop and implement the women's budget. She proposed a useful three-part framework for analysing the gender-sensitivity of a government budget. Her framework emphasises the fact that it is analysing the full budget. The three-pronged approach involves:

- ♦ Finding out whether government departments and authorities spend money on projects that are especially for girls and women. This could include, for example, finding out whether money is spent on women's health programmes, special education projects for girls, and structures forming part of the national machinery (in South Africa, the Commission on Gender Equality, the national and provincial Offices on the Status of Women and gender desks within departments).
- ♦ Seeing whether government departments and authorities spend money on equal employment opportunities for women. This could include, for example, finding out whether money is spent on training women in jobs that men usually hold, and whether childcare facilities and paid maternity leave are offered.
- ♦ Looking at whether government spends money in a way that improves the lives of women. Here one would ask questions such as: 'Does the education budget as a whole show that the department wants to achieve gender equality?'; 'In the agriculture budget, who benefits from farming support?'; 'In welfare, what hidden unpaid work (done by women) is the department relying on?'

The initiative spread to government

From early on in the project's life, there was interest from influentially-placed women within government, as well as from some of the women activists who had gone to work in the bureaucracy. Then, in mid-1996, Gill Marcus became Deputy Minister of Finance. Gill Marcus had previously, as chair of the parliamentary portfolio committee on Finance, been a strong supporter of the extra-governmental women's budget initiative.

In November 1996, South Africa attended the Commonwealth meeting for Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs, and became one of the three countries which would pilot gender budgets within government for the Commonwealth as a

way of 'engendering' macro-economic policy.

The Department of Finance is leading the initiative within the government. This initiative is much smaller than the extra-governmental one. Its primary achievement to date was the inclusion of gender-sensitive discussions of sectoral policies within the Budget Review which the Minister of Finance tabled together with the budget of March 1998.

1999 was the second year in which the Department of Finance had its own parallel initiative to our outside-government initiative. (Many people do not appreciate that parliament is *not* the same as government as we understand it). I am the government 'consultant' for this work and was impressed, in going around to the different departments, in the improvement in quality and availability of the sort of gender-disaggregated data we need. So, even if we can't see the difference in rand amounts, or it is difficult to know exactly where we exerted influence, I think that our initiative has generated a greater awareness of the importance of measuring whether you are reaching women or men, and black or white women or men.

Developments elsewhere

South Africa's work in gender budgeting has inspired a number of other countries to engage in similar projects. In some countries the initiatives are led by parliamentarians, in others by NGOs, in yet others by government and in some by a combination of stakeholders. In Africa alone, gender budgeting has spread to Mozambique, Namibia, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

The differences reflect the different political and social conditions in the different countries. As the initiatives develop, they can hopefully learn from each other not only techniques of gender analysis, but also what makes sense politically in terms of promoting gender equity in government policy and resourcing. No matter how solid the research, the Women's Budget Initiative is of little use if it does not empower people inside and outside government to push for policies that can redress some of the current inequalities — and to monitor their success in doing so.

Impact

The Women's Budget has made an impact in terms of becoming well known both here in South Africa and internationally. It is also, however, often misinterpreted. I have seen it

referred to as it if is about a separate budget for women's development, which is exactly what it is *not*. This misunderstanding occurs despite our starting off each presentation or workshop by stressing this point.

In terms of actual programmes, we probably had some influence in the introduction of the child support grant (a grant for poor children which should reach African women and rural women better than the old one, and which also does not make any assumptions about nuclear families); support for small, medium and micro-enterprises; greater awareness of the need for different housing options if you want to reach the poorest; the battle of the Commission on Gender Equality to get a vaguely reasonable budget.

The South African initiative focuses on the lives of poor, black women. They are the most disadvantaged and therefore most in need of policies, and budgets that will change their lives for the better. Women will only win freedom when they have economic independence and don't have to rely on men for money. Government has an important part to play in making sure this happens and we hope that the Women's Budget will continue to play an important role in informing government. □



Chewing it over

Vegetarianism has long been associated with feminism in the view of those who seek to caricature both positions as loony left, as well as in the view of many political activists. But is the connection merely one of lifestyle, or is there a real relationship between these two political positions? Is it simply the coincidence of unrelated issues, a matter of ethics rather than politics, or does vegetarianism have anything to do with gender? Dianne Butterworth, Debbie Cameron, Liz Kelly and Joan Scanlon get their teeth into some of these questions.

Debbie: Why did we decide to have a discussion about vegetarianism?

Joan: Because it's an issue that's associated with feminism, although some of you feel that it shouldn't be.

Debbie: The first time I was ever really involved in a feminist community, which was in Oxford, it was centred on a vegetarian whole food shop, Uhuru, and the connection with vegetarianism was absolutely taken for granted. All the feminists I hung out with were vegetarian and they regarded that as an integral part of their feminism, not just their politics in general. And the whole food shop was this really important feminist landmark run by a women's collective in Oxford, and the women's centre was really

connected to that. But later I did start to feel that no-one had ever made it clear to me why that would be so. I mean, was it just a general lifestyle connection that people were political in all sorts of different ways that came together — or was it really an aspect of feminist politics? I should say that I'm not a vegetarian. I guess I never really took the possibility to heart at the time. Whereas you became vegetarian fairly recently, didn't you, Dianne?

Dianne: Yes, about five or six years ago.

Debbie: So it hasn't been part of your life for hundreds of millions of years. So why did you? Why did you make that decision?

Dianne: Well, it definitely was after I became a radical feminist — certainly not before. I don't

Cartoons by Grizelda Grizlingham

know whether there is a significant population of vegetarians in Canada or not. I suspect not. But it had never really entered my mind as a possibility before. Essentially I suppose mine is a vegetarianism of principle, but almost a principle of convenience. I knew there were all sorts of arguments why I shouldn't be eating meat and it just eventually came to a point where it wasn't going to be difficult for me to give up meat. I wasn't going to have to make radical changes in my lifestyle; all I would have to do is not eat meat. I couldn't sustain my meat-eating, let's put it that way. In a way, I suppose, my understanding of it as being connected to feminism has developed since then.

The sexual politics of meat

Debbie: So what were the arguments in the first place that were really influencing you to think you shouldn't eat meat?

Dianne: Well it was primarily about the resources that meat-eating uses — the water, the grain — as well as the waste products from the industry — there's no treatment of all the animal excrement; it's just dumped into the environment. Also the production-line, factory treatment of animals bothers me. Unlike some feminist vegetarians, it's not so much the killing of animals that is the issue for me. The way in which we treat the animals to feed this industry has started to remind me of the way women are chewed up in the sex industry, but I don't think that link is particularly obvious. I suppose what struck me as a feminist about being vegetarian is this notion of thingifying: that we take an animal and we turn it into an object and process it as if it were a car or anything else that you manufacture on a production line. For me that's the connection, very hazily in my mind, between the way in which animals and women are treated.

Debbie: And you think that what's wrong with that is that animals are living beings?

Dianne: Yes, the notion that you can do anything to them because they've been turned into things — they're living in three square inches of space or they're forcibly inseminated at every opportunity. I think it's about the objectification. It's that which makes me think that there is a connection to the way women are perceived in our society.

Debbie: I remember someone, maybe you Joan, reading *Meat is Murder*.

Joan: It was *The Sexual Politics of Meat*.



Debbie: Because that makes an explicit argument that there's a gender issue there, doesn't it?

Joan: Yes. Although I share the views that Dianne is expressing, I also think it's very easy in this culture to dissociate from the issue of how animals become meat. It was primarily the connection with feminism and the arguments there about masculinity and meat culture that were a turning point for me in becoming vegetarian. But I think even those aspects of vegetarianism that are not linked with feminism offer very compelling reasons for not eating meat. I don't think, for example, that because the whole dimension of animals' capacity for suffering is not specifically related to feminism it is any less valid an issue. The turning point for me was definitely to do with the arguments in *The Sexual Politics of Meat* about how the language that's used about animals and about women is closely related — what the meat trades journals and pornography have in common — as well as the brutalisation of the people involved in the production of meat, i.e. the rearing of animals for slaughter. We're talking about millions — it's something like 750 million animals — that go to slaughterhouses every year in the UK alone. There was a television programme, which I think

was made in 1990, and called something like *Pandora's Lunchbox*, which was filmed in abattoirs and in battery farms and places like that. I think a lot more people would give up eating meat if they knew the facts about how it was produced. I find the idea obscene that in a culture where we don't need to eat meat we put 750 million animals to death for the purpose of food production. Unlike Dianne I do find the idea of killing animals for food obscene, unless it's about survival, which it clearly isn't in this country. And I do find that culture of brutalisation is profoundly linked with patriarchy; the meat trade is strongly associated with masculinity. It's not accidental that the decor in places like steakhouses is like that of a brothel: the red plush velvet, the imagery, the language of consumption, together with everything Dianne's already said about objectification.

Dianne: When I was 17 I worked in a butcher's shop for a very short time, and it was extraordinary how masculine the environment was. It was a small family shop. The two butchers would try to out-macho each other, and say: 'I cut this finger off in 1972', and the other would say: 'Oh well I sliced my ear off on the bandsaw'. There was this complete culture — like being on a sports field or in a boxing ring. And the fun thing for them, with me being a woman and being new

in the shop, was this sort of competition between the two butchers to see which one could make me throw up. They would get a shipment of sides of pork or whatever, and they would cut the head off and throw it on the counter in front of me with all the brains spilling out and wait to see what my reaction would be. And it reminded me of playground stuff like boys chewing their food and showing it to you and you're supposed to go: 'Ew, gross'. It was very much like that — a horrible masculine environment that I was an intruder into because I was female. I was allowed to *pack* the meat, but it was clearly a man's job to do all the meat cutting.

Debbie: And a woman's job to cook it, presumably, once the customer has bought it.

Dianne: Well, I think in that particular culture, in the Canadian environment, yes.

Joan: I think that's another reason why it is gendered. It's predominantly women who are involved in the production and preparation of food, but where meat is a privileged food, it is predominantly men who kill and eat it.

Debbie: But in those cases, normally what feminists' response is that all the meat shouldn't go to men, that women should get equal shares, not that everybody needs to give it up.

Joan: Yes, but it's not just about access to male



privilege. I think you can extend the argument by looking at why it's seen as privileged food, for instance the way it's associated with masculinity. There's a kind of machismo involved in eating it.

Liz: But you could make exactly the same argument about alcohol. Traditionally alcohol has been more the preserve of men and a male privilege. And some feminists have argued that we should be abolitionists in relation to alcohol but actually most contemporary feminists don't.

Joan: But the argument about alcohol doesn't have any of the issues around animal killing or the treatment of animals linked with it. I can see the point that you're making but if alcohol was produced at the expense of animals in the way that meat is, then I think I would have the same view about that — but it doesn't (fortunately). One of the things I object to most strongly in the arguments against vegetarianism, and the way that vegetarianism is ridiculed, is that there is this argument that we are somehow privileging animals or giving animals the status of human beings or attributing to them...

Debbie: Anthropomorphising them...

Joan: Yes, anthropomorphising them by giving them human rights. It seems to me that people who put that argument anthropomorphise animals where it suits them; they are prepared to recognise that animals have commonalities with humans if it's do to with, for example, medical research. The reason that animals are used in medical research is because of what they're seen to have in common with humans, biologically. Yet when it comes to killing them for food, it is difference that counts suddenly. The argument about what animals have in common with humans seems to have turned more around whether animals are capable of reasoning than whether they are capable of suffering or experiencing feelings that are similar to humans. I also really dislike the idea that because other animals are different from humans, they're necessarily seen as sub-human, because that argument has been used about different categories of human being — i.e. they don't feel as much, or they don't have the same capacity for thinking and therefore it's OK to treat them inhumanely.

Liz: But I think if you use that argument you have to be more than vegetarian because actually how do you know what it's like having milk taken from you. Why do we wear leather shoes?

Joan: Sure. But the fact that there's always a

logical extension of every position doesn't invalidate the fact that, as Dianne said, there are certain things one can do without effort — which actually cost one nothing. It's actually more difficult, I think, in terms of diet and various other choices, for people to take that to its logical conclusion. It does become more complicated the further down that road you go, but it's not difficult not to eat meat in this culture. It's very easy, given the alternatives that are available.

The politics of food production

Debbie: I don't know. I think that is actually questionable, depending on what place you're coming from. I'm sort of in a difficult position here, because I do advocate giving up things, things that you might like or might feel comfortable with, on the grounds of your political principles. But I don't think it is that easy to be a vegetarian. I have the concerns that Dianne started with about food production and the politics of food production, but I really don't think they only apply to meat. What bothers me is that they apply to everything. I think a lot of the products that people start buying when they become vegetarians really don't bear scrutiny in terms of the politics and economics of it and the exploited labour that is involved and the fact that we import large varieties of vegetables which are being grown as cash crops by people who were previously doing subsistence farming. I think there is such a thing as a sustainable lifestyle sustainable food production that does involve meat as well as non-meat, but it would have to be done in a very different way. I make certain choices about food products, like buying a lot of organically produced stuff, both meat and vegetables, so I do think there are very good arguments about the politics of food, but I think it's problematic to think that you're addressing that by being vegetarian. I really think the thing about meat turns on whether you think it's OK to kill animals or not.

Dianne: I disagree, obviously. I think there should be a difference between how we react to the two types of exploitation. I suspect that the cotton in my shirt has been grown on land that previously was for sustainable farming, it's been pesticides to death, it's been harvested by exploited people. There's all sorts of arguments about production methods which can be made about all sorts of other products. But the difference I see is that it's going to take a

different kind of campaigning to sort out those issues — we can start looking at globalisation and we can look at issues about labour and work. We're essentially compromised in most of the choices we make but it isn't an all-or-nothing thing. The way you combat having Zimbabwean mange-tout where a single supermarket has essentially turfed out every small farmer, or whatever the production nightmare might be, is not necessarily to dig into the product's background and decide: 'I'm going to boycott this kind of mange-tout but not that kind of mange-tout'; it's about looking again at the whole idea of globalisation and the power of supernationals and so on...

Debbie: It's not just abroad actually is it. I think about hydroponic watercress. The sister of a friend of mine married into this family that does a lot of vegetable production in Norfolk or somewhere and everything I know about that is quite horrific. Apart from the killing it is comparable to the abattoir. I really think that whether you decide to start with meat or start somewhere else like only buying organic if you can possibly afford to do so it is a question of how you feel about the destruction of living things for the needless, if you like, gratification of human beings.

Dianne: Well let's just say I don't feel the same about a cabbage as I do about a cow.

Debbie: No, but you would feel the same about an exploited agricultural worker as about an



abattoir worker. But there wouldn't be the same metaphorical association with masculinity, would there? Many more of the workers I'm talking about are, in fact, women.

Dianne: It certainly is an area even in this country where a lot of immigrant labour is used, under the counter, poor wages...

Debbie: People being shipped off in vans. Food production is a very nasty business all round. I suppose the other concern I have is about feminism being seen always as a politics of giving up things, giving up every part of what was your culture and what might have been your pleasures. I think many things you come to see as not a pleasure any more and many other things you maybe never saw as a pleasure, like it really cost me nothing to think: 'Oh I'll never have a white wedding', or even: 'I'll never go to a white wedding had by anybody else'. I rejoice in that; that really isn't costly for me but let me ask you, did you find it that easy to give up meat?

Dianne: I love meat. I still have cravings for big steaks or bacon.

Debbie: So it was hard.

Dianne: Well, it's not as bad as giving up smoking.

Liz: I've given up neither. Well, that's not true, I was a vegetarian. But it was precisely that thing about thinking that this was costing me in other ways that I ceased to want to do it. And I was a much more strict vegetarian; I used to look at packets of biscuits to see if there was meat fat in them, because I had a child who would examine them when I came back to see if I'd made a mistake in the supermarket shopping. And it was an enormous amount of work trying to make sure that what we ate was a good enough diet and I got really tired and fed up with it. Having said that I don't eat a huge amount of meat I probably eat it once or twice a week.

Joan: I'm amazed at the argument about work though because I live in a house with two children who are vegetarian, passionately vegetarian, and it doesn't involve us in any extra work.

Liz: Well it depends on what the children eat, doesn't it? It depends if you've got a child who eats all the stuff that they're going to get protein from — if they eat salad, then that's fine, it's not a problem. But if you've got a child who doesn't eat that then it is a huge amount of work.

Joan: But I thought it was the child who didn't want to eat meat?

Debbie: But they might want to live on, I don't know, biscuits or crisps.

Joan: So when did you go back to eating meat? Was it after your daughter was grown up?

Liz: It coincided with her deciding for other complicated reasons that she wasn't going to be a vegetarian any more.

Joan: So are you saying in a way that it wasn't ever a decision of your own, it was never something you held political views about yourself?

Dianne: Or was it like Debbie, that's what you did because you were involved in feminist politics?

Liz: I think it was a combination of both. The women's centre in the town where I lived was also in the back room of a health food shop for a while and it was very much a culture about that. Also partly to do with issues about food production, but now I think in a more complicated way, that this stuff is not just about meat and...

Joan: The fact that things are more complicated isn't a reason for not doing anything or not taking any action. You could say that about almost every aspect of feminist politics.

Debbie: Yeah. So you have your priorities or your boundaries.

Joan: You could see sexuality as being another such issue.

Lifestyle or politics?

Debbie: And some people do say: 'I disagree with that' — and they argue that the question of who we go to bed with and how is about lifestyle choice rather than being about politics.

Joan: It's a complicated issue as well, in that you don't resolve questions of power simply by having relationships with women.

Debbie: Yes, you're not changing the world by becoming a lesbian yourself. Yet that doesn't stop me from doing it and thinking it's important. I don't have kids and during this period it was a cultural thing, wasn't it? For all the time I lived in Oxford I pretty much effectively was a vegetarian without having the conviction about it. I wouldn't have held up my hands in horror if I'd found out that I'd accidentally eaten a meat ingredient, whereas a lot of the people I went

around with would have. But to all intents and purposes I was a vegetarian because everyone I ever ate with was. But on the other hand there were issues about things like the fact that the women in the refuge we helped to run, and women on the whole from working class communities, had no experience with vegetarianism. They'd grown up as did I in a Britain that had a completely horrendous choice of vegetarian food. They didn't know what to do with it, how to prepare it, they were just not interested in that at all. That caused certain conflicts which I would see as basically cultural conflict and which I think you have to be a bit flexible about it, there being other things that those women are contending with and that you're trying to contend with in supporting them, that might be more politically important from a feminist point of view.

Joan: Sure. But the fact that you might be vegetarian doesn't mean that you have to require all the women in the refuge to be vegetarian.

Debbie: No, but what if you want to eat with them? What if that was a thing that happened? The other time I find this, and this is a thing that's more relevant to my lifestyle now, is that it's difficult if you travel. Some places quite close to us find vegetarianism an absolutely extraordinary idea. You won't find too many vegetarians in Spain or Portugal. It's not that an enormous amount of meat is eaten. In no peasant-type culture is there huge amounts of it in the diet but in the Iberian peninsula certainly you'd find a lot of fish and seafood eaten. You wouldn't find people basing meals on vegetables. And so for me there's a whole issue around hospitality and how that gets compromised if there are ordinary things — very large numbers of ordinary things — that you refuse to eat. And even worse, if you do take it to the stage of being vegan.

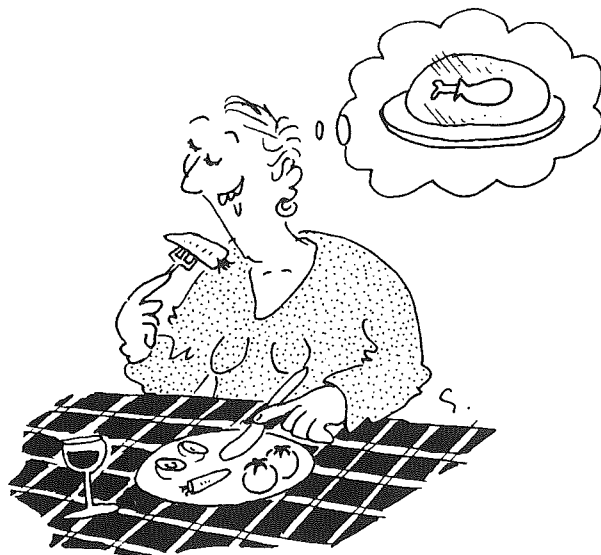
Joan: Don't you think that's different from actually going out and buying and cooking it yourself, though?

Debbie: I think that's rather hypocritical, isn't it? Why should I be more willing to have animals slaughtered if other people cook them than if I do?

Joan: Well I don't think it's hypocritical if your main concern there is of recognising cultural differences and hospitality. It depends on what your priorities are.

Liz: But we didn't do that in the 80s though. I

can't tell you how many Women's Aid conferences I went to where all the food that was available was vegetarian and it was fine for a lot of the women who were workers or part of the support group but the idea was to bring women from the refuge there and their kids and many of them hated the food. And part of what that meant was they then didn't take part in the conference; they'd gone off to the chip shop or somewhere to get something to eat. So I think there are ways in which we made it a requirement of being involved in feminist politics which actually was very unhelpful in terms of asking



other women to come into the organisation. Now that's not an argument to justify my choice.

Joan: I do think the arguments around sexuality are very similar though. Because a lot of women are alienated by women-only space and completely misconstrue the whole notion that doesn't mean that you therefore open those things up to men in order to get more heterosexual women involved.

Debbie: I agree, but that's where my point about priorities comes in. That is hugely important, particularly in the context of working with women who have experienced domestic violence, whereas the food thing I think is just so much less important in terms of my gender politics that I do think it's unhelpful to make a big issue of it.

Joan: I think the food thing is less important in terms of gender politics, but I do think that unless that information or clarity of political

principle is actually there in the point you argue then it's not even something that becomes an idea that's disseminated as part of feminist debate and discussion. And I don't actually think of it as a choice I don't think it is either/or. I don't think it's the case that you make vegetarianism a part of your feminist politics at the expense of other aspects of your politics. I really don't see that it has to be like that.

Debbie: No, but if you're organising a conference...

Joan: If you're organising a conference, of course you have to take into account the constituency of women who are going to be there. But the fact that you are inviting a whole load of women who are likely to be vegetarian — it doesn't impinge on them (some, of course, that you would have known in your Oxford days would think that it did) that there is meat available for other women in the way that if you invite men to such an event then it does impinge on lesbians (and women in general) that they're there. I don't think that being a vegetarian means you assume some moral high ground that is completely ignorant in terms of culture and class and all the other issues you've been raising. I simply don't think it has to be a choice between vegetarianism and other issues at all.

Debbie: Not at the level of individuals it doesn't. Individuals will make choices and ought to be able to. The cultural issues are complicated. The refuge that I worked with women in was basically working class white, but if it had had a lot of Asian women there would have been those issues in the kitchen of the refuge itself. Cultures are very different. In the Indian subcontinent you would have no problem because it would be more unusual for people to eat meat than not to eat it. I think I agree with Liz's point; I think we did make it a kind of hegemony and I think my failure to be a vegetarian might be a sort of reaction against that in a kind of class chip-on-the-shoulder kind of way. But also there is the fact that I do like meat, and I don't want feminism to seem completely like a politics of having to give up everything you like.

Joan: I think that's the least strong argument of the lot.

Debbie: I know, it's a crap argument.

Dianne: I find it so unconvincing, because what you're saying is simply 'I don't want to give it up'.

Debbie: Well if I don't want to give it up why should I imagine that anybody else does?

Liz: In a way all we can talk about is the decisions we have made. And the political grounds or not on which they're based. So in a way that's all we can speak from. I suspect that some of my reneging on it is precisely linked to some of those things.

Debbie: It's not as if the food I ate in my childhood was a gourmet dream by any means.

Liz: Absolutely.

Debbie: And it's not as if I cook those things now.

Joan: But you're talking about reneging at a point when the culture isn't like that. I can completely sympathise with and respect the idea of reacting against a lifestyle politics and refusing to conform because there's a completely unargued assumption which becomes a kind of unquestioned moral principle as well... But I think where there's a principled politics you make a decision whether you agree with that or not, and if you do, then refusing to follow the logic of that it seems to me a different thing from refusing a hegemony that's about lifestyle.

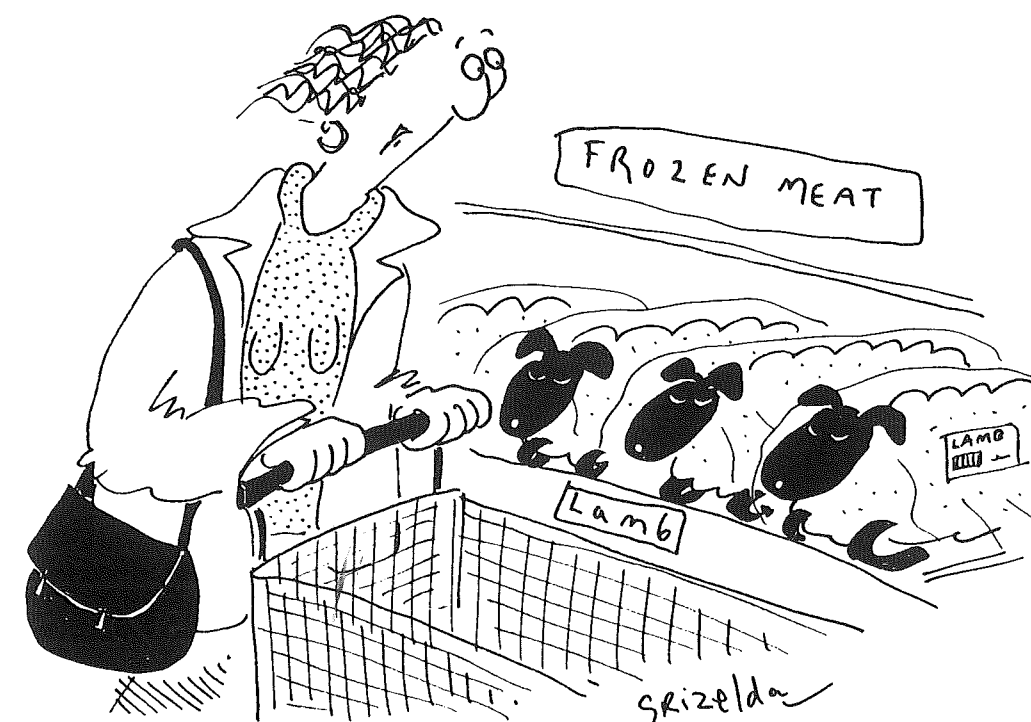
Dianne: Well, possibly. Before I actually

stopped eating meat, I actually accepted a lot of the arguments in a kind of back-of-the-brain sort of way. And for a number of months before I stopped eating meat, I would say to a friend of mine: 'One of these days I know I'm going to have to stop eating meat'. So obviously somewhere I had accepted that these were valid points but it didn't quite translate into action for some time, and it might not have translated into action ever.

Joan: The reason why I think Debbie's argument about 'I like it, and I don't want to stop', has absolutely no substance at all is that the same argument could apply to so many other issues as well. For example, very few women who are lesbian would actually feel that they had given up sleeping with men.

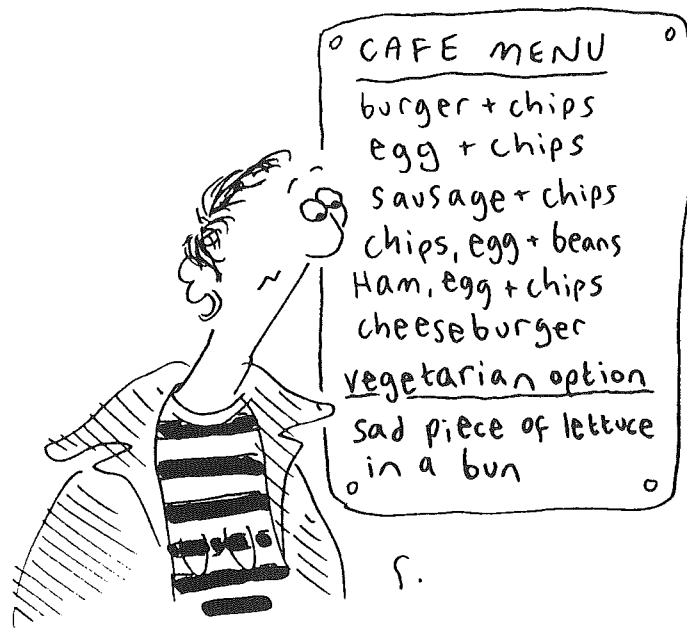
Debbie: Exactly. But that's all the difference in the world.

Joan: But there are women who, when they were heterosexual, did not necessarily find it completely repellent and alienating. And anyway, whether they did or they didn't, I think the argument applies exactly the same. I would now find eating meat repulsive, but I didn't at the time when I gave it up, actually. In fact the very



morning that I decided to not to eat any more meat I had gone downstairs to buy bacon and eggs and the first edition of the *Sunday Correspondent* which happened to have in it the most distressing article about pig farming. It brought back all the arguments I had just read in Carol Adams' book; it was just so completely and utterly about the brutalisation of those animals, and the way that it corresponded so strongly to the way women are treated in the sex industry, that I just thought: 'OK, this is it'. And I think partly it's something to do with pigs very specifically as well; it's common knowledge that pigs are every bit as intelligent as most domestic pets, cats and dogs, and yet people who sentimentalise furry animals are perfectly happy to have pigs slaughtered for their breakfast. And I just think that's foul hypocrisy.

Dianne: An interesting point where I think our arguments diverge is that my main objection, if I'm forced to articulate it, is about resources and so on. In some respects I find eating fish almost worse than eating cows because we are destroying the oceans. Because we have a surplus of cows, but we are gradually depleting the stocks of fish down to unsustainable levels. It is leading to a huge ecological disaster and some places have already been badly hit. I do find eating fish rather



short-sighted.

Liz: Or the exemption of fish...

Dianne: The exemption of fish, particularly in the environment where we live, where most of our fish arrives on our tables as a result of great big fishing nets dragging behind huge ships the size of football fields and not some little local fisherman with his tiny little net that pulls in his daily catch. And that's certainly one of the areas where I think I differ from you Joan. Because it's not just about mammals or killing; it's to do with resources.

Joan: I do agree with you, although it took me much longer to get a place of giving up fish than meat.

Dianne: Was that your rationale for eating fish — that you're just harvesting them from their own environment — that they are happily going about their lives until they're caught and killed?

Debbie: Actually a lot of the ones we eat are farmed, aren't they?

Dianne: Certain species are.

Joan: The conditions under which fish are produced clearly differ from those of other animals, but I still think the argument around killing for the sake of food is very strong indeed.

Dianne: I've met people who call themselves vegetarian but who eat fish...

Joan: And there are those who say they're vegetarian who eat chicken as well...

Dianne: It's mad — as if fish are somehow a turnip. I *should* be vegan; there's no question I should be vegan but it's too hard.

Debbie: It's only quite recently that even being vegetarian in this country has not consigned you to a life of tedious and boring food.

The importance of food

Dianne: Food's never been that important to me. I've never been one to eat gourmet food. So if a vegetarian dish isn't particularly inspiring I don't really care. As long as it tastes OK and goes down and doesn't come back up then I'm happy. If it were really important to you about the variety and flavour and excitement of food I think it would be difficult.

Debbie: I think that depends quite a bit on where you go to eat and what you can afford if you're talking about food you don't prepare yourself. I still think that vegetarians are not

well-served by, say, the average works canteen or caf around the corner. And I suppose this is part of my class chip on the shoulder. If you believe a thing's desirable you do look at how feasible it is for people who might not be in a privileged position.

Joan: But these are circular arguments to some extent because if there were more people who were vegetarian there would be better provision. Most fast-food places now have veggie burgers.

Debbie: I think it's interesting to think about how things might go in the future because I've heard or read that a lot more young people are vegetarian, whether they keep that up for a long time but the children you live with are not alone, are they? There are huge numbers, so they have to cater for that at school.

Joan: They've been vegetarian for a long time.

Debbie: How much re-education of what people like to eat and can cook is really going on in school dinners? Do they use meat substitutes or do they try and turn children on to actual vegetables and grains?

Joan: It tends not to be meat substitutes but it involves a lot of dairy products.

Debbie: There is such a thing as a very unhealthy vegetarian diet.

Liz: Yes.

Joan: The idea about health is one that I find fairly peculiar, given what we know about how unhealthy meat is. I'm not just talking about things like BSE but, for example, the kind of research about how meat is associated with cancer. The notion that it's healthy is just extraordinary.

Debbie: It's partly to do with the bizarre proportions in which we eat them. Every globally known healthy diet involves a small amount of meat in the diet to large amounts of complex carbohydrates.

Dianne: This is the interesting thing about the class argument because I think it's only in the comparatively rich West where we think nothing of eating meat three times a day. You have your bacon in the morning, you have your ham sandwich at lunch and you have a steak or pork chop at dinner. It's absolutely extraordinary. Part of the production methods encouraged in this country, in most of the West, that has made the meat industry such a production line is the insistence on cheap meat and every government

talks about cheap meat, as if this is the most worthwhile thing to work for. Whereas in any other part of the world, if you're poor or working class, you have very little access to meat.

Debbie: But that doesn't translate into wanting less access to it. In those circumstances it's a food that's privileged in that it's a treat. There's certainly over-production and over-eating and the health of the poor suffers probably more than the health of the rich. If you look at the general diet in Scotland it's completely horrendous. But the fact is, I feel the arguments here are like the arguments on smoking, everybody knows it kills you — I'm sitting here doing it. But in lives that have little pleasure, people take their pleasure where they can and that becomes part of their cultural way of doing things. In the family I grew up in there was no-one that would have known how to prepare a meal without meat or fish in it. It doesn't mean that I couldn't make different choices.

Joan: That was true in my family; my father was in the meat trade and wouldn't have considered it to be a proper meal without some meat. I don't see that your background determines the choices that you make.

Debbie: No, but I think it does explain some of the choices that people don't make even if they think that the moral or the health or the animal rights arguments are pretty strong. Maybe that shouldn't serve as an excuse for me but I do think it's explanatory on a larger scale. And I also think that if you wanted to have a politics around food it would have to involve making a kind of pleasurable and healthy diet and the preparation of that accessible to more people in the way that we teach people how to cook or what we make available at what prices.

Joan: It's about priorities again, isn't it? The fact that you may not choose to prioritise that as a campaigning issue doesn't alter the fact that you can make that choice for yourself and that you can actually also find pleasure within the choices that you make. I really think that the constant association of this issue with things like smoking or alcohol is totally skewed because it constantly sidelines the core issues that we're talking about. I have no interest in campaigning against smoking or alcohol. There are similar issues in terms of the arguments Dianne was putting, certainly about tobacco anyway. And of course there are arguments about food production

as a whole, not just meat. But the single issue of whether or not it's ethically tenable to condone acute suffering and slaughter on a vast scale is what takes this issue way outside the frame of reference of other types of industry.

Debbie: I don't know about the suffering, because it think it would be possible to raise animals and indeed even kill them in different conditions.

Joan: But that's not how it's done though is it?

Debbie: No it isn't, but I certainly do agree with the aims of an organisation like Compassion in World Farming, which isn't against the raising of livestock, but is utterly against the way we do it now.

Dianne: The problem is that you can't have it both ways. The only way you're going to get compassion in farming is to stop eating so much meat. Because in order to provide the amount of meat that we, as a country, eat, the methods for farming by necessity are brutal.

Debbie: In theory you could legislate to change that and people would have to eat less meat.

Dianne: Yeah.

Debbie: So your order of events is not necessarily the only logical one stop eating meat and then we get more compassionate farming.

Dianne: I'm saying you can't have compassion in farming with the same level of production and consumption. If meat were all produced in compassionate circumstances I might rethink my being vegetarian.

Debbie: All I was trying to say when we started this digression was that some people don't feel like that — they feel that the issue is we can't kill animals. And I suppose my position in this discussion is that I don't agree with that. It's not that I disrespect it or would want to argue anybody else out of their choices or their feelings on that but I do not see that that's a gender issue.

Joan: No it's not, but that doesn't make it any less significant an issue — as with so many things. I don't think that it is a gender issue in and of itself. I think that there are connections with gender issues which are basically to do with the fact that the vast majority of violence and slaughter is done by men whether it's animals or women, or other men. Slaughtering animals for food is a form of violence; I don't think you can deny that, can you?

Debbie: No.

Joan: And violence is a gendered issue, isn't it?

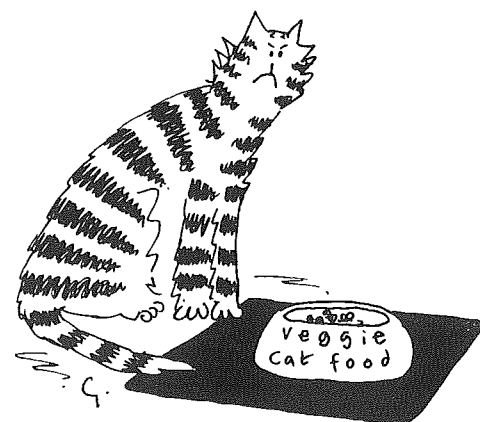
Debbie: In a patriarchal culture, yes it is, in certain ways, but I don't think violence would go away if we overthrew patriarchy.

Joan: But in a patriarchal society, violence is gendered and therefore the meat industry, which is inherently violent, is also gendered...

Debbie: For me a lot of the arguments for not eating meat are very good arguments but none of them are intrinsically feminist arguments to the degree that I would think: 'I cannot call myself a feminist if I go on doing this'.

Dianne: That's true.

Joan: Of course I accept that. I think you are completely consistent within your point of view; I just don't agree with you. □



Cruel but not unusual

Feminists have long debated the merits of the term 'domestic violence', seeking to underline the political nature of male violence in the so-called 'private sphere'. Here, Claudia Hasanbegovic puts the case for using the term 'domestic torture', drawing parallels with those forms of violence which are publicly condemned, and highlighting the role of the state in condoning and colluding in acute forms of violence against women on a vast scale.

On hearing the term 'domestic violence' or 'family violence', women — even those who are experiencing such aggression in their intimate lives — experience confusing feelings. Reactions might range from considering the issue as something without any relevance to them, something that takes place in other lives, to minimising the phenomenon as a private matter. The academic world is not immune from these prejudices, transforming the ideology of privacy into an open devaluation of research in this area. By contrast, the word 'torture' motivates general

disapproval — and respect for its victims. The difference in public response to these two social phenomena can be found in the division of spheres between private and public, domestic and political, the 'feminine' world and the male world; all of which regard traditional women's views and perceptions as inferior.

Nevertheless, since 1878 feminists have argued that domestic violence is domestic torture. My intention is to clarify these notions and to contribute to the redefinition of domestic violence as domestic torture, as well as to

uncover the political nature of male violence against women in the private sphere. This is a political question with the state as an essential element in the dynamic: the cause, production and reproduction of domestic torture in society.

Understanding the political nature of male violence against women in the 'private' sphere brings about various implications for struggling towards the elimination of domestic violence. In terms of legal instruments and redress, international conventions against torture would be enforced to protect battered women, entitling those women who are enduring domestic torture to seek political asylum when their national states do not protect them. Principles of 'state responsibility', making a state accountable to the international community for its failure to protect all its national citizens from torture, would apply to women suffering from male torture as well. Yet, perhaps one of the most relevant effects of using the term 'domestic torture' is its effect on describing a brutal reality of cruelty and extreme suffering that millions of women and children endure every day. Domestic torture, despite its obvious prevalence, appears to be naturalised by society and neglected by the state. Therefore, to define a brutal political reality through a term that denotes brutality and political responsibility might be a contribution to the process of consciousness-raising for survivors of domestic torture, and the community in general.

Why the term 'wife torture'?

Academics and feminists do not agree amongst themselves in the use of the term 'domestic torture'. In 1878 Frances Power Cobbe wrote an article under the title 'Wife Torture in England'. She argued that: 'I have called this paper "English Wife-Torture" because I wish to impress my readers with the fact that the familiar term "wife-beating" conveys as remote a notion of the extremity of the cruelty indicated as when candid and ingenuous vivisectioners talk of "scratching a newt's tail" when they refer to burning alive, or dissecting out the nerves of living dogs, or torturing ninety cats in the series of experiments'. Frances Power Cobbe had a significant impact on public opinion, and the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1878, which enabled abused wives to obtain separation orders to keep their husbands away from them, was passed. Cobbe supported her argument with statistics of femicide and accounts of extreme brutality carried out by men in the home. Edward Peters, in his

book *Torture*, refers to Cobbe's article, indicating that:

the title speaks for itself. The word torture was arresting and unambiguous. It was astutely chosen and created a perspective upon the problem that must have focused a greater deal of hitherto diffused attention upon the central aspect of the problem by linking it to a term which, by the later nineteenth century, was one of virtually universal opprobrium and therefore potentially effective in harnessing what had until then been a scattered opposition. Torture was acquiring its semantic expansion, as always, in an honourable and important cause.

The 'honourable and important cause' of eliminating male violence against women from the private sphere includes acknowledging that it involves acts of torture. Torture involves the use of violence against an individual, with a political connotation given by the fact that the state carries out this torture either in an active way, through one of its agents or by somebody following its instructions, or in a passive form, by complicity. When a state fails to protect its citizens from torture, in the public as well as in the private domain, it legitimises torture. Peters minimises the gravity of what Power Cobbe denounced, and ignore Power Cobbe's accounts of statistics on femicide and wife torture. Power Cobbe classified domestic violence according to the different states of the cycle of marital violence saying that: 'But the unendurable mischief, the discovery of which has driven me to try to call public attention to the whole matter, is this — Wife-beating in process of time, and in numberless cases, advances to Wife-torture, and the Wife-torture usually ends in Wife-maiming, Wife-blinding, or Wife-murder'.

In the 1990s, feminist legal activism and research put forward the concept of domestic violence as domestic torture. Rhonda Copelon, Martha Albertson Finemann et al. searched the international legal system for possible remedies to a phenomenon which they understood as torture. Their articles quote again and again the testimonies of survivors of domestic torture that illustrate the dimension of terror, isolation and brutality that women endure. Additionally, when looking at international conventions on human rights, Michele Beasley and Dorothy Thomas found legal arguments under the concept of state responsibility to implicate the state in domestic torture through their inactivity and constant failure to protect women from male violence.

Theorising Torture

From a gender perspective on torture, the cases of women tortured throughout history is well documented. Women's legal, economic, and social dependency has made them vulnerable and subordinated. Most ancient societies gave men the right to beat and kill their women. In some societies, christian, jewish and muslim religions have tolerated wife-beating into the present day. During medieval times, the Holy Inquisition and the witch hunts specifically targeted those women who attempted to subvert their subordinate position in society or in the family. Currently, the brutal misogyny of religious fundamentalist regimes costs the lives of many women around the world.

With greater or lesser degrees of prevalence, and with different objectives, torture has been carried out in almost all countries of the world. For example, there are accounts by Amnesty International of torture in the early years of the century in democratic Argentina in order to support foreign companies' interests. Torture was also carried out by the Nazis during the Second World War for political and racist reasons. Nevertheless, after the Holocaust, and with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the practice of torture by state agents became more clandestine, despite exceptions like the Iranian system. However, torture by husbands is ubiquitous and largely practised with impunity.

Wife battering understood as wife torture

Andrea Dworkin quotes the following testimony of a battered woman abused by her partner after he had used pornography:

He whipped her with belts and electrical cords. He made her pull her pants down to beat her. 'I was touched and grabbed where I did not want him to touch me'. She was also locked in dark closets and in the basement for long periods of time.

Similar testimony of a woman tortured by the Argentinean military is quoted by Nora Strejilevich:

the electrical prods on the teeth were horrible a thin cord with small little balls... each little ball it was an electrical prod and when it worked out I felt as if once thousand glasses were broken... they displaced along the body hurting it... I could not scream, neither weep, nor move. I was shaking ... I want to see where I am, I put the bandage

down from my eyes and it is the first time I open my eyes. I am sat here, this place is like a wardrobe.

A battered woman, quoted by Maria Cristina Vila, told her psychologist that:

She was eight months pregnant when one night, after she sent her two daughters to bed, she had finished the cooking and she had also finished washing the floor. During the dinner, her husband dropped the food on the floor and put her face in it. After that, he ordered her to stand next to his chair, he pointed a gun and ordered her to remain in this position till next day. ... he warned her that if she would move, he would kill her and the daughters. The woman remained standing till the next morning, when she came into the bathroom, she washed herself and brought the children to school.

Peters describes the different techniques of torture, designed and usually carried out by state agents. Additionally, he proposes a view of pain:

as a perceptual experience whose quality and intensity are influenced by the unique past history of the individual, by the meaning he gives to the pain-producing situation and by his 'state of mind' at the moment. It is suggested that all the factors named before played a role in determining the patterns of nerve impulses that ascend from the body to brain and travel within the brain itself. And, in this way pain becomes a function of the whole individual, including his present thoughts and fears as well as his hopes for the future.

In this sense, pain as an outcome of political torture or family torture has consequences in the body and psyche of the woman. Judith Herman developed the term 'complex post traumatic stress syndrome' to make a diagnosis adequate for the psychological impact of torture in battered women — as well as in survivors of concentration camps and political prisoners. Renee Romkens and Maria Cristina Vila employ the term 'post traumatic stress syndrome' to identify the psychological outcome of male violence for women. The different approaches agree that all abused women have a common experience outside of the 'normal' experience of a human being. The distinction regarding wife abuse is the intimate bond with the perpetrator, the length and repetition of the abuse over time.

Political parallels

There is, however, a type of political violence named 'hostage-taking', which presents similarities with wife abuse, including the intimate

bonds. In the hostage situation, intimate bonds result from staying for a long time in close proximity to the abductor. Usually, within marriage a woman has chosen the intimate bond with the man who batters her. While in the case of the hostage, the woman or man does not choose the relationship, nor do they choose the individual(s) who are perpetrating the abuse. In both circumstances, violence, intimate relationship, captivity and isolation are present. Regarding hostages, the jailer alone effects the isolation of the prisoner. Yet the isolation experienced by a battered woman is the result both of her partner's actions and threats and of the complicity of society and state. The legal and social concept of privacy grants husbands licence to isolate their women from any kind of assistance. Dee Graham et. al. analysed the 'Stockholm syndrome' to account for the paradoxical psychological responses of hostages to their captors. This analysis suggests that when a captor is also kind in some ways, despite threatening a person with death, hostages may develop a fondness for the captor and an antipathy toward authorities working for their release. Dee Graham et. al. take a step further and say that this model shows how the psychological characteristics observed in battered women resemble those of hostages. This model suggests that these psychological characteristics are the result of being in a life-threatening relationship rather than being the cause of an abusive relationship. Furthermore, in both cases extreme power imbalance between an abusive husband and battered wife, as between captor and hostage, can lead to strong emotional bonding. The authors summarised the conditions which give rise to the development of the Stockholm syndrome

- (1) a person who threatens to kill another is perceived as having the capability to do so;
- (2) the other cannot escape, so her or his life depends on the threatening person;
- (3) the threatened person is isolated from outsiders so that the only other perspective available to her or him is that of the threatening person;
- and (4) the threatening person is perceived as showing some degree of kindness to the one being threatened.

Despite these elements and similarities, there are several differences between the situation of hostage and the battered woman. One is the sex of captor and hostage, both of whom are usually men. In an abusive relationship, the woman is made into the man's hostage. The other difference is the victim-victimiser relationship. The

situation of marriage or intimate relation is usually chosen by the woman as well as her partner, while in the situation of hostages, it is a relation imposed by a stranger. In addition to this, the ordeal of a battered woman might last for several years, while for the hostage it would usually be, at most, a question of months. Moreover hostages develop their attachment to their captors 'during' the captivity, while battered women usually become attached to their male partner before the violence begins. According to Finkelhor and Yllo, 'findings indicate that rape by one's husband is experienced as worse than rape by a stranger because the women came to doubt their judgement in choosing intimate partners, had to live with their rapists, and felt unable to talk with others about the rapes and to get outsider support'. Therefore, it seems possible to expect that women being held hostage will not experience the same self-doubt about their choice of intimate partners as battered women do.

Dee Graham et. al. also suggest that another difference is the 'outsider concern' for the life of the hostage and involvement in negotiating their release. In the case of the battered woman, she herself has to negotiate her life and safety with her abuser. Lack of outsider concern for battered women's fate is also related to the isolation from outsiders. In the situation of hostages, the isolation is physically and geographically clear: for outsiders, for captors and for the hostage. The hostage is held in the home, workplace, or elsewhere, by someone who is threatening to kill them and asking for something in exchange for their release. The captor makes the situation visible. He makes clear the abuse and threats to the hostage's life. On the other hand, in the case of a battered woman, the goal of her social and familial isolation is not openly stated. The battered woman is being abused, and she herself most of the time reinforces her own isolation to avoid her husband's punishment, for instance, when her partner claims to not like her relatives or friends visiting her, or objects to her working outside the home. He does not need to state his wishes explicitly, but he will punish his partner if she does not deduce them and comply with them. He does not openly declare his goal of subjugating his wife. Generally, the abusive man is violent in private, without the presence of outsiders, thus keeping a social image of kindness and benevolence.

The battered woman is held hostage in her own house. This is a place socially, familiarly,

religiously, and politically understood as a 'safe place', a private place where nobody has the right to intervene. The articulation of the principle of privacy, and the discriminatory application of the law by the state — which neglects and/or denies effective protection for its female citizens — are important contributory factors in making the battered woman's captivity possible. In addition, some material aspects of the economic and social dependency of women on men — lack of shelters and subsidies, and so on — also help to keep a battered woman prisoner.

Public vs. private violence

In spite of these differences, there is overwhelming evidence of similarities between the abuse perpetrated on battered women and political torture techniques. According to Judith Herman, violation by a state or soldier is not necessarily more devastating than violation by an intimate. In fact, the violence carried out by a partner is potentially psychologically more devastating than the violence endured by a woman from a stranger. Some Argentinean survivors of political torture and violence in the home, expressed sentiments such as these:

I was tortured by the Military, and then my husband also battered me. I can assure you that my husband's hits were more awful than the 'picana' [electric prods] of the Military. I chose my husband and I loved him. The military were just sons of a bitch, my enemies. But my husband no. That was more humiliating for me than the picana.

In this testimony, the trust and confidence built up in an intimate relationship was betrayed by the husband, while the state oppressor was a stranger without emotional bonds to the woman. It is precisely the breach of trust by the abusive husband that leads to immense psychological pain for women, and makes both torture and battering similar whatever the level of violence endured and whatever techniques employed by the torturer or abusive partner.

Another testimony of a former Argentinean guerrilla who was tortured in the 70s by Argentinean, as well as Peruvian, military said:

Rape was the worst torture for me. The electric prods were not so devastating as the rape. However, when I remember that, I feel angry with the Peruvian military who gang-raped me during two weeks, not with the Argentinean ones...[because] as a guerrilla soldier I knew that if the enemy captured me, they would try to eliminate me. But I wasn't

the enemy of the Peruvian military. I didn't even know anything about their politics, but I helped their indigenous people with my work in the community.

In this testimony, being gang-raped for being a woman, rather than for being a *political enemy* caused this courageous woman greater outrage.

Edward Peters provided some descriptions of the methods of torture in the late twentieth century; these include the most common types of abuse found in situations of domestic violence. Edward Peters classifies methods of torture as: 'somatic torture, psychological torture and pharmacological torture'. Amongst these methods of torture, it is possible to identify those experienced by the women whose testimonies were quoted above:

the somatic torture includes beating: punching, kicking, striking with truncheons, rifle butts, jumping on the stomach...
Electricity: probing with pointed electrodes (picana eléctrica); cattle prods (shock batons) amongst others. Prolonged assumption of forced and stressful positions of body.
Prolonged standing. Traction alopecia: the pulling out of hair. Rape and sexual assaults. Forced consumption of spoiled or deliberately heavily spiced food... [the psychological torture includes] witnessing the torture sessions of others: relatives, children. Threats made to witness the torture of others. Sham executions. Sleep deprivation. Solitary confinement. Threats.

The techniques and effects of torture in the private and in the public sphere are not the only commonalities of these types of violence. The persistence of torture over years and across nations, despite the international conventions that forbid it, is similar to the phenomenon of wife torture.

It is recognised that male violence against women in the home is a manifestation of the imbalance of power between men and women in this sphere and in society as a whole. The use of violence or the threat of physical violence by the man tends to control the woman's will, body, mobility, sexuality and property. According to Ronald Crelinsten and Alex Schmid, torture aims to paralyse the enemy politically and therefore control their will. Darius Rejali proposes comparing torture with what goes on in homes, hospitals, schools or factories, in order to gain a better understanding of state punishment.

Defining torture

According to international legal instruments, torture involves violence done or condoned by

Amnesty International Report on Torture (Duckworth in association with Amnesty International Publications, 1973)

Michele E. Beasley and Dorothy Q. Thomas 'Domestic Violence as a Human Rights Issue' in Martha Albertson Finemann and Roxanne Mykitiuk (eds) *The Public Nature of Private Violence* (Routledge, 1994)

Rhonda Copelon 'Intimate Terror: Understanding Domestic Violence as Torture' in Rebecca Cook (ed) *Human Rights of Women: National and International Perspectives* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995)

Ronald D. Crelinsten & Alex P. Schmid *The Politics of Pain: Torturers and Their Masters* (Westview Press, 1995)

Andrea Dworkin *Life and Death* (Virago Press, 1997)

Judith Lewis Herman *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence — From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (Basic Books, 1992)

United Nations 'Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment' in *Human Rights Instruments* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, 1993)

Frances Power Cobbe 'Wife Torture in England' first published in *Contemporary Review*, 1878, reprinted by Jill Radford and Diana E. H. Russell (eds) *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing* (Open University Press, 1992)

Darius Rejali *Torture and Modernity: Self, Society, and State in Modern Iran* (Westview Press, 1994)

Renee Romkens 'Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome in Battered Women' in *On Love and Violence* (Moon Stichting, 1989)

Nora Strejilevich *Una sola muerte numerosa* (Universidad de Miami, 1997)

María Cristina Vila 'Aspectos psicológicos de la problemática y consecuencias para la salud de la mujer' [Psychological issues of the battered woman problem and its consequences for women's health] in *Violencia Familiar Mujer Golpeada II* (Asamblea Permanente por los Derechos Humanos, 1996)

public authority. The UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatments or Punishments, in Article 1, establishes that:

For the purposes of this Convention, the term 'torture' means any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions.

Several authors remark on the similarities between gender violence in the public realm — specifically war and state terrorism — and gender violence in the home. Yet, in the cases of war or state terrorism, the state is directly involved in the production and reproduction of violence, and furthermore, it legitimises military violence. However, in the case of domestic violence, many states deny its existence or minimise its consequences for women. Those states seem impervious to requests for assistance made by battered women. Some states, when enacting laws to protect women against male violence in the home, fulfilling international obligations, do not prescribe any sanction or punishment of the perpetrator. It seems ridiculous that the only institution with the power to punish and sanction the behaviour of citizens does not use this power when it is comes to punishing abusive men and protecting their female partners.

Most nations have men in great proportions occupying positions in state institutions such as the judiciary and the police. In many nations of the world, states fail to punish abusive male partners. This attitude seems to be a kind of patriarchal conspiracy, where the male political hegemony protects male citizens and sanctions their abuses. How is it otherwise possible to explain states' behaviour in the light of the international conventions they have signed and ratified? States have the obligation, national and international, to protect their female citizens from male violence in the private and in the public sphere, and the duty to punish the criminals. However, the prevalence of violence

against women reveals the political character of male violence against women. It is this political dimension which causes us to consider the state as an essential factor in the production and reproduction of male violence against women in the family, and in society in general.

In legal terms, the constant failure of the state to protect women from male violence in the home constitutes 'state responsibility'. Even though the concept was initially developed for cases of human rights abuses in the political arena such as torture during state terrorism, feminists and advocates for battered women initiated legal actions against state institutions which failed to protect women from male violence in the home on the grounds of 'state responsibility'.

A political definition for a political problem

The approach taken in this article is informed by my professional legal background. The inclusion of the state, the idea of responsibility, the need for state intervention in protecting female citizens' rights to live free from violence, together with the obligation to punish marital violence — amongst other kinds of male violence against women in society — are components of a legal attempt to understand the causes of, and solutions to, wife torture. This perspective assumes that the phenomenon of wife torture is a political issue, which requires a political consideration and solution.

As it is posed, the state is actively or passively a factor in the production and reproduction of wife abuse. Furthermore, the political obligation of states to stop male violence against women in their societies derives from the international law and human rights conventions related to women's issues, and torture. In addition, cross-cultural studies have shown that wife abuse is avoidable. Aspects of communal intervention, education, judgement, and delegitimisation of cultural beliefs that devalue women's lives in societies, are elements which have to be addressed when planning public and social policies on wife battering. Despite this, and probably most important of all, is the political will to improve women's lives.

Therefore a new definition of wife abuse is proposed here. This concept is designed to clarify the political and public nature of the phenomenon, to help victims and outsiders to identify brutality and responsibilities, and to

validate survivors' experiences. In other words, this is a definition that points out states' obligation to be held accountable for their failure to protect women's rights, that reflects the nature of women as survivors and that highlights the psychological dimensions of wife-torture in their lives:

Wife-torture is male violence against women carried out in the private sphere, through physical, psychological, sexual or economic violence, pursuing control over a woman's behaviour and will, forcing the woman to do what she does not want to do, or forbidding her to do what she wants to do. This kind of

torture implies the progressive detriment to women's physical and emotional forces, impoverishment, damage to her self-esteem, and human dignity, and its prolongation through time points out the state's complicity with the criminal.

Wife-torture is a crime, which violates the human rights of women granted through international conventions and local laws, and its prevalence in society is a political issue to be tackled by the state. The state's failure to guarantee its female citizens their human rights makes the state accountable before the international community. □

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Difference is not all that counts

The idea of differences among women has been one of the most prominent themes in recent feminism. But while recognising diversity is important, the politics of 'difference' can lead to denials of women's oppression and reinforce the most conservative tendencies in particular communities, silencing more radical challenges. Here Purna Sen gives her personal view that diversity should be placed within a framework of commonality: an effective feminist politics must recognise what women share.

Some differences are recognised, some are not and sometimes difference can be turned into a tool for separation, isolation and censorship. Here I will argue both for the recognition of difference and against the privileging of difference, wherein lie many difficulties. I want to make a case for recognising commonality among women, but within certain parameters. I will do this from my own experience and work, particularly among Asian women in the UK, in the Indian sub-continent and with women from various other backgrounds.

Feminism in the sub-continent

There are many examples of inspirational feminist work from the sub-continent which I cannot go into here in any detail. I wish to highlight only two.

The trafficking of girls across countries in the sub-continent is rife, with many young girls disappearing from their homes and ending up in areas of prostitution. Sometimes they are intercepted by government officials or the girls may try to escape the control of their traffickers. In these situations, the girls are either put into government shelters (which are often incredibly unpleasant) or appear in court and are re-claimed by their traffickers, posing as relatives. The girls may go along with this misrepresentation, out of fear of their abusers. Sanlaap is an organisation based in Calcutta which works on this issue and which has successfully lobbied for access to and recognition in the courts. They have also visited the government residential homes in which 'rescued' girls are placed and in which they too often languish. They have now managed to obtain

recognition as legitimate carers for these girls, so that they are given custody. They can then house the girls, try to locate their families and provide some education or training too. They do this as part of their work against trafficking, against prostitution, against male violence and for greater opportunities for women and girls.

In Pakistan, a long-established women's organisation is currently (May 1999) being harassed and threatened by men on a number of fronts. Shirkat Gah has long worked for the promotion of the rights of women, handling cases of domestic violence, rape, forced marriage and other forms of discrimination against women. During the 1990s there has been an increase in the number of so-called 'honour' killings of women and these too come to the workers at Shirkat Gah. 'Honour' killings — which I think we should re-name dishonour killings — are where women are killed for having been considered to dishonour or shame their families; their killing (usually by a male family member) 'cleanses' the dishonour or shame. Suspicion of adultery or of consorting with a male can be enough to precipitate such a killing. The women at Shirkat Gah work with these cases and seek to bring the men and their families to account — a difficult task in a country where the public cultural norms increasingly favour these sorts of misogynist actions.

One woman long associated with this organisation is Asma Jahangir, a lawyer who is also the Chairperson of the Pakistan Human Rights Commission and the UN Special Rapporteur on Extra-Judicial Killings. She and her sister Hina Jilani — also a lawyer — handle cases of women who have been abused by their families. In April 1999 Samia Sarwar, a client of Hina's who was in the process of divorcing her violent husband, was killed in their office by a gunman, who was allegedly hired by her mother (a gynaecologist), uncle and father (president of the local Chamber of Commerce). Hina narrowly escaped a bullet during this incident in her office. Despite reporting the incident to police and supplying identifying details no arrests have been made (according to latest reports from Pakistan). Not only was Samia murdered in the office of her lawyers but Hina and Asma have been subjects of continued harassment and threats from the family concerned and their supporters, who declared the murder in keeping with tribal laws and declared a fatwa on Asma Jahangir.

The courage and strength of women working

for women's rights in such a context is remarkable. They face not only the difficulties of dealing with cases of violence and abuse, and too often death, but the consequences of their work include explicit danger and threat to their own lives. Despite these dangers these feminists continue to speak with clear and loud voices against cultural practices which harm women at considerable risk to themselves.

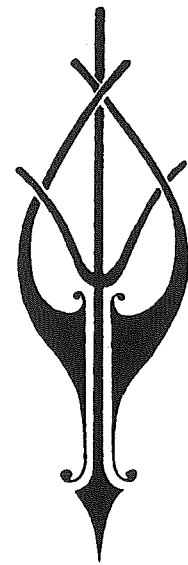
Migration

It might be thought that the experience of migration and of living in hostile environments radicalises those who live through this process but this is not necessarily so. I do not think that the immigration experience and that of racism has actually radicalised very many women — because they are caught inside a need to uphold traditional cultural practices as motifs of their identity and community allegiance. Why should women adhere to these practices? It seems to me that if women live in a hostile environment and have to deal with racism and if the key 'leaders' who do not undermine women's own cultural identity are men who share that identity but also promote conservative traditions (and locate them in religious contexts in ways which serve their own purposes), then women are more easily tempted (or coerced) into upholding the traditional and orthodox models of their own identity and history.

As a result, there are black and minority ethnic women who ascribe to notions of cultural shaping of identity and to claims of tradition which are often more orthodox than those contemporaneously experienced by many women in their countries of origin. Those who leave often define their identity through culture and traditional practices shaped by their experiences in the home country before they left. They do this without being involved in the ways in which culture moves on, changes and transforms in response to and in connection with the other changes in society — economic, political and social. For example, in some Indian immigrant groups in the UK there is a strong ideological and practical commitment to older, stricter forms of arranged marriage than are now practised in certain communities in the sub-continent.

I think that there may be a number of different ways of explaining this: a) cultural practices have moved on but those who left have not — occasional visits are not adequate to be sufficiently submerged in the dynamic of change





to participate in it, nor perhaps even to recognise it; b) cultural practices have moved on but those who left do not wish to move on — strong adherence to old practices are a central part of their identity, their self-respect in a hostile and still racist western society; c) those who left the sub-continent are from more conservative groups than those who are involved in radical social and political agitation at home. The sub-continent is larger than Europe; of course there are varied and sometimes conflicting traditions with both conservative and radical or progressive tendencies. Whatever the explanation in individual cases, what is important is to recognise that there are varied tendencies and histories within a culture and that claims to cultural (or other) difference should not be used to silence or debilitate women's voices of criticism. Definitions of culture, tradition or difference should not be treated as absolute or sacrosanct.

Meanwhile, women in India continue the radical and challenging traditions of the anti-colonial struggles, struggles which were inextricably linked to the promotion of women's rights, political engagement, enfranchisement and so on. A quick look at most of the constitutions or declarations of independence put in place when ex-colonies won national independence shows that they committed to gender equality, female suffrage etc. relatively promptly after independence. This did not come about by accident or because of a 'female-friendly context' in the ex-colonies: it came about because women in those countries fought hard and long to put these issues on the agenda and to push the nationalist leaders — usually men — to make some progress under national sovereignty. Fighting battles for national identity and integrity perhaps helped to set favourable terms in the discourse (if not in a lot of practice) for the promotion of other aims which were consistent with such principles. Improving women's social and political position was one such area.

I do not mean to suggest that all is well for women in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh or Sri Lanka — far from it — nor that feminist struggles and nationalist projects were one and the same. I do suggest, however, that alongside the traditions claimed by diasporic women — of cultural compliance under regimes of male dominance — there are courageous, exciting and inspiring traditions of women's activism, women's struggles and women's solidarity. Unfortunately, amongst migrant communities the

selection of which traditions to promote, and which to adhere to, does not commonly spread to these other histories of strong, vocal women's activism.

It concerns me that this sort of selection goes on and that women and girls, first and subsequent generations, lose this history and are disconnected from feminist activism and ways of thinking. I think that this shows itself in the closure that operates for some migrant women (or the succeeding generations) against challenging male oppression within their own communities. It is also supported by (some) feminists from other cultures who themselves are unaware of such traditions and contemporary strengths and consequently accept unquestioningly and even perpetuate recognition (sometimes under the rubric of respect) for conservative constructions of traditions which oppress women.

My observation is that feminists in the ex-colonies do not share the reluctance of their migrant sisters to name and challenge the patriarchal practices of their communities. It may be, as I suggested earlier, that more conservative communities are more heavily represented in migrant populations than in the country of origin. Or, one could argue that racism transforms the relationships of gender within what become minority groups. But transforming these into relationships which embody male power and privilege but do not question, or do not question effectively, is extremely problematic. Opening up oppression towards a public gaze is essential for change. My view on this is greatly strengthened by my work against violence against women, discussed later in this article.

Difference

There is another aspect of the traditionalist culturalism of migrant communities and subsequent generations which is of concern: that is the focus on difference and the way in which it can sometimes become a primary or overriding concern. The need to recognise difference is clear — without it there is pressure to conform to a dominant culture, denial of varied experiences as well as the consequences of these, prejudice and discrimination. I have myself been involved in work which has sought to look at and analyse the implications of difference, for example, in education, for refugees, for ethnic minority women dealing with domestic violence and women fleeing domestic violence who have drug or alcohol dependence.

But what does concern me is where difference becomes an absolute organising principle, a fundamental tenet of separatism. The separatist refrain is along the lines of 'How can you work on my needs when my culture / traditions / religion / experience / language are so different from yours?' Of course, at face value this claim may have some merit — surely it is those who have particular experiences who are best placed to name their needs — and is an argument which many of us have proposed in terms of women naming their own experiences, producing knowledge and defining needs. However, the dynamics and relationships in which we work are more complex than this formulation permits. I think women of various locations are absolutely central in naming their experiences and needs and in contributing to the understanding of their situations. But how do others hear these voices? We have to hear them not only at face value but through an organising framework including justice and principles of equality. So, when a woman says that her husband has every right to chastise her physically for her wrongdoings or when a woman says that her husband makes her have sex as and when he chooses but it is not rape, a feminist response will likely *engage critically* with such views.

Likewise, I think that it is important to engage critically with cultural expressions of the oppression of women. It is only after hearing these, I think, that it is possible to move to working together to address needs — something which I do believe is possible across cultural boundaries and other spheres of difference. In the case of Sirkat Gah discussed above, it is not necessary to respect cultural difference by saying that so-called 'honour' killings are a cultural expression or practice (which they may well be). In fact Sirkat Gah is operating within a cultural context and contesting its norms, and feminists from beyond that context must support their struggle. It is necessary to recognise difference but not to be debilitated by it. Just like cultural relativism, the privileging of difference has considerable limitations; the notion and language of difference have become tools, code-words, for separatism, silence, closure of discussion and denial of the possibility of forging alliances.

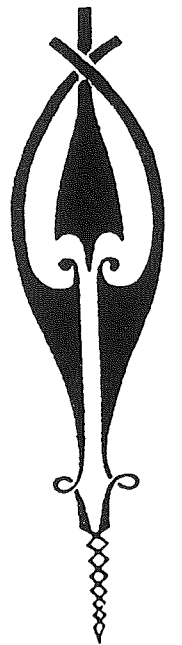
Highlighting difference in ways suggested above can foreclose discussion: undermining the relevance of knowledge across difference limits the possibilities for joint discussions and action. If I cannot know the particular experiences of,

Sikh or Muslim women because I am not one, then it can be argued that I can neither have meaningful discussions about needs, nor can I understand their situations nor can I sensibly participate in their struggles. So, on the one hand the privileging of difference can result in closure of communication, while on the other it can silence those beyond the boundary of belonging, in terms of culture, race, ethnicity or religion. The results of the difference principle becoming primary is that it can censor, silence, and support separatism — none of which have a place in struggles for justice and feminist principles.

Another tendency I find troubling is the way in which the language and privileging of difference has been taken up by those who are not sympathetic and used against those very groups which claim that 'difference' to be so central. Thinking no further than recent cases of domestic violence of which I am aware it has not been exceptional for police officers to decline to support women suffering domestic violence because, they claim, of the importance of cultural difference. I know of such instances involving Asian women and women from the Horn of Africa; I know also that others who stray from the 'normative referent' — in their sexuality, appearance, disability etc. — are also liable to have their needs downgraded or dismissed in the name of difference. Such dismissals may be thinly disguised forms of prejudice, racism, homophobia and other hatreds based on difference. While the police or other individuals or agencies reject calls for support from 'different' women, men from these groups may also take separatist positions on difference. Many Asian women know only too well the intense pressure put upon them by men (but also women) not to speak out about difficult intra-community issues, such as domestic violence. Women should not wash their 'dirty linen' in public nor should they in a racist society subject men to harassment or interventions from a racist state. Where these dynamics are successful they impose once again the compulsion to silence, to uphold and acquiesce in the protection of men and male dominance.

Commonality

Women all over the world experience male violence and I think that it is useful to consider violence in the context of a discussion of difference. Women from all cultures and backgrounds do and will fight male violence but



responses to them which accept the prioritisation of difference deny them the support and safety which they are entitled to obtain. The prioritisation of difference is soundly over-ridden by the shared needs, and rights of all women and the common impacts experienced across difference.

I have listened to women of different cultures, religions, countries, age groups, classes, social backgrounds... and over and over again they talk of the devastating impacts of male violence: of the belittling, of the physical injuries, of the emotional destruction, of fearing for the safety of their children, of the shame and embarrassment of speaking to anyone about their experiences and of the fear that violence brings. Again and again women find ways of expressing their intolerance and disavowal of violence, although this may take various different forms such as explicit wishes to leave or to be rid of an abusive man, a concern never again to have contact with a rapist or a wish for a life where 'these things' do not happen. Women share the need for support, belief, safety (including shelter), real options, financial means and clear affirmation that their lives can be different — can be free of violence. All women have the right to live free from violence, the right to live without men and the right to protection by the state against violence inside and outside the home. These are common to women who have experienced violence and are founded on a recognition of our commonality as women across all forms of difference. How these can be best delivered, enabled or facilitated must be considered in relation to the considerations which shape our various experiences, such as culture, language and race/ethnicity. However, the fundamental principle must be that all women have shared experiences, shared needs, rights in common and a sound basis from which to talk to each other and struggle together.

Contrary to what the principle of difference founded on ethnicity or race may tempt us to believe, not all black and ethnic minority women have the same view as to whether and how spaces should be created to resist gender inequality and oppression. Here, the points I made earlier about the divergent ways in which migrant women and those in the home country understand themselves, their cultures and religions are relevant. Constructing a monolithic category of 'third world woman' or even a single Asian stereotype is as problematic and unhelpful as are notions of white women as a single

category or of all women based only on the experience of white, heterosexual, able bodied women. I would argue that there *are* significant differences between women and they come into play most importantly not in terms of women's life experiences — listening to women from an ever-increasing number of countries and contexts underlines what we share, more strongly than what divides us — but in the ways in which women can and do respond to their experiences and contexts. I will highlight two critical aspects of difference here:

- a) women have differential access to support and to services: in the UK language issues remain critical in this respect and race/ethnicity remain significant factors when contacting service providers (or when deciding not to do so); dis/ability marks a scandalous barrier to access; and there are many others including those structured by the state, such as immigration rules.
- b) politics: much more fundamental than tradition, culture, race or religion is the allegiance women have to particular political projects — feminism is one, anti-racism another, as is justice. Politics not only influences which projects will be significant but also how that project is shaped — what justice looks like, what feminism can bring and how one should fight racism.

These two issues are much more important in our work together than whether we celebrate Christmas or Eid, how we dress or the food we eat.

I wonder if it is possible to shift the separatist and divisive aspects of a focus on difference by using the concept of *diversity* instead? It seems to me that *difference* has become too loaded with tendencies towards closure, silencing and isolation to be useful in political strategies which seek to work together, which understand the importance of alliances and common struggle. I realise that diversity itself is not without problems — it has been used to neutralise the power of anti-racist action and politics in the USA and now in the UK (witness the many local government authorities which have replaced their anti-racist teams and policies with those 'valuing diversity' — a de-politicised, unchallenging and anodyne term). Despite this I think that it holds more promise than difference because of the way in which difference has so successfully been used to divide us.

Commonality, diversity and women's politics

I would like to offer three suggestions as to how diversity can have a place within feminist politics.

The more I hear women's voices from various locations — social, cultural, religious, etc. — the more I am certain that our commonality must provide the framework for our work together. This commonality is shaped by many things including our experiences of male oppression and power, of injustice, violence and discrimination and our vision of and struggles for other ways of living and organising ourselves. So my first suggestion is that commonality provides the framework and it is within this that we have to recognise diversity. My view is that the diversity of most importance is the variety of responses and strategies used by women in diverse situations.

Secondly, there is one issue which I think is of central importance in the ability to work successfully across this diversity — that is a critical self-positioning. What I mean by this is that a pre-requisite for conversations across diversity is for women to engage critically with their own position, not only the positions of other women; women must name their own oppression. One of the problems associated with earlier claims to sisterhood was, I think, the inherent (and sometime explicit) claims to superiority from white/western women in

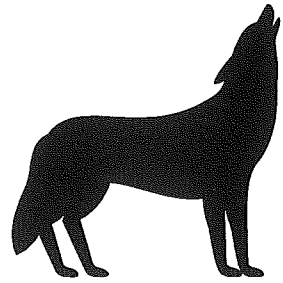
relation to the rest of us. This cannot have a place in shared struggles.

Thirdly, one way in which diversity can find a place in our work together is to find ways to support women's choices and give credence to other interpretations and expressions of resistance. This means, for example, that western women cannot instruct all sub-continental women to oppose all forms of arranged marriage or claim that no feminist can ever wear a head-cover and Indian (and other) feminists should not always rush to write off white women wearing lipstick as not being real feminists. Instead, we must be able to hear and recognise voices of resistance, which may take many forms, and support them. This will mean that we should not accept claims which define cultural constructions of tradition which are monolithic and which clearly oppress women — there are always voices of resistance from women but they sometimes, they struggle to be heard.

I have written this piece as a result of increasing frustration and concern at the way in which claims to culture and difference are used to silence women and to seek support from well-meaning 'outsiders' for women's oppression. I have discussed some of these ideas with some women but realise that there is more thinking to be done! I would be very happy to discuss these ideas or have feedback from anyone reading this article. □



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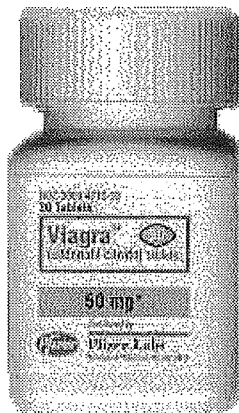
Barking Back

Has something got right up your nose recently? Have you a bone to pick or an issue you want to chew over? This is a space in T&S where women (under an assumed name if necessary) are invited to bark back at the annoyances which dog radical feminists. This can be a brief yap or an extended growl, on any subject of concern to radical feminists. Here Julia Parnaby explains why Viagra makes her hackles rise.

A cock and bull story

Ah Viagra! The power to inflate column inches more rapidly than it lifts a flaccid dick. The new Prozac, the drug that will restore pride and virility to the world's poor drooping men and make everything right again. Restore balance and harmony, heal marital strife, bring us joy, happiness, bouncing babies, and if we're lucky maybe even fix that damn millennium bug.

Call me a cynic, but there came a point last year when I thought I might *retch* if I heard its name once more. The nation's journalists, loth to miss out on the latest bandwagon, leapt aboard this one as if it was the ride of their lives. Thrusting that little blue pill into the headlines. Pricking its way into every paper, news report and TV show, serious or not, as though lives depended on it.



Viagra, we've been brainwashed to believe, will provide succour for millions and transform lives. So why wasn't I convinced? Well maybe because I just don't accept all those stories about male sexuality. The whole Viagra story is based on the view that penises are more important than anything — they must be honoured and respected, and when necessary coaxed and cajoled. They can't be *left alone*, ignored, *RETIRED*. No they must be fiddled with, fuffed with, inserted, wiggled and jiggled. They must be *used*, because they are more important than *anything* — no really, I mean *ANYTHING*. Go on, think of something more important than a prick.

Well damn it — you know you're right! Just about anything is more important. So why didn't I get that impression for the longest time? Why

did Viagra take over the world for those few months, and why does it continue to pop up like an unwelcome guest every few weeks?

Well I guess we all know why — because, despite everything, despite the backlash and feminist responses to it, despite girl power, we *still* live in a world that's run by and for men, and most of their interests still run to an ancient pattern of beer, birds and getting their end away.

To me this is a worrying situation. The widespread perception of male sexuality has been as a pent-up force which needs to be unleashed regularly for fear of dire consequences. Feminists have become used to challenging this idea, not only in relation to rape and child sexual abuse, but in the context of heterosexual relationships in general. What concerns me is that in this historical context how should we feel about those men wandering round with chemically enhanced sexualities? Self-control shouldn't have to be an issue, but I fear that it is.

I'm not suggesting a causative link between Viagra use and rape, sexual assault and abuse, but on the other hand, it seems absolutely inevitable that Viagra will become inextricably linked into the pornography and prostitution industries at the very least. That bothers me because we know how cruel and abusive to women those environments are. This can only worsen matters. Already seizures of black-market Viagra from Soho sex shops have been reported. The sex industry knows this is a trend which is worth a fortune to them, both as drug providers (since distribution of Viagra is already becoming harder and harder to regulate with, for example, the apparent ease of availability over the internet) and as providers of the paraphernalia and 'entertainment' which go along with the commodification of sexuality. It also provides them with a limitless supply of 'horny' male consumers of their 'goods'. (How long too before we see yet another bizarre switch — men on Viagra claiming their women can't last long enough to satisfy them and turning ever more to prostitution?)

Making impotence cool

The reconceptualisation of impotence, its cause and relief is a really interesting one. Impotence — the body's own rebellion against what it knows is crap and shallow — now need not be an embarrassing mark of failure to live up to the

required standards. In fact it's interesting that any mention of Viagra is universally seen as a badge of *pride*. Impotence isn't unfashionable or humiliating anymore. It's a good thing, an excuse to take drugs, which in turn has become an intensified expression of virility. Even Les Battersby wants a fix and isn't ashamed to fake impotence in his quest to score. This turnaround in attitudes may be one of the most astonishing of the 1990s. Viagra man has become attractive, sophisticated and very, very desirable. Someone for other men to admire, a role model and someone to aspire to.

Caught up by the hype, gay men and clubbers are popping Viagra as their drug of choice. Once the heady mixture of dancing and E made them feel invincible, now Viagra gives them the wherewithal. E made you feel like you loved the whole world, but you expressed it by dancing and grinning like a loon for hours. Following it up with Viagra now means you get to carry through your desires. Dealers are even targeting women with the drug, selling it as female-friendly — 'Even if he's off his face this will make your man last all night', as if that was *ever* the point.

We're back to that tiresome old myth that penetration is the only way for women to enjoy sex, reinforcing the idea that if men could only last longer then women's problems would be solved. Just like that dumb car ad that's trying to tell us, in its tricky little postmodern way, that size matters, so Viagra sells us down the river with the half-baked notion that having a man who can poke you all night long is all you need in life. Can't *anyone* be a little more imaginative?

Now in the age of Viagra old gits with limp dicks are able to be 'proper' men again; and terminal wankers, saddoes and perverts, pornography's client base, now have even longer to keep their hands busy and their brains vacant.

In our society which demands instant gratification, Viagra removes any necessity to explain or resolve problems or question the causes of impotence. Surely it happens for a reason — physical illness, stress, depression, relationship problems. But no! Why should people examine this? Why should anyone feel anything other than happiness and immediate fulfilment of desires on demand? Viagra, like Prozac once that had slipped into being a global panacea, ignores and fails to address the problem. It allows men to carry on regardless, to keep

performing, never really understanding or caring about themselves. Emotionally barren, but fully functioning. It dooms users to dependency and reliance on something over which they have no control, in place of making real, meaningful

changes in the way they conduct their lives and think about themselves and their beliefs.

Impotence has become just another inconvenience to be brushed aside. In fact it perversely has become a means to an end, a way of getting to somewhere akin to nirvana where pleasure is produced on demand. Perhaps it's even become the late 90s newest fashion, one of our society's sickest trends.

Curiously this new wave of acceptable drug users are helping to bring dependency into the front room (or should that be bedroom). Parents for so long have been terrified of drugs, scared that one whiff of dope will by necessity lead to an addicted child. Now, in a weird twist they're barricading the House of Commons, GPs' surgeries and local hospitals demanding their very own fix of recreational chemical fun.

The *real* crisis in the NHS, we're being told, isn't incompetent managers, waiting lists, no cash and righteously pissed off nurses — it's the queue of men being denied their fix, their right to fuck as often and as freely as they choose. (But only at the expense of their £6 a time fix out of our pockets.) Why should they be denied this? Why should diabetics get insulin, premature babies have incubators, heart patients get transplants when they can't have an erection? (An article by a Viagra user in the *Times* last year ended with the outrageous demand that Viagra should be prescribed on demand to any man, and in preference to *all* other NHS treatment.) It's not right they pout. Well, I disagree.

In addition to sensible ideological objections, the estimated cost to the NHS for prescriptions of Viagra is £1 billion a year.¹ Enough tablets for a shag three times a week would be expected to take up a quarter of a GP's drugs budget. This at a time when rationing of drugs for life-threatening disease is of real concern. But many men don't seem to care, they want Viagra and they want it NOW. Driven on, no doubt, by that baffling view that has held sway for so long that for men sex (and perhaps more centrally, ejaculation) is a God-given right and a biological necessity.

Education not medication

The issues continue to be clouded by an industry desperately trying to convince women that Viagra is for us too. So, what *is* in it for women? Well, you know you really are a great receptacle, it's what you're designed for. Now your man can keep going hammer and tongs what more could you want? Foreplay, non-penetrative sex — damn! that was all discredited years ago. It's all g-spots and pounding now you know, and what better to sort you out than a four hour long erection. Come on ladies, don't you realise, this is for your benefit too? Or you could take Viagra yourself, both of you buzzing away, having the time of your lives. (No really, it's not just for men, no *really*. The industry is trying really hard to find a way to make women use Viagra — they're failing because there are no benefits for women, and also because women know what they need to achieve orgasm, and education not medication is the answer.) Just pleasure, a stupendous shag (the longest of your life!).

Or maybe serious cardiovascular events, seizure and anxiety, temporary vision loss, ocular burning, retinal vascular disease or bleeding (adverse reactions mentioned by Pfizer, Viagra's manufacturers on their website)², along with headache, upset stomach, stuffy nose, urinary tract infection, diarrhea (reported by the US Food and Drug Administration)³, or a painful erection lasting over six hours, but isn't it worth it? Well, for millions it seems it *is* worth it. Any amount of risk seems worth taking because in our world gone mad there's only one thing worse than not having copious penetrative sex, and that's missing the latest trend. Put the two together and you've hit upon a sure fire winner; a salve for sexual anxieties and a great new set of tales for the lads — you'd *have* to be strong to resist!

So now it's great that you don't have to be 'English' about sex anymore. You can talk about it, you can get on with it, you can even laugh. (Did you hear about the first death from an overdose of Viagra? A man took twelve pills and his wife died. Boom bloody boom.) No you can be proud — you went out there and you changed your life. You made a stand, you put your foot down, you fought for your rights. You got what you deserved.

I hope it makes you happy. Because it sure as hell pisses me off. ☐

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¹ Guardian 8/7/98 P.2

² http://www.viagra.com/hcp/comm_pack.htm.

³ <http://www.fda.gov/cder/consumerinfo/viagra/viagrafaq.htm>

Summer 1999

Letters	2
The price of fame <i>Germaine Greer's The Whole Woman</i> reviewed by <i>Debbie Cameron</i>	4
An audacious idea <i>Kathy Cusack</i> reports on a major research project on violence against women in Ghana	13
Local heroine <i>Margaret Mary Issaka</i> interviewed by <i>Linda Regan</i>	17
Bad press? Tabloid sexism dissected by <i>Isla Duncan</i>	26
Different decade, same old shit <i>Stevi Jackson</i> is not surprised by new findings about young women's experience of heterosexuality	30
Balancing the budget <i>Debbie Budlender</i> explains the Women's Budget Initiative devised by feminists in South Africa	41
Chewing it over Feminism and vegetarianism debated by <i>Dianne Butterworth, Debbie Cameron, Liz Kelly</i> and <i>Joan Scanlon</i>	46
Cruel but not unusual <i>Claudia Hasanbegovic</i> argues for understanding domestic violence as a form of torture	57
Difference is not all that counts <i>Purna Sen</i> takes issue with the emphasis on difference at the expense of what women share	64
 A cock and bull story <i>Julia Parnaby</i> finds Viagra a bitter pill to swallow	70

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