

# Trouble

The radical feminist magazine

# & Strife



**Pre-Millennium  
Tensions**

Interview with Monica McWilliams

Revisiting rape myths

Clean Break Theatre Company

Smiley-voiced fembots

Women of the 20th century — 100 years of attitude

**No. 40**  
**£4.50**

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

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# Trouble & Strife

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# SPEECH SYNTHESIS

*If male-to-female transsexuals are women in men's bodies, why do they have to learn to 'speak like a woman'? Debbie Cameron argues that these lessons, like those women working in call centres are subjected to, are strategies for producing patterns of gendered speech which maintain patterns of dominance and subservience.*

When I taught an introduction to feminism many years ago, I would sometimes get students to examine the lyrics of popular songs for their ideological contradictions. One of my favourite texts for this purpose was 'You make me feel like a natural woman'. Even when performed by the incomparable Aretha Franklin, there is no getting away from the imbecility of this song. If the attentions of a man are needed to turn the singer into a 'natural woman', what was she before? Similar puzzles arise with songs like 'More than a woman' (eh?) and 'She's always a woman to me' (as opposed to what, a giraffe?). For the authors of these lyrics, evidently, there is more to being a woman than simply being female.

Although being a woman is supposedly our 'natural' state, there is always room for improvement, and for anxiety about whether we've got it right yet.

The theoretical point I intended the song lyrics to illustrate — that women are made rather than born — has been pushed to its extreme by today's postmodernists and queer theorists. They insist that biological femaleness is not just insufficient to make you a woman, it is more or less irrelevant to the enterprise. In support of this argument they are fond of invoking the drag queens, transvestites and transsexuals for whom gender 'construction' is literally a form of DIY. Radical feminists tend to dislike this move,

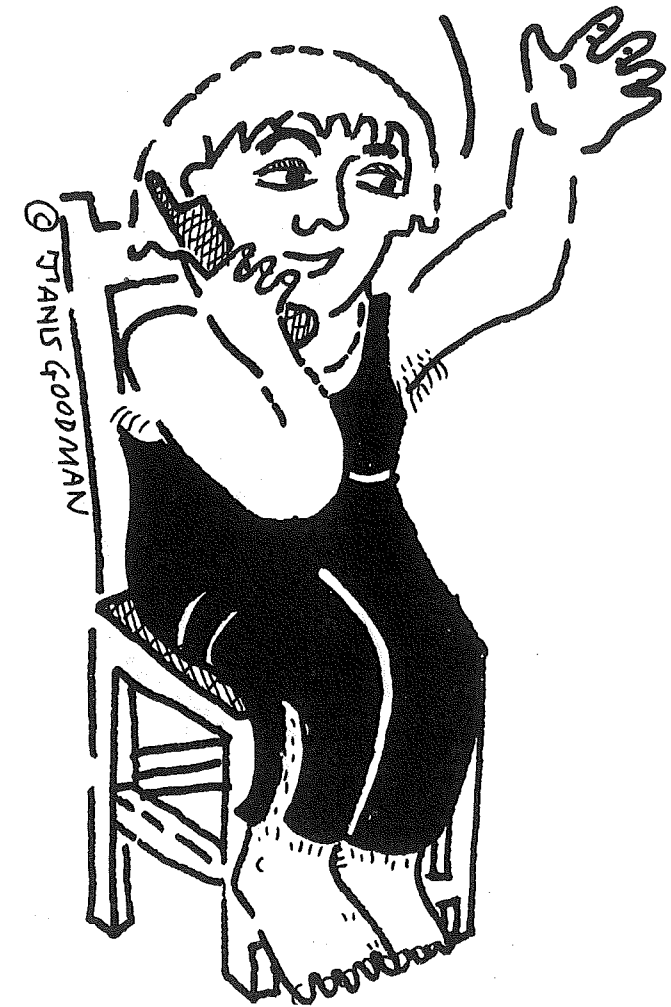
particularly when it involves either treating gender as a lifestyle option akin to wallpapering your living room, or celebrating DIY women as feminist revolutionaries. I too find these tendencies irritating (and later on I will give some reasons why the second is way off target). But I do think there is something to be learned from looking more closely at *how* you make a DIY woman. If we are interested in current ideologies of femininity, there are few more revealing sources than step-by-step instruction manuals for turning men into women.

## DIY women

My own interest in this subject springs from a broader concern with the relationship between gender and language, or more exactly *speech*. When the subject of transsexuals crops up in the media (as it seems to do incessantly, on everything from daytime talk shows to soaps to science documentaries), the main focus is usually on the chemical or surgical reshaping of the body. Wardrobes and sex lives also feature quite prominently. Far less attention is given to the changes many transsexuals make to the way they speak, though these are often just as dramatic as the changes in their physical appearance. (They may also be produced by the same drastic methods, i.e. hormone treatment and surgery.) The memoirs of 'pioneering' transsexuals like Renée Richards make clear that speech has always been a major concern for individuals seeking to pass, but over time a whole sub-industry has developed to deal with their linguistic needs. There are speech therapists, voice trainers and assorted consultants who specialise in advising transsexuals on how to talk, and innumerable books — ranging from abstruse clinical volumes to popular self-help texts — have been written on the subject. In all this literature it is constantly emphasised that sounding like a woman requires a great deal of work. One book written for the families and friends of transsexuals warns that 'for most MTF transsexuals, considerable time and effort is needed to train their voices — even the way they cough and clear their throat — to become as gender appropriate as possible in register, pitch, inflection and intonation'.<sup>1</sup>

Interestingly, it is assumed that female to male (FTM) transsexuals do not have to work so hard at learning to speak in a 'gender appropriate' way. One explanation for the difference is that testosterone, taken by FTMs, thickens the

ALL THAT SPIEL  
ABOUT PREFERRING  
WOMEN TO BE NATURAL  
AND HE FAINTS WHEN  
HE SEES MY ARMPITS



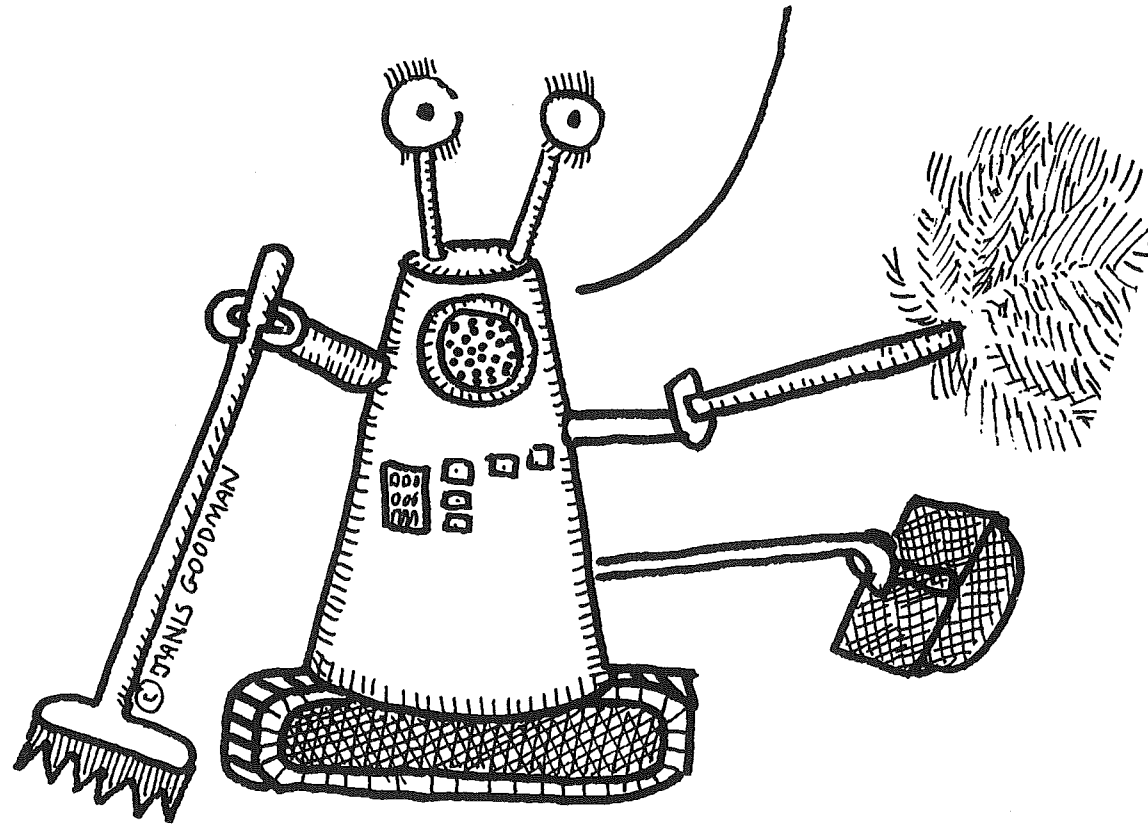
vocal cords and lowers voice pitch, whereas oestrogen, taken by MTFs, does not have a parallel effect on the vocal tract. Thus MTFs need additional voice training. But on closer examination, this explanation is unconvincing. One article in a textbook on the clinical management of 'gender dysphoria' claims that even

when MTFs undergo vocal tract surgery this 'does not obviate the need for speech therapy in almost all cases'. Plainly, 'gender appropriate' language as specified in speech training manuals and self-help literature for transsexuals involves a great deal more than the pitch of the voice.

The literature on this subject, both expert and popular, is like a 'best of' compilation drawing on something like a century's worth of stereotypes about women's speech. One expert explains, for instance, that 'when women talk they move their mouths more than men', while

another states that 'women smile more and have many more encouraging nods'. This piece of 'scientific' advice clearly has nothing to do with pitch; it doesn't even have anything to do with *speech*. Rather it has to do with a whole style of interpersonal communication, and the contribution that style can make to the perception of a person as 'a natural woman'. A more popular work, *Miss Vera's finishing school for boys who want to be girls*, makes clear what the experts are dancing around in their supposedly objective descriptions of 'gender appropriate' behaviour.

MY VOICE IS  
WARM, SMILEY  
AND BREATHY-  
AN EXCELLENT THING  
IN A WOMAN



Miss Vera advises readers that if they wish to pass as women they must develop 'a greater willingness to listen'. Learning to speak like a woman does not just mean learning to speak differently, it also means training yourself to speak *less*.

Other common pieces of advice to MTF transsexuals are to speak more softly than they did when they identified as men and to ask more questions (especially 'tag questions' of the 'isn't it/don't you' variety). Less extensive guidance is offered to women on how to talk like men (an asymmetry which, once again, cannot be put down simply to the testosterone/oestrogen difference). But just as Miss Vera counsels DIY women to adopt the linguistic markers of subordinate status, advice for DIY men tends to focus on the linguistic markers of power. Writers suggest that the FTM should learn to 'talk slow, take all the time in the world', or to 'tell people what you want rather than asking for it'. These are presented simply as 'masculine' habits, but it does not take a genius to work out that they are also the habits of a dominant social group. The speaker who feels able to 'take all the time in the world' has a strong sense of entitlement, which is typically produced by long experience of privilege. Quite similar advice has been handed out for years to women 'high fliers', the most notorious example being Margaret Thatcher. No one involved in Mrs Thatcher's linguistic makeover ever suggested that the point was to make her sound like a man. The point, rather, was to give her more 'authority' by eliminating the telltale markers of subordinate status.

#### Gender stereotypes

An important source for many of the gender stereotypes in the literature I have been citing is a 1975 book titled *Language and Woman's Place*, written by the US feminist linguist Robin Lakoff. Robin Lakoff set out to describe what she referred to as 'women's language', a way of talking that women, she argued, are compelled to adopt by a society intent on depriving them of power. But the picture she painted has been modified considerably in the light of empirical research over the past 20 years: most language and gender researchers today regard 'women's language' as a stereotype with only a tenuous relationship to the facts of women's speech. It follows that if transsexuals model their behaviour on Robin Lakoff's description, they are not imitating real women but reproducing a sexist

stereotype, whose main characteristic is subservience or powerlessness. Robin Lakoff's own intentions were clearly progressive — she was *criticising* the pressure put on women to 'talk like ladies' — but the use of her work as a sort of instruction manual for DIY women is entirely reactionary. (So much for the idea of transsexuals as the vanguard of feminist revolution.) Arguably it is also self-defeating, in the sense that someone who follows the recipe in its entirety will not be able to pass as a woman; rather they will sound like a parody of one.

Some transsexuals, to be fair, resist the 'women's language' stereotype. Self-styled 'gender outlaw' Kate Bornstein, for instance, gives the following critical account of the voice lessons she attended:

I was taught to speak in a very high-pitched, very breathy, sing-song voice and to tag questions onto the end of each sentence. And I was supposed to smile all the time when I was talking. And I said, 'oh, I don't want to talk like that!' The teachers assumed that you were going to be a heterosexual woman. No one was going to teach you to be a lesbian, because lesbian was as big an outlaw as transsexual.

Kate Bornstein is among those 'transgendered' individuals who deliberately set out to blur boundaries and create hybrid identities. Whereas the classic 'transsexual' wants to *be* 'the opposite sex', resembling the archetypal woman or man as closely as possible both physically and behaviourally, the 'transgendered' person does not set out to pass. S/he may identify as neither gender, or both at once; s/he may or may not go in for extensive chemical and surgical alteration; s/he often treats (homo)sexuality as a primary identity, as in the quote above where Kate Bornstein explains that she rejected the advice of her teachers because what she really wanted to sound like was not a 'woman' but a lesbian.

If we leave aside the rather odd suggestion that someone could be taught to sound like a lesbian, Kate Bornstein is making an important point here which is often overlooked in discussions of 'women's language'. Put briefly and bluntly, the symbolic meaning of this kind of speech is not just powerlessness but more specifically *eroticised* powerlessness. The high pitched, breathy and 'sing-song' voice recommended to DIY women is also the voice of the archetypal sex siren — the voice for instance of Marilyn Monroe performing 'I just want to be loved by you'. It is meant to arouse heterosexual men.

### Sexualised speech

In support of this point, we might consider that MTF transsexuals are not the only recipients of advice on speech which is based on the 'women's language' model. Very similar advice is offered to, and followed by, telephone sex workers catering

YEAH...  
GIVE IT TO  
ME NOW  
BIG BOY



to heterosexual male callers. The language used by telephone sex workers, and the instructions given to them on this subject by their employers, is the subject of an interesting article, 'Lip service on the fantasy lines', first published in 1995 by the anthropologist Kira Hall. The phone operators are advised to adopt high, breathy and swoopy voices, to ask the caller endless questions, and to use the kind of 'empty' or 'trivial' vocabulary that Robin Lakoff identified as exclusive to women — words like 'divine' and 'lovely', or elaborate colour terms such as 'ivory' and 'ecru'. The operators Kira Hall interviewed were clear that women's language was an essential tool of their trade. Callers responded positively to it, which is to say that they stayed on the line longer when operators used it, thus enabling the operators — who are paid by the minute — to earn more money. Kira Hall did not record 'live' calls, but she did sample the pre-recorded fantasy narratives that are available on some sex lines, and she found that what operators said about their style of speech was borne out by these performances.

The women Kira Hall spoke to were essentially 'passing': they certainly did not use the same style of speaking in their leisure hours (or in the interview situation) as they did when they were taking calls. In many cases they were also engaged in other kinds of linguistic simulation. Some of them had two or three personas which were racially and ethnically distinct. Exploiting the fact that the telephone is not a visual medium, the same operator might interact with different callers as a Hispanic woman, an Asian woman and a white Anglo woman. Operators also maintained that the 'best' Black women were often, in reality, white. What they appeared to mean was that white women were better able (and perhaps less reluctant) than Black women to produce the kind of performance that callers wanted, which was essentially a racist stereotype. Kira Hall even encountered, on a line exclusively for heterosexual men, one gay male operator. Although he was untypical, in the fantasy world of the fantasy lines it would be hard to see him as any less 'authentic' than his female co-workers, and the customers apparently found his performances no less satisfactory.

Do the men who use these lines even care whether the person they are paying to arouse them is faking it or not? It is difficult to say, but when Kira Hall revealed to some of her male acquaintances that the 'sexy schoolgirl' at the

DEFINITELY  
THE AGE OF  
BIG BROTHER

HIS MISSION  
TO CREATE AND  
CONTROL  
LITTLE SISTER



end of the sex line might be a 45-year old washing dishes as she talked, or possibly even a man, they expressed surprise and disappointment.

### Subordinated speech

It is hardly news that much of the sex industry depends on, among other things, the capacity of men to delude themselves. What are we to make, though, of the fact that increasingly, women in quite 'ordinary' workplaces are facing some of the same linguistic demands as telephone sex workers and MTF transsexuals? A good example is the 'call centre', a type of workplace where people are employed exclusively to process telephone calls: operators deal for instance with banking transactions and insurance claims, selling rail and airline tickets, taking catalogue orders and cable/satellite TV subscriptions. By the middle of 1998 Britain had more than 5,000 call centres, and most of their operators were/were women.

There is a significant preference for employing young women in call centres, in part because employers perceive them as having the right kind of voice and communication style for the job. 'They are naturally friendly and can smile down the phone', as one manager told researchers. Another suggested that women are 'better [than men] at creating rapport with people' and 'more tolerant' — by which he meant, of rude and abusive callers. It seems then that the feather-headed subservience deplored by Robin Lakoff (and strategically exploited by Kira Hall's informants) has now become a valuable commodity in the mainstream labour market.

My own investigations of call centres suggest, however, that women's allegedly 'natural' friendliness and tolerance is not taken for granted, but deliberately inculcated and systematically enforced. Operators are given detailed instructions about how to talk — smile,

use expressive intonation, display empathy with the caller, ask them 'open' questions, sound excited about serving them, never get angry or impatient. New employees practise these ways of talking in role-play exercises during their training. Nor can they slack off as they become more experienced, for surveillance in the average call centre is intense. Supervisors can listen in covertly to calls, and some are also taped so that the operator's performance can be appraised in more detail later (this is what companies mean by the small print in their advertisements, which announce blandly that 'calls may be taped for training purposes'). Sometimes market researchers are employed to pose as customers and report back on individual operators. All this means that call centre operators must monitor their speech carefully to ensure it is in line with what the company demands. Failure to conform may result in poor appraisals and lost bonuses; in extreme cases it could even get you fired.

The kind of feminine speech that is valued by call centre managers is undoubtedly artificial, and in future many of the real women who are currently obliged to produce it may be replaced by something entirely artificial — speaking machines. Even now, we hear more and more synthesised speech: in lifts, on London Underground trains, on BT's call-minding service. Some synthetic voices are more synthetic-sounding than others, but they are all quite clearly gendered, and the differences are instructive — once again, this is not just a question of voice pitch. If you listen to the female ones, you will often hear something eerily reminiscent of the advice to transsexuals I quoted earlier. Warm and smiley, breathy and swoopy, these man-made voices (I use the term advisedly) encapsulate every stereotype of what the 'natural woman' should sound like. The synthetic male voices heard in lifts and on trains are nothing like this. They are never breathy or smiley; on the other hand they are often significantly louder.

A friend of mine who works in the field of speech synthesis has a disparaging nickname for the preferred female voice: she calls it 'sex in a box'. She once explained to me that when she plays her corporate clients a speech sample and asks them what they think, they tend to say

things like 'can you make it softer?' and 'maybe a bit less bossy?' They will not go so far as to use words like 'available' and 'sexy', but that, my friend believes, is what they actually mean. Thus if she modifies the sample by adding extra breathiness, they respond enthusiastically.

Radical feminists are of course well aware that language is a political issue, but it seems to me that the politics of gendered speech and voice have been neglected by comparison with, say, the issue of sexist language. If I refer in a feminist context to 'degrading linguistic representations of women', I am likely to be understood as meaning the use of sexist epithets ('bitch', 'slag') rather than, for example, the use of smiley voice by call centre operators. Yet the latter is no less degrading than the former; also, and importantly, it is no less a *representation*. As I have tried to show using various examples, 'speaking like a woman' in many contexts is not just a question of doing what comes naturally, or of consciously designing your speech to fit your own ideas about women. Often it involves representing (and thus recycling) someone else's idea of how a woman ought to speak. And this can be highly oppressive. For example, in one case that I know of — that of Safeway supermarkets in the USA — women workers who were forced to smile, make eye contact and greet customers 'warmly' by name complained that their employers' expectations about their speech and body language were exposing them to continuous sexual harassment.

The coercion of women workers to adopt a subservient way of speaking is a growing trend, and I would like to hear more feminist voices raised in protest against it. Companies that insist on turning their female employees into smiley-voiced fembots in the interests of 'customer care' should be told in no uncertain terms that their feminist customers don't care for it. And just as we deplore the presence of pornographic images in public space, we should also resist the sexualisation of female voices in real or synthesised public announcements. Linguistic representations, no less than visual images, affect the way women are perceived and perceive ourselves. We need to rewrite the script. □

# A WAR OF ATTRITION

*After many years of feminist activism and a large increase in the numbers of women reporting rape, why are rape myths so tenacious? Liz Kelly reviews current research on rape and sexual assault which shows how men continue to get away with rape.*

When I first began researching violence against women in 1980, the majority of published feminist studies were about rape. Yes, most of it came from the US, but there was quite a lot of it, and it revealed important and interesting things which informed the practice of many rape crisis centres. The 1990s have been 'the decade of domestic violence' in terms of both research and policy development. I have lost count of the number of times I have attended conferences or read reports which are called 'violence against women' yet are limited to domestic violence. And whilst the rhetoric that domestic violence includes 'physical, sexual and psychological violence' is invariably recounted, the reality in the practice of agencies, including women's groups, is that the sexual violence is rarely addressed or explored explicitly.

Rape and sexual assault have become a residual issue, and the dearth of research on it for the last decade has been both an outcome, and reinforcement of this neglect (as has been the negligible funding for rape crisis groups). The disappearance of rape from the feminist, policy and research agendas has not been confined to the

UK, it has been echoed in many other (western) countries. The situation is arguably even worse with respect to sexual harassment. There is an interesting piece to be written about why and how this has happened. What makes domestic violence a more acceptable issue for national and international discussion and policy? Why have more feminist researchers chosen to focus on this area? Why has domestic violence been an arena where innovation in legal reform, models of intervention and support has been so fertile? And why are forms of male violence which have an explicitly sexual aspect in their name more challenging to address? There have, however, been some developments recently in the UK, and the possibility exists in 1999 to move on. In this piece I explore new developments in research and policy which foreground rape and sexual assault.

## *In from the margins?*

Whilst there has been some legal reform in the 1990s — criminalising marital rape and rape of men — the last national policy initiative on sexual assault was in 1986. A Home Office circular to the police (69/86) called for better

## Note

1. All quotations and facts about transsexual and transgendered speech in this piece are taken from a review article on 'Transgender and Language' in the journal *GLQ* (1999), written by the anthropologist Don Kulick. Though we don't agree politically, I am grateful to him for letting me use his work, which so far as I know is the only detailed survey of the literature on this subject. I haven't reproduced all the references, but if readers want more information they should consult Don Kulick's bibliography.

## References

Kira Hall, 'Lip service on the fantasy lines' in Debbie Cameron (ed) *The Feminist Critique of Language*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Routledge, 1998)

Robin Lakoff *Language and Woman's Place* (Harper & Row, 1975)

training, the appointment of more women officers, better facilities for forensic medical examinations, and recommended that no rape cases should be 'no crimed'<sup>1</sup> unless there was an admission from the complainant that it was a false report. There has been no evaluation of this circular, of the rape examination suites which were established as a result, or of the three sexual assault centres which it prompted (all based in the north of England).

The good news is that a number of factors have combined, in the UK at least, to challenge the marginalisation of sexual crime. The most critical have been two recent developments: the establishment several years ago of the Rape Crisis Federation of England and Wales (similar networks have also recently been established in Scotland and Ireland), which for the first time provide collective voices for women's organisations working on sexual violence; and the effectiveness of a small feminist campaign — Campaign to End Rape (CER) (see *T&S* 35) in publicising the attrition rates in reported rape cases and lobbying for reform in both the letter and practice of the law. A current review of sexual offences law by the government (due to report in spring 2000) is, in part, the outcome of this pressure.

There is also some new research which provides us with important insights into what is going wrong when women (and some men) report rape. I look in turn at *Policing Sexual Assault* and *A Question of Evidence?*, both published in 1999, exploring what they tell us about rape and responses to it, and the challenges the research findings raise for feminists. I also draw on welcome publications from elsewhere in the world which can inform our thinking and our activism.

#### *A lonely furrow*

Sue Lees has, along with Jennifer Temkin, continued throughout the 1990s to research and write about rape. There has been a lonely furrow to plough compared to the (relative) explosion of studies on domestic violence. For example, to my knowledge no government department has commissioned external research on sexual assault in the last decade, and none of the twenty projects in the current Violence Research Programme funded by the Economic and Social Research Council focus on it.

Sue Lees' latest book, *Policing Sexual Assault*, written with Jeanne Gregory, makes

more widely available work already published in various places. The title is something of a misnomer, since it is neither limited to police responses nor to sexual assault. Perhaps the lack of research on rape explains the frequent references to studies on other forms of male violence, especially domestic violence. Whilst this does buttress the argument at various points, it also sometimes confuses and distracts from a focus on rape and sexual assault. Pedantry aside though, there is much important information here, especially the study of attrition done in North London at the end of the 1980s, with more details here of women's assessments of the process than in the original research report.

The attrition study involved tracking 301 reported cases of rape and sexual assault between 1988-90 in Islington, North London. Since the police were cautious about giving access to current open files, two women police officers were assigned to collect and collate the information. At first glance this seems like a poor compromise, but ironically the enthusiasm and insider knowledge of the officers meant that more accurate information was gathered, including cases which were 'no crimed' at a very early point. In the research report a flow chart aided understanding of how, and at what point cases dropped out of the Criminal Justice System; whilst a version of it appears in Chapter 4 of the book it applies only to the 109 cases of rape and attempted rape. It is also rather odd to locate it at this point, rather than in the previous chapter on attrition. Following exactly what happens is also difficult in *A Question of Evidence?*, although for slightly different reasons. To help comparison I have done my best to extract the relevant findings (see the table on attrition, next page).

From the original sample of 301 sexual assaults, over a third were no crimed (38%) and for the rapes and attempted rapes this rose to 43%. The extent to which police officers still believe that many — and some of them estimate the proportion as 50% — of reported rapes are false complaints is shocking. Gregory and Lees note there is little, if any curiosity amongst officers who take this position as to why this might be the case. Instead they invoke the centuries old cliché that 'rape is the easiest crime to allege' and/or anecdotes to justify their position. The bitter irony is that we know from research that women are less likely to report rape than domestic violence, and that one of the main reasons for not reporting is (justified) fear of

being disbelieved by the police. In this context it is hard to imagine why one woman, let alone such large numbers, would voluntarily subject themselves to having to give a statement and being forensically examined about something which had not happened. But it appears that many police imaginations still take entirely different routes to those of women working on sexual assault.

Of the 185 'crimed' cases over half did not proceed to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS): in 88 cases where the perpetrator was a stranger he was never identified, in 4 cases the offender was given a police caution, and in a further ten the police decided to take no further action. Thus less than a third of the original cases — 88 — were referred to the CPS. Gregory and Lees put forward the thesis that the police are 'second guessing' the CPS, only referring up cases they think will be accepted. They comment:

However, the police are not always successful in anticipating what action the CPS will take. Despite their apparently stringent screening procedures, passing through the CPS gateway provided absolutely no guarantee that a successful prosecution would ensue and the processes of attrition continued unabated. (p71)

The CPS dropped a fifth of the cases referred to them. Of the 71 which were prosecuted just over half resulted in a conviction, but many of these were for the crime of 'indecent assault'. There is a detailed examination of the CPS and the many criticisms which have been made of the service, not least that it is over-centralised and disconnected from the police and victims/witnesses. It appears that increasingly — as with the police — success rates and 'performance indicators', rather than justice, have become the overriding priorities.

Drawing on their own study and one conducted at a similar time by the Home Office (Grace et al, 1992), Gregory and Lees provide us with important insights into which kinds of cases are lost, and for what reasons:

- ♦ much of the increase in reporting involves rapes by known men;
- ♦ rapes by strangers were most often 'no crimed' because they were thought to be false complaints, whereas those involving known men were most frequently ~~were~~ dropped because women withdrew their statements;
- ♦ attacks by strangers have the lowest detection rates (that is finding the attacker), but where they go to court they are most likely to result

Attrition Points	Gregory and Lees		Harris and Grace	
	No.	%	No.	%
Reported rapes/attempted rapes	109	100	493	100
<i>Police actions</i>				
No-crimed	49	45		27
Undetected	16	15		9
No further action	7	6		33
<i>Crown Prosecution Service</i>				
Referred to CPS	37	34		31
Dropped by CPS	7	6		9
<i>Court Action</i>				
Prosecutions	30	27		21
Acquittal/discharged	18	16		8
Convicted of rape/attempted rape	9	8		6
Convicted of other offence	3	3		7

in a conviction;

- ♦ cases involving intimates are least likely to be prosecuted;
  - ♦ cases involving acquaintances which are prosecuted are most likely to result in an acquittal;
  - ♦ cases most likely to result in conviction involved under 16s and over 50s, and those where there was evidence of injury.
- So in the early 1990s rape by a partner, ex-partner or father was not really rape at all (rape by a husband was not a crime at the point both these studies were conducted), and rape by someone known hardly qualified either. The stereotype of 'real rape' — by a stranger, outside, involving a weapon — had persisted, despite being challenged by feminist research and activism.

Gregory and Lees point to a serious conceptual problem in Home Office studies: how 'acquaintance' and 'intimate' are defined. In the Home Office the category 'intimate' includes relatives, friends and work colleagues, whereas Gregory and Lees reserve this category, rightly in my view, for current or ex-partners. The Home

Office 'acquaintance' category includes men who the victim met within the 24 hours before the rape, and in the 1992 study half of all acquaintances fell into this group.

The authors make a very strong case for including this group within the 'stranger' category, since the 'knowing' involved is minimal. They argue that since DNA evidence now makes the 'it wasn't me' defence virtually impossible, serial rapists have changed their targeting strategy, using pubs, clubs and bars rather than outdoor public space. By engaging the woman in some form of 'consensual' contact, if the rape is reported it is then possible to use the consent defence. I have no doubt that there are some men who operate in this deliberate and calculating way, but I am not totally convinced that this is the whole story, since it relies on this group of rapists having a detailed knowledge of the legal system. Other, simpler, factors may account for a shift in the contours of reported rapes. For example, it is easy to forget the major changes in patterns of social life over the last three decades, with women, and young women in particular, having more of an independent social life. Many more women can be found in varied social settings, and interactions between men and women have become less formalised. Also more women have cars, and use taxis — if they can afford one or both. Thus the street and public places may simply be less successful 'hunting' grounds for predatory men. An even simpler explanation would be that, as with rape by intimates, women are reporting assaults which always occurred, but were not previously perceived as criminal offences.

Whatever the reason, what is more important about these categorisations, is how they lead to a misidentification of the problem, which as we will see with *A Question of Evidence?* has serious consequences for how the policy context is constructed.

There is virtually no research in the UK on how race and rape are and are not connected. Few of the Home Office studies provide data on this area, and Gregory and Lees acknowledge that their sample is too small to draw firm conclusions from. They do report a much higher proportion of Black suspects than in the population (44%) with a much lower percentage (15%) of complainants being Black. A lower proportion of cases involving Black suspects were 'no crimed' (37% compared to 48% where the suspect was white). Where the accusation

involved rape across racial categories racism appears even more strongly, with 73% of the cases involving accusations by Black women against white men being 'no crimed' compared to only 32% of cases where the complainant was white and the suspect Black. In the discussion of what the small sample of women who were interviewed had to say some complexities emerged: white women being reluctant to report because they feared racist responses to their being attacked by a Black man — not just from the police but also from others, including their white boyfriends; of race being used by attackers and defendants' lawyers to suggest that white women find Black men irresistible (p157). There is much to be explored here, since there is minimal information to date on the decisions Black and ethnic minority women make about reporting rape, or their experiences when they do.

Gregory and Lees cite a recent study of 100 prosecuted cases of marital rape (Sue Lees has elsewhere published a study of marital rape cases referred to the Court of Appeal), which found the average sentence was lower than for attempted rape, and that the presence of aggravating factors such as injury and considerable additional violence were downplayed (p110). This response has echoes in Australian feminist, Patricia Esteal's, recent paper. She points out that instead of the predicted flood of marital cases, hardly any are reported and a tiny number have been prosecuted in both the US and Australia (the impression I got is that there have been more prosecutions in the UK, if so, quite why this might be the case is an interesting question for further exploration). She cites research which shows that rapes by current and ex-partners are the most likely to cause injury, and that they are only second to stranger rapes in terms of the use of weapons. These factors, and the betrayal of trust involved, are invariably seen as aggravating factors in criminal cases warranting higher sentences, but not where rape by a current or ex-partner is concerned.

#### **Research from within**

*A Question of Evidence?* is the most recent study of attrition, conducted by Home Office researchers Jessica Harris and Sharon Grace. Its publication has been long awaited, and was considerably delayed until June this year. The research was commissioned at the height of parliamentary concern about the decrease in the conviction rate for rape in 1996/7. It offers little succour, rather

it suggests that the situation is even worse than we imagined; if the 'no-crimed' cases are included the conviction rate for this sample of almost 500 cases reported in six areas of England and Wales in 1996 is 6% (see table). The 9% figure which is most often quoted, is based (like Home Office national figures) only on those cases which are crimed.

Thus the study provides even more ammunition for the charge that the Criminal Justice System (CJS) is failing women, confirming many of the findings of Gregory and Lees as well as providing additional details as to where exactly some of the problems are. How the data is presented — not using actual numbers, and beginning each new section (on police investigation, prosecution and trial processes) with a notional 100 — makes it extremely difficult if not impossible to work out exactly what happened to the initial case sample (this is why the table only includes percentages).

Some of the most important findings are:

- ♦ over a quarter of the cases involved victims under 16;
- ♦ in both 'no crimed' and 'no further action' cases a significant percentage were women withdrawing their statements, this was most likely where it was an acquaintance;
- ♦ cases involving strangers and intimates were more likely to be designated 'false' complaints by the police;
- ♦ 'no-criming' rates varied between police areas from 14-41%;
- ♦ cases involving acquaintances were most likely to be 'no crimed'
- ♦ cases involving intimates were most likely to be no further action or discontinued by the CPS;
- ♦ cases involving strangers where the suspect was identified were most likely to proceed to court;
- ♦ the CPS were less likely to discontinue if the victim was young or elderly;
- ♦ conviction was most likely where the victim was under 16: half of cases involving woman over 21 result in an acquittal;
- ♦ many defendants pled guilty at court to lesser offences;
- ♦ 20% of sentences for rape were below the minimum (4 years) set in the Billam guidelines over ten years ago; comments by the judges interviewed made clear that they see the guidelines as applying to stranger, i.e. 'real' rape.

Some of the most important findings in *A Question of Evidence?* (such as the 6% conviction rate) are under-emphasised. Others appear on a single page, such as that very few of the reported gang rapes or rapes involving women with learning disabilities were prosecuted. These are key, and serious, findings, yet no additional information is presented nor reasons given for them, and they do not appear in the executive summary which is all most policy makers will read. Those of a cynical disposition might muse on why this might be the case, why certain findings are underplayed, whilst material from a small number of interviews with CJS personnel is given a significance which they do not warrant. Indeed, some of the most contentious recommendations at the end of the report appear to draw less on a detailed reflection of the research findings than the opinions of five judges and five barristers.

So what conclusions can we draw from these studies? *A Question of Evidence?* shows 'no criming' has decreased, but has been replaced by an increase in the no further action category, meaning that in both studies only a third of reported rapes are considered by the CPS, the majority having been lost before this point. In both the proportion of cases dropped by the CPS is lower than many presume (under 10%). But this disguises the involvement of the CPS at earlier stages. Harris and Grace reveal that 20% of cases where there was a detected perpetrator were referred by the police to the CPS for guidance on whether to charge; the CPS advised no further action in two-thirds of these cases. These, however, appear as police, rather than CPS decisions.

Harris and Grace note that a major gap in our knowledge, is why so many women withdraw their statements at an early point. The little information we do have suggests that women's perception of the police 'testing the evidence' and warning them about the difficulties of getting a conviction, is that they are not believed, and that they are being encouraged to drop the case. All the recent research makes clear that, as Jennifer Temkin notes, 'Old practices and attitudes ... are still in evidence', that guidelines are not always followed and that disbelief and stereotyping persist. She also makes the point that improvements are most noticeable at the very early stages, where the initial contact is often with specially trained women police officers. The problems increase where the



investigation is taken over by CID. Both studies concur that the police are acting as gatekeepers, second guessing how the case will be perceived by the CPS and the courts.

Many of the practitioners interviewed in the Harris and Grace study were at pains to stress that it was not their practice which was at fault, or even the letter of the law; rather the problem was that too many 'weak' cases being prosecuted. Given the huge attrition at all stages before the trial this is simply not a tenable explanation, but it is clung to tenaciously by the key players in the CJS, especially lawyers.

### *The paradox of reported rape*

Over the last two decades reported rape has increased year on year, whilst the conviction rate has fallen almost in direct parallel. At the same time we also know that the majority of rapes are not reported, at most 1 in 10 are, a much lower reporting rate than for domestic violence. When asked in surveys why they do not report women cite three main factors: fearing an unsympathetic response from the police; lack of faith in the courts; and fear of further attack. The evident failure of the CJS — police, prosecutors and judiciary — to deliver justice must confirm these misgivings, yet increasing numbers of women continue, despite all evidence to the contrary, to seek justice.

Home Office attempts to explain this sorry state of affairs use one of two approaches: looking at all crime, or the specificities of sexual crime. The first refers to the fact that attrition is high in a lot of reported crime. This is true, and particularly with respect to robbery and burglary. But this is a very weak argument, since the main factor accounting for attrition in property crime is that the offender is hardly ever identified; this is not the case with respect to reported rapes in the late 1990s where the majority of reported cases now involve a known perpetrator.

The second, and preferred approach, is reflected in some of the conclusions and recommendations in *A Question of Evidence?*; that the problem is 'acquaintance rape' — both that this accounts for the increase in reporting, and that these cases are much more difficult to prove in court. This was a key message in the Home Office press release announcing publication of the research study in June, and was immediately translated in the media to the problem of 'date rape' — sex gone wrong. Yet within the Harris

and Grace study the single largest category of rapists were ex-partners. And if we take a closer look at the acquaintance category, just under half had met in the previous 24 hours. If these were re-categorised as Gregory and Lees suggest into stranger assaults the picture would look rather different.

Current thinking in the Home Office clearly seeks to explain the abject performance of our justice system by references to the increasing proportion of reported rapes that involve 'acquaintances'. Rather than explore why the justice system seems unable to adjust to what research and feminist services have known for two decades, that most rapes are committed by known men, we were offered a counsel of despair in *A Question of Evidence?* — floating the possibility of a 'lesser' crime of acquaintance rape. There was no rationale offered for this proposal, other than it is hard to get a conviction when victim and offender are known to one another. Accepting this would in effect involve downgrading the majority of rapes. These kinds of tinkering with levels of rape have not proved effective in other jurisdictions, such as Canada and the USA, and they represent a refusal to engage with a complex reality in which the neglect of rape — and feminists have to take some responsibility here — has meant that the myths of 'real rape' persist in the minds of CJS personnel and juries. It is, in fact, extremely unlikely that the current sex offences review will recommend a lesser offence, but it continues to be a favoured theme in the media and is supported by many of the largest selling newspapers.

What both studies show, however, is a more complex picture, with each kind of rape — stranger, acquaintance and intimate, adult and child — dropping out at various stages for different reasons. Not to mention that there were also convictions in each of these categories. To suggest that there is only a problem in relation to one area, when the research findings themselves suggest otherwise, demonstrates either a lack of understanding or a desire to over-simplify within the Home Office.

### *International research*

Here I just want to highlight some recent work which *T&S* readers might not be aware of, and which they might find useful. Some of the most interesting recent research on rape and sexual assault comes from Australia and New Zealand.

Jan Jordan has conducted a detailed study of women's experiences of reporting rape in New Zealand, which has both similarities and differences with UK research. Unlike here women report significant improvements in satisfaction with respect to forensic examinations, perhaps due to the establishment of many sexual assault centres in Australasia. Apart from this similar continuing problems with police and judicial attitudes persist. She concludes that much of this can be traced to the tenacity of myths and stereotypes about rape.

*Heroines of Fortitude*, from New South Wales, Australia, is a remarkable study of 150 court hearings and trials. The vast majority involved known men (90%). Just over a quarter plead guilty (26%) but in the trials less than a third (31%) resulted in a conviction. Some of the detail of the trial transcripts is deeply depressing — since new South Wales is one of the jurisdictions which is seen to have done most to limit sexual history evidence and change the conduct of rape trials. One of the report's conclusions is that women were routinely discredited and attacked during cross-examination by biased questions which drew on stereotypes about the appropriate behaviour of women in relation to sex and sexual assault. Over half were accused of making vengeful accusations, and a third accused to taking the case for the compensation. Over half (57%) were asked about sexually provocative behaviour, over a third about resistance (37%). The old style corroboration warning (similar to that which used to be required in the UK — that it is dangerous to convict on the uncorroborated word of a complainant in rape cases) was given in 40% of cases. Despite the sexual history legislation the woman's reputation was raised in 12% of trials and sexual experience material raised in 95 of the 111 trials. It was allowed in evidence in 84% of the cases where it was raised, but commonly admitted without prior application, with no challenge from the prosecutor or question from the judge. These actions contravene the law reforms which sought to limit sexual history evidence, in much the same ways as Section 2 in England and Wales, and the stronger reform in Scotland, have been evaded,

Aboriginal women were hugely over-represented as complainants, and much more likely to be treated with disrespect through more references to alcohol, promiscuity and seeking compensation. The study also showed that Aboriginal women experienced more shame in

giving evidence and found it extremely difficult to give the kinds of graphic descriptions of the assaults which lawyers demanded of them. Defence lawyers also appeared to use jargon and authority to intimidate and confuse. A 'cultural' defence was also often deployed implying that casual sex and interpersonal violence was more acceptable in Aboriginal communities.

It is not normal practice in *T&S* to recommend books written by men, but *Unwanted Sex*, by American law professor Stephen Schulhofer is an exception for me. The respect he gives to radical feminist analysis and the detail with which he explores the tensions and difficulties in translating it into legal reform is unusual in any contemporary discussions of sexual violence. The areas discussed include: the principles which should underpin law on adult sexual offences; the failure of rape law reform in the US; and detailed exploration of contexts in which sexual harassment and abuse of trust/authority relations ought to be included in criminal law.

Part of Schulhofer's intention is to move beyond various deadlocks in recent debates, including whether rape should be a crime of violence or a sexual crime, and the much rehearsed supposed tension between pleasure and danger, women's right to say yes, and their right to say no. He is excellent on the arguments by 'power feminists' (Camille Paglia, Katie Roiphe et al) that women should 'take responsibility' for their sexual choices. Rather than being a progressive proposal Schulhofer argues that placing the burden on women to communicate clearly, merely rehearses the position rape law has always taken.

He proposes that the principle of sexual autonomy should underpin sexual offences law, an especially strong statement from the US, where most legal reform has emphasised force and violence.

[Law] still refuses to outlaw coercion and abuses of trust which prevent a woman from deciding freely whether to choose or refuse a sexual relationship. And when she does refuse, the law still fails to ensure that her clearly expressed preferences will be honoured and enforced. (p9).

And:

Sexual coercion is simply any conduct that threatens to violate the victim's rights. Conduct that forces a person to choose between her sexual autonomy and any of her other legally protected entitlements — rights to property, to privacy, and to reputation — is by definition improper; it deserves to be treated as a serious criminal offence. (p132)

Campaign to End Rape  
c/o 28 Eaton Road  
Sale, Cheshire  
M33 7TZ  
(donations welcome)

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> This is a bureaucratic police category into which cases which are not pursued are placed. Cases which are 'no crimed' do not appear in official crime statistics, and it seems to be disproportionately used in relation to both rape and domestic violence.

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In the US reformers in the late 70s and 1980s focused on three areas: removing the resistance requirement; taking consent out of the definition of rape; and introducing degrees of rape/sexual assault. He argues that whilst the reformers knew men's failure to obtain genuine consent was at the heart of rape, they opted for a strategy which they believed would focus on the behaviour of the assailant, rather than the victim. The consequence was that the focus ended up again on force rather than autonomy. That there have been such meagre gains from an extensive reform process, is according to him partly due to appeal courts reintroducing (non)consent as a necessary key element in rape cases.

Thus consent is not avoidable, and the law has to address when no means no — most women when they say no intended their statement to mean just that — and that if consent is to have any valid meaning it must require some form of saying yes.

By requiring affirmative permission, through words or conduct we can insist that any person who engages in intercourse shows full respect for the other person's autonomy — by pausing, before he acts, to be sure that he has a clear indication of her actual consent. (p273)

As Jennifer Temkin has pointed out, this is not a difficult burden for the law to place on men, since the woman is present.

By taking the point of departure as sexual autonomy Schulhofer finds it easy to make the kinds of connections radical feminists have between rape, sexual assault and sexual harassment. I have to say I found it more than a little ironic that it is a man who has provided the most cogent and passionate unpicking of the notion popularised by a number of high profile US women calling themselves feminists — that legal reform around rape and sexual harassment has 'gone too far'. In fact US sexual harassment laws are very limited in scope and effectiveness — they only protect employees and students. To win a case there needs to be an explicit threat in terms of one's job or academic performance, and even in the unlikely event that you win the individual harasser is not liable, the employer or institution is. So using the civil discrimination, rather than criminal route, as encouraged by Catharine Mackinnon's definition of sexual harassment as sex discrimination in the later 1970s has not delivered effective remedies either.

#### So where to now?

There are at least two ways to base rape law reform on the principle of sexual autonomy. One involves defining consent in law, as they have done in parts of Australia, as 'a positive and free agreement'. This is the route proposed by the Campaign to End Rape in the UK. The other is the current proposals recently published in South Africa to define rape as 'sex obtained under coercive circumstances', with specification of what these circumstances might include. The intention in the latter case is to remove consent as far as possible from the case, and for the complainants' evidence to be focused more on what their assailant did, rather than their state of mind. There is no way of knowing at this point which of these strategies will prove the most effective, but they are both seeking to recast law in ways which take feminist analysis into account.

A key commitment in *Living Without Fear* (see this issue) is to decrease attrition and increase prosecution in rape cases. Welcome though this ambition is, it will come to nothing if where the problems lie is mis-identified. We do not need more research to see that the majority of rape cases are being lost at a very early point; we do need research to find out what is going wrong in the encounters between women reporting rape and the police. Both UK and international research confirms that there remains a core problem in perceptions and understandings of rape, which is not limited to the 'acquaintance' category. Feminists and women's projects need to begin some serious thinking, and quickly, about how we might begin to make sustained inroads into the myths and stereotypes about rape.

It looks increasingly likely that the Home Office review of sexual offences law will reflect aspects of feminist research, thinking and analysis. But they will remain paper proposals if the understanding of 'real rape', 'real rapists' and 'real victims' continues to exclude the majority of forced sex. We will not improve responses to rape and sexual assault until policy makers and legal practitioners begin to expect the best of men, rather than seeking to excuse or justify the worst. We will not improve responses to rape until CJS practitioners understand that it is in fact the hardest accusation to make, and that it is their practices which make a critical difference in whether justice is done and seen to be done. □

# Kind Words and Compromises

**'Living Without Fear' is a new initiative on violence against women, launched by a Labour administration that makes much of its commitment to so-called 'joined-up government'. Helen Jones gives the document a cautious welcome, but says there are still gaps in both the government's analysis of the problem and its willingness to back up good intentions with real resources.**

On June 30 1999, the Government launched 'Living Without Fear' (LWF), a joint Home Office/Women's Unit initiative to 'combat violence against women'. The initiative recognises that '...advice and support for women who suffer violence is still not comprehensive enough or easily accessible', and its goal '...is that within five years there will be efficient multi-agency partnerships right across the country'. LWF contains many proposals and suggestions. The Government's strong acknowledgement that violence against women is a crime, whatever form it takes, must be seen as a victory for all the women who have campaigned for years.

In this piece, I want to examine LWF, to see what it offers victims/survivors and women's organisations, what it requires of other agencies and the extent to which it provides a national framework to combat violence against women. The document is the culmination of a lengthy consultation process which included many women's groups and feminist researchers. It can be seen as a set of tools: a magnifying glass to examine existing policies and procedures, a lever to help prize the lid off funding pots and a lens through which statutory and voluntary agencies can better understand each other's roles. However, it is not the only story; women's

groups need to be critical of the document and continue to lobby for a stronger message and commitment from government. The structure of the document, highlighting examples of 'best practice' and current service provision and showing what the Government intends to 'add', provides useful information and the beginnings of a framework for action. But much of the government input is little more than good intentions.

One of the few tangible actions LWF offers is the increase of £6.3 million in the grant to Victim Support and a pledge of £6 million to be made available to 'future' projects within the Home Office Crime Reduction Strategy. However, this initiative has an overall budget of £250 million, so £6 million is paltry. At least ten times this amount will be spent on burglary. Home Office research<sup>1</sup> points to a 'best estimate' of 8.35 million incidents of domestic assault and threats in 1995 in England and Wales. Compare the pledge of £6m with the investment of free labour provided by women within rape crisis centres and refuges and we can begin to see the commitment of the Government.

Women's Aid	250 groups
Rape Crisis	50 groups
If each group has 15 volunteers (probably an under-estimate)	4,500 women
And if each woman works 10 hours per week each week of the year	2,340,000 hours
If each hour of work was paid at £5 per hour	£11,700,000

By comparison, in the USA, the Violence Against Women Act in 1999 provides \$120 million for direct domestic violence services and \$75 million for rape and sexual assault services rising to \$260 million and \$100 million respectively in 2002. Also, the £6 million is for new projects which have to fit within criteria on crime reduction, and applications will be expected to be multi-agency and demonstrate how they will reduce crime and cut costs. Few local women's organisations will be able to meet these demands.

LWF recognises the many statutory, community and voluntary groups involved in the delivery of services to women. However, apart from a vague reference to a 'stable funding formula' being developed, there are no new resources for the grass roots services which women use.

### No coherent perspective

The lack of any acknowledgement of action being taken on an international level about violence against women is a serious and surprising flaw. Violence against women was recognised as a fundamental human rights issue in the 1993 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women and was a major topic at the 1995 Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women. It has also become an important issue in the European Union and Council of Europe. But there is no reference to these developments in LWF.

On a national level, male violence against women cuts across social and welfare policy, raises issues about the Criminal Justice System, aid and foreign policy, and has direct links with the recent Human Rights Act. But yet again, there is little reference to these connections; so much for 'joined-up government'.

This lack of coherence is evident. One of LWF's pledges is to monitor and review existing legislation, including sex offences. Yet the day after LWF was launched, a government press release announcing publication of the study on

attrition in rape cases (see Liz Kelly, this issue) highlighted the possible introduction of a lesser offence of 'date rape'<sup>2</sup>. This provoked an immediate storm of outrage, played out in the media. What is perhaps most worrying is that the Home Office, who now have responsibility for implementing LWF, thought this was the most worthy aspect of the research to highlight.

### What's the problem?

LWF focuses on the needs of 'victims' rather than addressing the failures and weaknesses of institutional responses. Chapter 3 on 'Justice', for example, is vague on the government's intention to improve the Criminal Justice System. The proposal for an improved circular to the police on domestic violence is unlikely to change the attitudes of the police, who have been

the barrier to implementing the previous circular issued in 1990. Regardless of other proposals for reform contained within the document, the police will continue to hold the power over how reported cases are handled and processed, and there is little concrete suggestion as to how the continuing practice of 'no criming' will be addressed.

LWF outlines existing and proposed research on Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) practice and court procedures and pledges specialist training for prosecutors on sexual offences. These hold the promise of addressing some problems (see T&S 35), but those at the level of the judiciary remain unaddressed. The attitude of judges is highlighted in the case where Judge Brian Capstick QC reduced the sentence of a man who had raped his wife arguing that 'The rape of a wife may make it a less serious offence than it would otherwise could be.' (*Daily Telegraph* 12/10/99). This reflects the values of a (predominantly male) culture which re-enforces the myths that the Zero Tolerance Campaign worked so hard to dispel. The Government need to look hard at where the system is failing women. At present the system offers little deterrent to male perpetrators of violence — it remains a high reward, low risk crime.

### Who's the problem?

Implicit in LWF is the assumption that women are responsible for their own safety and responsible for the behaviour of men. LWF includes the following statistics (p7):

- ♦ every week two women are killed by their current or former partners. (Homicide Statistics 1998)
  - ♦ one woman in four experiences domestic violence at some stage in her life. (British Crime Survey 1998)
  - ♦ women aged 16-29 are at greatest risk of experiencing domestic violence. (British Medical Association Review 1998)
  - ♦ domestic violence often starts and/or escalates during pregnancy. (British Medical Association Review 1998)
- Is there anything strange about these statistics? Well, they are all about male violence, but there is no mention of men in any of the statements. If they were reworded would they have more meaning?
- ♦ Every week two men kill a current or former partner.
  - ♦ Men cause one in four women to experience

domestic violence at some stage in their life.

- ♦ Men are more violent towards women aged 16-29.
- ♦ Men often beat pregnant women.

This gender-neutral approach in the language of LWF is a denial of men's responsibility for their own actions. In patriarchal societies, women's responsibility for male violence extends from ignoring exploitative, sexualised advertising; wolf whistling; abusive telephone calls; harassment in the workplace — everyday activities — through to fighting for their lives when being raped; because if they do not fight, police and judges will suggest that they were not really afraid; that they did not mind too much or that they actually encouraged the offence. Some women are seen as less deserving of the status of 'victim' due to the dominant definition of violence which connects culpability to 'appropriate' behaviour. What is remarkable about LWF is that the words 'male violence' and 'man' are virtually absent.

In the introduction to LWF, Baroness 'I'm not a feminist' Jay, our current minister for women states:

We have produced 'Living Without Fear' to show how we can put an end to this unnecessary heartache and upset.

She speaks of *heartache and upset* when every week, two women are killed by partners or former partners, when in one area, 45 women reported rape to the police whilst 120 women reported rape to a rape crisis agency over the same period<sup>3</sup>. Home Office research suggests that '...victims who felt to blame in some way were less likely to report incidents to the police'.<sup>4</sup> Whilst women are made to feel responsible for the behaviour of men and feel unable to report to the authorities, women will continue to experience more than 'heartache and upset', women will continue to be killed. Conferring responsibility on women rather than demanding it from men can do little to end male violence against women.

### Addressing the problem

Using public policy to address the problem of male violence against women must involve diverse governmental departments, statutory agencies and non-statutory agencies. Creating national support for multi-agency response is necessary, while an innovative and effective system of political accountability that makes visible the effects of violence, on women and the wider society, is vital. LWF does propose a

movement towards integrated responses, but what actual proposals does it contain for making this a reality? It praises domestic violence forums, of which there are now over 300, yet ignores the reality that many run with meagre or non-existent resources and that some agencies, such as the CPS or health and education are rarely involved. If the intention is to stop the compartmentalisation of crimes against women should we not be looking to transform domestic violence forums to be inclusive of all types of gendered violence? LWF suggests that domestic violence fora have '...the potential to be extended to all forms of violence against women.' (p14) but then goes on to state 'We would like to see full coverage of domestic violence fora within five years.' (p15). In Chapter 2 on 'Provision and Protection' there is no pledge by the Government to 'add' anything to the development of integrated sexual assault centres. The document consistently prioritises domestic violence, marginalising other forms of violence against women as merely add-ons or after-thoughts. By its own example, integration is a long way off.

LWF does contain an illustration of the number and location of rape crisis centres and cites examples of good practice of several local groups. But the Government does little to acknowledge the work of the Rape Crisis Federation (RCF) — in fact they are excluded from the list of useful telephone numbers — or the potential for RCF and Victim Support to work together.

Roz Foley commented on The Home Affairs Select Committee on Domestic Violence, which called for a crime prevention campaign. She argued: '...if we let non-feminist institutions co-opt this [Zero Tolerance] kind of campaign, what we will get will be the usual crap that puts the onus on women to change our behaviour, and not on men to change theirs'.<sup>5</sup> The newly elected Labour Government commissioned a national campaign from the Zero Tolerance Charitable Trust in 1997. To date, it has not been used. Instead they launched 'Break the Chain' in January 1999, a low profile campaign which focuses solely on domestic violence.

#### ***The challenges ahead***

The role of information giving, counselling and, fundamentally, believing women, in one-to-one and group sessions, has been central to the development of women's groups such as Women's Aid and Rape Crisis Centres. Such an

approach is however highly demanding of resources. Many refuges and rape crisis centres have moved towards more individualistic approaches that do not take account of the collective nature of women's experience of male violence. Belief, the time to talk and the opportunity to share experiences has a significant effect on a woman's ability to regain control over her life. Women's groups have sought to name the problem, to break the silence to ensure that male violence against women is no longer protected by secrecy. But funding remains an issue which threatens this approach.

And while we critically assess LWF, the argument continues that a gendered analysis of violence is misguided. Melanie Phillips, writing in the Independent on Sunday (14.7.99) argued that there is overwhelming evidence that women initiate domestic violence as much as men. She selectively quotes from Home Office research<sup>6</sup> findings that 4.2% of men and 4.2% of women said their current or former partner had assaulted them. Look again Melanie. The study acknowledges that it cannot distinguish between the initiation of violence and responses to it, and further found that women are far more likely to report both repeat assaults and serious injury: 'Women were much more likely to report choking, strangling, suffocation and being forced to have sex' (p37), and that women and not men reported being fearful. The same study reports that 26% of women (one in four) will experience domestic violence at some time in their lives.

Without an analysis of gender inequality, initiatives such as 'LWF' produce a politics and an ideology of male violence that suggests 'Violence against women is a crime, like any other crime...'. Male violence against women is not 'a crime, like any other crime', it does not have the same motivations as burglary and theft: it does not even have the same motivations as street violence.

LWF takes up many of the recommendations made by Women's Aid in 'Families Without Fear' their Agenda for Action on Domestic Violence. The focus is on the needs of individual women (surely an acceptable agenda for women's support groups). But a Government-led, national strategy should be more than advice and examples of how to pick up the pieces. Interventions focus on the needs of the individual, whether that is in provisions for women and children or in programmes for offending men. This is of course necessary, but it offers no clear challenge to the

causes of crime and can therefore offer no real prevention or protection. The central question of how we get men to change their behaviour is not asked. This is a serious question. Men 'get' something out of abusing women and children. The Zero Tolerance Campaign got it right and continues to get it right. Men abuse women to gain power, to take control. The myths that surround male violence against women still exist in society and still need to be challenged. This is why campaigns are an essential ingredient in any strategy to end male violence against women. It is vital that the strongest message reaches the widest audience. The priorities of the Zero Tolerance Campaign were founded on the belief that ending male violence against women is an achievable destination, not merely a direction.

The potential of LWF is limited on a number of fronts. Firstly, the investment of money pledged by the Government is minimal. How can the good intentions of LWF be carried through in the face of continuing cut-backs to public services and the precarious financial position of women's organisations? Secondly, the individualistic approach, focussed on the needs of victims and current best practice ignores the expectation

from both the UN and Council of Europe that governments produce a coherent national strategy and plan of action aimed at eliminating violence against women. Instead we are offered 'add-on' fixes to existing provision. Thirdly, local level domestic violence forums are prioritised; this is little more than a smokescreen to disguise the inaction and lack of commitment of Government. A coherent national strategy which would offer leadership in both institutional change from the highest level and demonstrate how all forms of violence against women can be included in local co-ordination is entirely absent.

Despite its huge limitations, Living Without Fear is a move in the right direction. It acknowledges the continuum of male violence that feminists have been protesting about for years. It offers examples of successful projects, including some of the most radical and feminist in the UK and these may encourage further development. The Foreword to Living Without Fear states 'This is only a first step and will not in itself solve the problem of violence against women.' We must ensure that the journey does not come to a premature end. □

#### **References**

Cabinet Office 'Living Without Fear' (TSO, 1999)

<sup>1</sup> Home Office Research Study No. 191, Table 3.1

<sup>2</sup> Home Office Research Study No. 196 *A question of evidence? Investigating & prosecuting rape in the 1990s* (HMSO)

<sup>3</sup> Merseyside Police Management Information & Analysis Unit — Figures for Wirral April 1998-March 1999. Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre for Women on Merseyside Statistical Report 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Home Office Research Study No. 191.

<sup>5</sup> *Trouble & Strife* 27 Winter 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Home Office Research Study No. 191, (HMSO, 1999)

## THE UNIVERSITY *of York* CENTRE FOR WOMEN'S STUDIES

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# Walking with dinosaurs

*In 1997, Trouble & Strife interviewed Monica McWilliams, one of the founders of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition. Back then she talked about the challenges involved in participating in the peace process talks. Two and a half years later, Linda Regan interviews her again, and asks her about the role Women's Coalition can playing in the politics of post-Good Friday Agreement Northern Ireland.*

**Linda Regan:** *The first thing I want to say is congratulations.*

**Monica McWilliams:** Yes, we finally seem to be starting to make a difference here now.

**Linda:** *I suppose I really want to start about that. What's it like finally getting to a point where you're actively participating in government, as opposed to going through the process of trying to get there?*

**Monica:** Well, it's brilliant to be on the Health and Social Services Committee — the first meeting was yesterday and there's another one tomorrow on education — as opposed to going around endless negotiations. The negotiations were tiring; they seemed to be never-ending,

because every time we thought we had got somewhere, we would take six steps back. We never knew our timetables from one day to the next or when we would be on call, so you couldn't actually organise your life. Occasionally you were in very late hours, not knowing whether you were going to be there all night or not. And obviously it was demoralising because no-one actually knew whether we were ever going to make it. And now to have all that behind us is just such a relief; it's like a weight lifted off our shoulders. In the end, though, it wasn't done with huge euphoria; we did it by breaking the problem into little pieces and dealing with each of the pieces until we got through all of them. So in a way, moving into the Assembly, getting the

Dinosaur graphic from a Northern Ireland Women's Coalition poster

ministers declared and getting into the committees has been just another part of the process. It wasn't like we all danced in the streets or threw our arms up in the air or declared that peace had broken out, do you know what I mean? We're all sufficiently aware that there are still enormous hurdles to overcome because people are strangers to each other; they don't really know each other and only now is dialogue starting to happen between various parties and individuals in those parties even though we've almost been together, some of us, for three years. But getting into bread and butter issues is great. It's been good and I'm really looking forward to starting to tackle some of the health problems because we've huge problems here now about closure of rural hospitals. There are issues around maternity services and around acute services — accident and emergency services. I'm also keen that we get into family and child care work. Yesterday at the committee we were each allowed to declare what we wanted to see happen and that was quite good.

## *The process of peace*

**Linda:** *Can we go back just a little bit? The whole process of getting to where you are now. You said it was very slow, very frustrating with three steps forward and one step back. What were some of the main difficulties for you, for the Women's Coalition, in this process?*

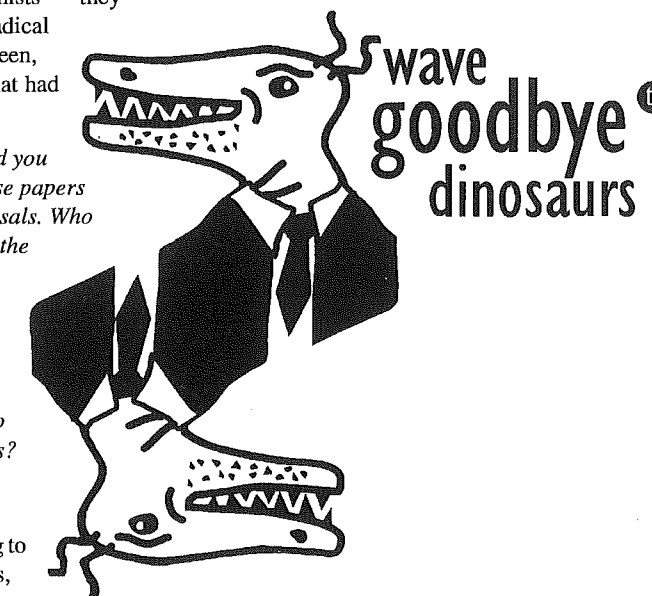
**Monica:** Since the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement we always wanted to move to implement it, particularly since we had the referendum — it was the will of the people. But clearly there were parties, particularly the Ulster Unionists, who had huge problems with it going too fast and they wanted to slow things down till their people became more comfortable with the idea of sharing government with Sinn Fein. In the end that's what it was about. Decommissioning was a ruse; it wasn't really the main issue, though it became the main issue. For us the major difficulty was having to debate decommissioning endlessly when in fact we felt that the debate should have been much wider. And because the terms of reference of Mitchell's review was very tight — it was about the formation of an inclusive executive and an agreement that decommissioning was part of the process — we ended up talking mostly about decommissioning once again.

We had to go to London at one stage to the

American ambassador's house because they wanted it to be done away from the media and behind closed doors because there was so much negotiation taking place by proxy through the newspapers. They actually said, 'Look the time is right now for people to talk to each other rather than to journalists.' So we put forward a paper there which outlined the range of options: here's what we get with the most acceptable option, which is the formation of the executive and thereafter an agreement to work with an international body on decommissioning, then there was another option which was to establish a shadow executive in the meantime, to establish the committees etc. People thought our paper was quite useful, to at least see what was in front of us, because most of the other parties were refusing to commit to paper. I took from the area of domestic violence the idea that if you were going to get some confidence amongst parties, people needed to acknowledge the hurt they caused and take some responsibility for that and make a declaration of intent about what they intended to do, and if they didn't, they would be held accountable. We felt that it was important to acknowledge that we all had a part to play in the conflict, because there were some in the room who still believed that all of the conflict was caused by the other and not by themselves. And so responsibility was always minimised or rationalised and they wouldn't take it on board. So that was quite interesting and in the end those statements did come out from both Sinn Fein and the Ulster Unionists — they were the most radical things I'd ever seen, compared to what had gone before.

**Linda:** *You said you put forward these papers and these proposals. Who was involved in the process of drawing those up? Was it just members of the Coalition? Or did you go out to women's groups?*

**Monica:** The members of the Coalition belong to women's groups,



community groups and NGOs. We have a structure where one in four weekly meetings are completely open — on a Saturday, with crèche facilities (the other three meetings are decision-making meetings for the whole membership). That's where a lot of what we would discuss would come up. We would do a feedback on what's happening at the negotiations and then throw it open in terms of where we intended to take it. We also have our own co-ordinating meetings — team meetings — that meet every fortnight and we have a negotiating team. We would also speak publicly at various meetings, so there were lots of ways that we were disseminating the information. There is now a Coalition newsletter that we circulate and I have my own constituency newsletter that I personally, along with a team of women, put round 60,000 doors.

**Linda:** Do you think the fact that you've got such a large constituency through the Coalition itself and the fact that you've got all of this consultancy through open meetings had any influence on the way the others received what you were putting forward?

**Monica:** No [laughter]. Not at all. We were seen by many of the larger parties, particularly



the Ulster Unionists and, to some extent, John Hume's party, the SDLP, as irritations.

**Linda:** So that hasn't changed? When you were talking to Trouble & Strife before, back in the summer of 1997, you spoke quite a bit at that point about how antagonistic some people were.

**Monica:** That's still there. Now that we've got devolved government, that will probably disappear because we've set up our government. But one of the reasons, Linda, why we've received the brunt of people's antagonism is because they called us 'women in love with paramilitaries' and some of them referred to us as 'Sinn Fein in skirts'. We understood what needed to happen in order to get stability, that it wasn't all just about decommissioning, and our analysis was different from the rest. We felt that all of us had an influence to bring to bear on creating the conditions that would lead to paramilitary stepping-down and you just didn't go around telling them that was it, they had to step down. There was no point in getting them to do that because they would see it as surrender. You had to create the conditions that enabled us to be able to say, 'This war is over'. We had to create the conditions where they could see that people now were truly interested in sharing power.

#### Signing up to the Agreement

**Linda:** And what about links with other parties inside the process. Was that any better as time has gone on?

**Monica:** We have very good working relationships with the smaller parties because we had to co-ordinate our efforts. There's a small party, the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), led by Davy Irvine, who's quite a radical, who also is from a paramilitary background. But he had a much more radical analysis, given his years in prison and given his own paramilitarism; he also knew and confronted the kind of hegemony that existed amongst the Ulster Unionists as power-holders. He challenged from inside and I felt he played a good leadership role within that 'tribe', so to speak, by making them look at themselves. He really confronted and challenged their belief system, which is always harder to do if you come from inside the tribe. So we acknowledged that role and worked quite closely with them even though there might have been political differences in relation to how they saw the Union working. We believe that you implement

the will of the people, not your own sectional interests. And to some extent that's what they have been saying too, though Sinn Fein and the loyalist parties would differ on the question of nationalism and unionism. But actually there's a lot of similarity there between how they see the war.

So we worked closely with the PUP, and our relationship with the Alliance Party is much better too — it's also a small party and a cross-community party though more predominantly middle-class. The PUP is very working-class and so we found ourselves constantly having to make the point that the process needed to be inclusive. In the final stages of the negotiations and in the review of the negotiations there were times when it became quite exclusive and only certain parties were going to the negotiations in London and we said, 'Look, we've got to keep everybody on board and informed'. And that's what happened when the negotiations collapsed last April — they were trying to force Trimble and Adams to agree, and they left the rest of us out of it. So we were very process-focussed again as well and I think the other parties found it a bit irritating that we kept saying to them, 'Look authorship is ownership and all of us need to be involved in this'. If we didn't stay together as a pro-Agreement collective, then the anti-Agreement people would have a heyday over it because they would split us all off and go at us individually, which is what happened for a long time. But now we're working together much better as a pro-Agreement group.

**Linda:** And who would you say is automatically in that group?

**Monica:** Well, all of the pro-Agreement parties are in it. But some of them work more closely. Sinn Fein's in it, the PUP, the Alliance, ourselves, David Trimble's party, John Hume's party the SDLP, and UUP as I just said and that's it.

**Linda:** You're now up and running, which everybody breathed a sigh of relief about here, I think, as well as there and there was some cheering over here when it finally happened.

**Monica:** Is that right? Because there wasn't here, which is interesting. There was celebration amongst the people and I'm feeling it a bit more on the streets with people coming up and saying, 'well done' and 'thank god you've made it' and 'it's great that you've stayed with it and you did

a great role' but that's what I was trying to explain to you — there wasn't any cheering on the day we did it.

**Linda:** Yes I think that there was some over here, not enormous amounts of it, but I know there were people saying in the media, 'oh thank goodness for that'. But there was also questions about where it was going to work, which I presume is there too — it's early stages.

**Monica:** Yes, because there's still this deadline that Trimble laid down in February which is worrying, but we keep saying 'That's his deadline, it's not ours'. We also say that he doesn't get to set the dates of what people should do by when — that's entirely it's up to the Agreement which stipulates that we all work towards May 2000 to implement all aspects of the Agreement. So there's still a worry about what's going to happen in February but I think it's going to be OK. Everything so far has been very positive.

#### Women in NI politics

**Linda:** That's really good to hear. When the Women's Coalition got started, back when we talked to you in 1997, there was this thing about all women being pulled into the political process because of the Women's Coalition providing an opportunity for women to get involved. How much development of that has there been since? Are more women being called in? I know that there are a lot more women standing for local elections and things. Do you see that as continuing and being built on?

**Monica:** Yes, the test for us now is next year. We're going to be using the whole of 2000 to really get women now to start identifying local constituencies in which they would be happy to stand in 2001. The first time, we just ran at it and stood in all sorts of places. This time we're going to actually train up candidates and let them work out where the vote comes from and work with people in those constituencies to try and promote themselves. It's wonderful for me to see women already identifying constituencies they want to run in. There's still a reluctance, as you can imagine, in Northern Ireland, for people to be involved in politics at all — it's still a dirty word and it's going to take some time for new blood to come in, especially young people who are so demoralised by what passed for politics here, but I think it will happen. And they'll probably get

involved with other parties as well, not just ours, and women will also get involved with other parties. I'm sure that's the case, because we still have a hard time; people identify us as feminists and they also identify us as cross-community, and cross-community parties don't do well in Northern Ireland.

**Linda:** Do you think that's going to change?

**Monica:** I think it will change. It'll be an interesting test when we go out to stand again in elections whether people will now be more supportive of the cross-community candidates because when you're in conflict you always want your own tribe to be in there, fighting your cause. But when you start coming out of that a bit then you actually are prepared to risk your vote elsewhere. And that's what I'm hoping people will now be prepared to do.

**Linda:** And when you say that you're identified as feminists, is it being used as a stick with which to beat you?

**Monica:** Yes.

**Linda:** All the time?

**Monica:** Yes. By those who voted more traditionally. Indeed the other parties see us as feminist and have no time for us — you're talking fundamentalists here, who really have no time for equal opportunities, never mind a women's party. And then there are some women on the ground who don't see us as radical enough and are very critical of us. I think that's unfair, because they ought to level that accusation at some of the men's parties too, but it's always at us, rather than at the main parties. Some of the criticism is from lazy academics. For example, one male academic recently wrote that we seem to be more interested in getting women into politics and we don't seem to be doing anything about domestic violence; the guy clearly doesn't know what my background is — he doesn't know that I'm practically spending half of my day on constituency issues in relation to domestic violence. Do you know what I mean?

**Linda:** [Laughter] Yes.

**Monica:** So it's dead easy for people outside to do that. They're very critical of the political system these people who write like this — they want the whole thing torn down. They just think that we're about replicating what men do. Believe me we're not.

### The women's agenda

**Linda:** That's one of the things that I was wanting to talk with you about briefly, too. Do you think that the women's agenda — issues to do with women and women's lives — will now be incorporated within the new structure, including the issue, obviously, of violence against women. Are other members of the assembly hearing about those issues, listening?

**Monica:** Well they haven't yet, because we haven't had an assembly until this Monday [December 6, 1999] was our first sitting.

**Linda:** Were they listening to you when it was brought up before?

**Monica:** Yes they were. In the last year and a half since we got elected, the Assembly has sat six times and each of those six times was to discuss the establishment of a government. We never had motions on issues. We've never actually debated a single thing outside of the Good Friday Agreement. Never. We've never got around to debating anything other than decommissioning.

**Linda:** So it's only the official start of the process.

**Monica:** Yes. Where I've managed to get a few points in is about wanting legislation on legal guns — legal guns. The Dunblane initiative and the legislation on small guns haven't been extended to Northern Ireland, although we pushed for that, because so many people here carry personal protection weapons. And my argument is that domestic violence homicide rates have increased as a result of the higher numbers of legally-held weapons. Everybody thinks it's illegally-held weapons, but illegally-held weapons have not been used in domestic violence incidents, because they're buried in the ground and you've got so much surveillance attached to them. If any person used an illegal gun which had forensic on it in a domestic violence incident that person would be shot. Are you with me?

**Linda:** Yeah, I'm with you.

**Monica:** So it's legally-held weapons that have been used and nobody wants to hear that debate. They only want the so-called terrorists to be demonised.

**Linda:** So are they prepared to start looking at issues of non-sectarian violence? [Ironic laughter] Yet?



**Monica:** They like to think they are. And because we've had such huge numbers of murders here in the last year in domestic violence — there were twelve murders in one year in a tiny country.

**Linda:** That's a huge proportion.

**Monica:** Yes. And that was a huge increase too. We raised that through the media and through documentaries on the television. I will be getting into this issue now, because the Health Committee started yesterday. Domestic violence is one of the priorities. We have a criminal justice review as part of our Good Friday Agreement, but remember that criminal justice and law and order and policing are still a reserved power for Westminster. So I'm trying to get some of the laws changed here; I'm trying to get the Department of Public Prosecution abolished because it's useless. Other issues for us — we've held lobby meetings and invited the other Assembly members to them — are domestic violence, child protection, custody and access issues where the father's been a perpetrator and women are being held in contempt of court. Those are big issues.

We've got a new group here now called Parents Against Sexual Abuse; so many of the women are just terrified about the way our judiciary are treating them. I'm working with a director of office for law reform here who is a woman and she is very, very keen to change the civil law and to keep abreast of the civil law to make it as good as we possibly can. We have amended the civil law here and ours often is better than the British legislation; we hope to continue to do that. We do have the power to look at civil law but we don't on the criminal

justice side. So 'yes', Linda, is the answer.

I've been asked to attend courts for some horrendous cases. We recently had a man who attempted murder on his partner and also got done for foetal destruction because the foetus was destroyed during his attack on his partner. She's terrified of him; she's got security around her house and everything. And I think on remand he was still able to make phone calls to her and threaten her. He's now appealed his case and his case is now coming back up again. That's in one of our constituencies and we've supported her and gone to court with her the whole way through. A couple of other cases that I've gone to court with — one woman has been held in contempt for not giving access to a father who has been suspected of child abuse. So stuff like that. Because we're a women's coalition, and maybe because of my background, we get more phone calls on that than any other party — more phone calls on it than maybe any other issue.

### Setting new priorities

**Linda:** I suppose one of the things I'm interested in is how the other parties that are now in the Assembly are responding to those issues being raised. Are they seeing them as issues that they now have to tackle? Are they looking at them as being high priority?

**Monica:** It's too early to really say. Some are sympathetic and would be interested but to what extent we don't know yet until I start getting up on the floor and putting motions forward. I'm going to try and see if I can get a cross-party interest group going so that I can identify one individual in each of the other parties to sit on that. Then we can start lobbying on these issues. But because we're inundated at the minute just getting the government off the ground, I haven't got round to doing that yet. And I couldn't have done it before now because people weren't talking to each other. And they wouldn't sit down in the same committee.

**Linda:** As you say, this is just the beginning, so what we need to do is to come back to you a year from now and see how it's moving forward. But what are you hoping for in the fairly short term? What's the Women's Coalition hoping that they're going to be able to get going?

**Monica:** What we're doing at the minute is establishing policy teams and setting priorities for the short term and some for the longer term.

There are currently reviews going on and we have to await the outcome of those review before we can take action. For instance, we have the 11-plus here, which is an exam that all children do at the age of eleven; there's a review going that will finish in 2000 and then we're going to form coalitions with other parties to make sure it gets abolished. On each of the policy teams we're setting ourselves priorities and clearly child protection and the issue of violence against women and children are huge issues for us; the criminal justice review will report in January and we will be making a submission after that around the appointment of judges and around the prosecution service. Another big issue for us at the minute is reform of policing and we've just made our submission on that. Obviously our police is predominantly male and militaristic and was developed for a war. We are going to look at how we can re-orient them and get them thinking now about putting more resources and diverting their training into issues around violence against women and children.

Then we have all of the structures for the coalition formed with the two parties, Alliance and PUP; we've a member sitting on every committee. We'll decide how to vote on issues when we hold our briefing meetings once a week with all of these parties, and decide on whether we want to be seen to be identified in the first instance with things that are happening, and if we don't, what are we going to do about it?

We're the opposition, Linda, here. It's going to be a unique form of government if four of the parties and the majority of members are all in government. [Laughter] Right? There are ten of us who are not in government who are the opposition. So you can see the problem we're going to have. There are some others in opposition, but they're also small, there's only about five or six others but they're on the anti-Agreement side.

**Linda:** So those of you who aren't in the government, who are in the opposition are going to have to work together if you're going to achieve anything, really, aren't you?

**Monica:** Yes, that's right. That's the first thing we've done is establish that structure and luckily the relationship with them is very good.

### **Making links internationally**

**Linda:** Back in 1997, we talked about the Women's Coalition's links internationally. Has

*that continued to be built on?*

**Monica:** Yes. For fundraising purposes alone, we've got to build those links internationally. Because it's still the case that people don't give a lot of funding to political parties in Northern Ireland. In fact political parties are ineligible for funding. Most trusts and foundations will not fund you because you have a political motive, which to me is just unbelievable; they really ought to look at what some of the parties are trying to do. So we get no money whatsoever. All of our money has to be raised by us and I do some of that in the United States, trying to make contact with women's groups. Foundations over there can fund political organisations which have training and education functions. And they're quite interested in doing that, either under the 'women's' banner or under the 'politics and conflict' banner. And then we also have the European networks that we're attached to. We sent someone recently to Finland to a women's organisation there. We find we get a lot of invitations now to conflict societies like Guatemala, South Africa, Israel and Palestine, Bosnia, Kosovo and places like that because women are trying to make contact with women in other conflict situations. So that's quite useful.

**Linda:** And have you managed to bring any of those organisations over to Northern Ireland?

**Monica:** Yes. You have groups passing through Northern Ireland on a daily basis. And there's a business in conflict, if you know what I mean. We cannot actually attend every meeting that we get requests for; we would never get any work done if we spent all our time talking to people who come. However there is a group coming from Bosnia who we will be hosting. There's a group meeting today which I'm going to in about ten minutes which is a community foundation, a large one, called The Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust; for the next two days politicians and civic society will be talking to each other — it's the first meeting of its kind. The Trust is trying to get people who could think differently about how politics could be done in the future, particularly in relation to civic society.

Did you know that we've got a civic forum? The Women's Coalition got into the Agreement the establishment of a civic forum. It's a 60-member body which will be made up of women's groups, disability organisations, ethnic minority organisations, NGOs, civic bodies, trades unions, businesses, farmers, sports and victims' groups.

It will be an advisory/consultant body to the Assembly and it will have its own staff and its own resources.

**Linda:** That's really good. People here won't even know that that exists. Presumably information's going to have to be flowing back and forth, so the civic forum can look at the discussions that are going on in the assembly?

**Monica:** We were the ones who proposed that and got it into the Agreement. It's one of the major institutions that must be established, along with the Assembly, the North-South Council and the British-Irish Council. The civic forum is the fourth institution — it's not the fourth in priority, it's one of four. It's seen as equivalent to all of those others. It will have its own chair and people will sit on a rotating basis. Each of the sectors will be asked to start their own process of elections so that hopefully in a few

years' time they will have an electoral process, but initially representation is probably going to be through umbrella groups working right through co-ordinating groups and the nominating group. Now that's become a big issue about who gets to sit on the civic forum. They've all got to start working in their own sectors to make sure that the people who sit on it are as representative as possible. And no politicians are allowed to sit on it; it has to be civic society. It doesn't mean that members of political parties can't, because it would be unfair to exclude people who were members of parties, it just means that if you have been successful in recent elections, then you are ineligible.

**Linda:** Thank you very much indeed. Good luck with it. We'll probably want to come back to you again and see how it's going. □





# Adding Insult to Injury

*The 'fathers' rights' movement has dreamt up various 'syndromes' in order to achieve their political goals. One of these is 'Parental Alienation Syndrome' wherein they accuse mothers of brainwashing their children against their fathers. In this article, based on a presentation to a domestic violence conference, Anne Morris suggests that the truth is that women's abusive ex-partners continue their attempts to control them by deliberately alienating children from their mothers.*

In this article I want to discuss some of my current thinking that has arisen out of some action research I am undertaking. I have been working at Northern Women's Community Health Centre in Adelaide, doing project work, counselling and group work with women. Most, if not all, of the women who attend the Centre wish to deal with the effects of present or past violence and abuse in their lives. One of the effects of violence that women speak of is the alienation that has occurred between themselves and their children. The alienation has come about not just as a 'by-product' of abuse, but because wedges have been deliberately put in place between mothers and children, in a context of abuse against the mother and/or the children. This

has meant in many cases, that women have 'lost' their relationships with their children, and to most of these women it has been as though their children had died.

Let me tell you about 'Anne', one of the women I interviewed. She had had close and loving relationships with her two daughters, but when her emotionally abusive marriage broke up, her husband, who had barely had anything to do with the girls, began a vicious campaign to win them, one by one, away from their mother. Her younger daughter returned from holidays with her father, and her relationship with Anne had completely changed. As Anne describes it, 'the child that came to my door was not the child that I'd sent away. This child was cold. This child

that came back was basically... It was like, the anger in her eyes...', and from that point Anne's daughter refused to have anything more to do with her. Anne describes her reaction to this:

I started banging my head against the cupboards. And I would have kept on doing that until I killed myself. I stopped for 30 seconds, and I said, 'I am going to kill myself if I don't get help'. So I rang my friends up. It was a very special friend I had, an elderly couple. And she said, 'Don't leave this phone'. ...they raced over to me, presented me with a bottle of Scotch, and wouldn't leave until I'd come good, which was about 3 o'clock in the morning, until I'd knocked myself out with the Scotch to go to sleep. Then, first thing the next morning, they were back over there with me... I wouldn't be here today if they hadn't been there. I would have suicided... There was that huge hole in my life, which, to this very day, has not gone away.

## *Another form of abuse*

To women, the effects of this alienation were devastating. But what compounded this grief further were the many messages that women received from family, friends and professional workers, that the changes in their relationships with their children were due to their bad mothering, that they reflected their failure as mothers, and as women. Anne said, 'At that time, I did blame myself for everything, because everybody had told me I was to blame. I was bad. My husband had told me I was bad for sixteen years that we were married. He told me I was bad afterwards... My doctors were telling me that I was bad... The neighbours were all saying, "Well, what have you done? You've done something. You're to blame." My in-laws were saying the same thing. At that time, my mother was blaming me... my father definitely blamed me'.

This alienation has caused women enormous amounts of grief and pain, through the loss of their children and the compounding of this with mother-blaming. I find it curious that, while this alienation is not an uncommon event for women, women find that their experiences of it are generally not listened to or acknowledged. And indeed, I have found that this is reflected in the relevant literature, where this phenomenon has been invisible as a component of abuse and has not been named.

As Liz Kelly has pointed out, when something doesn't have a name, it tends to remain invisible and without reality. Without a name, we have nothing with which to recognise a phenom-

enon, or acknowledge it, or explore it, or validate the experience for others. Neither can we develop theory about it or practice that addresses it appropriately. I gave this phenomenon the name 'maternal alienation', and I have attempted a working definition of it as *the phenomenon of children being alienated from their mothers, within a context of abuse, through the deliberate use of tactics such as mother blaming*. Not surprisingly, once we had noticed and named this phenomenon at Northern Women's, we saw it more and more in our work.

So therefore, in order to develop an understanding of maternal alienation and to draw attention to its occurrence, a research project was set up at Northern Women's, jointly supervised by Northern Women's and the Department of Social Inquiry (Women's Studies), University of Adelaide. The project poses the questions: What are women's experiences of being alienated from their children by abusers of the women or the children, and how do systems further perpetuate this? In particular, what are the strategies and tactics used by abusers in maternal alienation, and how do they relate to wider discourses that inform professionals' views and beliefs about mothers?

To accommodate the differing orientations of feminist scholarship and Women's Health, the project needed to become inclusive of aims and styles of working that were appropriate to both. Other writers have written about the tensions in so-called 'action research' in the relationship between social science and social action. As Dobash & Dobash pointed out in 1988:

Social science is largely lacking in models of how to develop scientific work within this context [social action], how to analyze the social and political consequences of the messages inherent in research, and how to participate with community groups and social agencies in the collective creation of social change (53).

In trying to deal with these tensions, I have designed this project to include multiple strands. Firstly, I am using feminist qualitative research based on a small number of interviews and focus groups with women to explore their experiences of maternal alienation, mainly from the mothers' perspectives, but to a lesser degree, also from the perspective of adult 'survivors' of child sexual abuse. Further to this, from a Women's Health perspective, I intend to develop a project or projects based on consultations with the women involved, and in partnership with them, if they

want to be active in this. This would offer back to the participants opportunities to become involved in the project, and to direct how the results of the research are to be used by the Centre. All the women involved have indicated that they want the idea of maternal alienation to be publicised so it can be recognised, and 'put on the agenda' as a social health issue. They want a training package to be developed, which will challenge the pervasive mother blaming in professional practice. They are interested in publishing their stories, and also in the idea of producing a video. We have talked about developing models of practice so that practitioners can adequately address the effects of maternal alienation in their work with women and children. These are early ideas, and there will be more meetings with the participants when the research itself is finished. What guides these initiatives, and this works towards resolving some of the tensions present in action research, is, as Sandra Harding says, 'If one begins inquiry with what appears problematic from the perspective of women's experiences, one is led to design research for women' (p 8).

I believe that a feminist analysis offers the possibility of understanding what maternal alienation is about, because of the way it understands male violence within a context of gendered power relations and cultural beliefs that tend to maintain and support violence. I have used Liz Kelly's concept of a 'continuum' of violence to locate maternal alienation within a broad spectrum of violence against women. This enables me to acknowledge the interconnectedness of emotional, physical and sexual abuse (against women and children) and how maternal alienation can be a companion to these at any point along a continuum. The concept of a continuum of violence also allows me to consider a spectrum of abuse ranging from interpersonal to institutional violence, so that it is possible to look at how institutional violence, such as mother-blaming, contributes to the alienation between women and their children. Further to this, an exploration of discourses of mothers and mothering, and their close connection to mother-blame, can give us some idea of how mothers so easily become the butt of blame, and also how this tends to be obscured.

### *Deliberate strategies*

The women that I have interviewed in this research, and also other women I have seen in

counselling, have been quite clear about the fact that maternal alienation had happened in their relationships with their children. What these women describe shows that deliberate strategies are used by men who perpetrate abuse against women, to alienate their children from them. For example, 'Carol' told me about the early years of her marriage to a lawyer, who was physically violent to her and who undermined her relationship with her children:

He would say things to them like, 'Don't do as she says'. And it was all done in a way that was making the children laugh, and making the children think it was a joke. But the underlying message was, 'Be disrespectful to your mother; don't do as she says — your mother's stupid. Her family is stupid.'

Carol described how later, after the marriage had split up, every time her ex-partner had the children visit, he would drive them past a huge billboard of a garage with a picture of a gorilla on it. He named the gorilla 'Carol', and this was all part of a 'great big joke' that was constantly repeated.

Another woman, 'Andrea', described her situation with a violent husband before she left the relationship. Her children 'sat back and watched him verbally abusing me, saying that I was Hitler, Mussolini. And telling them, or telling me in front of them, that he wasn't going to eat anything that I cooked because I was trying to poison him. And that I was trying to use all of these other methods of killing him.' After she left, the children visited him, and there was, in Andrea's words, 'a sign of — a picture — a caricature of a woman with wild hair, wild eyes, looking really crazy, and written on that is, "Just remember, this is what Mum looks like", and my telephone number written in his handwriting on it'.

All the women interviewed talked about the everlasting battles waged by these men against them. 'Jenny' says, 'I have thought about the relentless nature of his pursuit of me, which is ten years now. It still seems to be festering along in its full bloom.' For every one of the women I interviewed, years after they had separated from these men, these campaigns were still being carried out against them, with the minds of their children as the battleground.

### *Abusers as 'victims' and 'heroes'*

This study established that men set out to alienate children from their mothers using a web of words and actions that both demean the

women and elevate themselves in children's eyes. The strategies they use fit with other research findings, for example by Ptacek, that men's violence can be 'motivated by a desire to silence their partners; to punish them for their failure as "good wives"; and to achieve and maintain dominance over these women' as well as intending to hurt and frighten them (p150-1). The women interviewed all believed their ex-partners used maternal alienation as a way of exercising control over their families, of punishing their partners and of winning at all costs. The men competed with their children's mothers to form exclusive relationships with their children based on the destruction of their children's other relationships of trust, affection and loyalty, particularly with their mothers. A potent strategy used by all the men described was to turn the mothers into objects of revulsion and disgust. Both Ptacek and Lundgren identify this assault on a woman's identity as a gendered being as a key ingredient of violence against women. One of the women, 'Hannah', pointed out that her ex-husband's 'strategy of dehumanising me' always elevated him. Furthermore, women who are mothers commonly have a strongly invested sense of identity and self-worth related to being a mother, which makes mothering an easy target for men who wish to injure and punish, and to inflict a further 'assault on her identity as a woman' (Ptacek, p147).

As well as using blame and insults that demeaned the mothers, the men that were spoken of in these interviews used strategies that elevated themselves in certain ways. The men emerged from their own portrayals as victim/ heroes, wielding a potent mix of unpredictable and punishing behaviour, with a refusal to accept responsibility and a need for sympathy. All the men spoke of themselves as victims, needing support from their children — support (they said) that had been denied them by their wives. Echoing some of the women who spoke about this tactic, I have called this the 'poor me' strategy. The men appeared to bond with their daughters in ways that set them up as replacement spouses, to look after them. The 'poor me' strategy was a key part of this. The men tended to bond with their sons in different ways, where they joined around their common male-ness, with contempt for things female, particularly their sons' mothers. All of these men were better off financially than their ex-wives, most of whom lived below the poverty line. In most cases, the

men had well-established careers in the highest income brackets, yet most of these men persuaded their children they were poor, and that they had been impoverished by the children's mothers.

From hearing the women's stories it became obvious that the degree of alienation that the women experienced with their children varied. Some stories showed that the success of the tactics used to alienate children from their mothers was sometimes total and at other times less successful. This variation in the 'success' of alienation even varied within families. Where alienation had been more successful with one sibling, this child was used to work on the others by replicating the father's tactics. More often, in families with children of both genders, it tended to be the boy who became more alienated from his mother than his sister, possibly because the girl had been excluded by the tactic of male bonding. But it was not always the case that sons were more alienated from their mothers. A possible area of future research could be to focus on the factors that contribute to this variation in the 'success' of maternal alienation, but it has been beyond the scope of this study to do this.

### *Recognising the problem*

One has to ask, when women themselves are so clear about the existence of maternal alienation, why is it that professional practice or writings don't name it? Even within the feminist and pro-feminist literature on violence against women, and feminist writings on constructions of mothering, the closest I have come to a recognition of the existence of maternal alienation are hints that it exists. For example, studies of child sexual abuse offenders have illustrated their use of deliberate and manipulative intentions to destroy a child's relationships of trust. Laing & Kamsler say, 'the relationship problems between mother and child victim which are so commonly seen after incest is disclosed, are more likely to be the result of a campaign of "disinformation" orchestrated by the offender, under the cover provided by the secrecy which he imposes on the victim' (p169). Jude Irwin & Marie Wilkinson reiterate Liz Kelly's finding in drawing attention to the damage done to the mother-child relationship in abuse, when they say, 'Abusive partners often isolate children from their mothers in a number of ways, such as involving children in supporting and participating in the abuse/ degradation of their mother' (p18). But there is

little more than this. Why is it, I ask myself, that maternal alienation has been virtually invisible in the literature and in practice?

Societal constructions of men and women, and particularly, of mothers and fathers, appear to play a large part in this. Hays describes the contemporary model of motherhood as 'an ideology of intensive mothering' which expects mothers 'to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children'. It is through the almost exclusive attachment of mothers to children that women could be, as McMahon expresses it, 'regulated through discourses of precious children and proper motherhood' (p28). Hays analyses the advice routinely given to mothers, such as in child-rearing books. She says:

Spock, Brazelton and Leach, along with their coworkers in the advice business, tell mothers to be constantly attentive to the child's needs, to be alert to each new developmental stage, and to learn how to read the child's cries and to organize the child's play activities. If mothers fail in the task, other 'experts' may charge them with child neglect, emotional abuse, and 'toxic parenting' or denounce them for creating a 'dysfunctional family' (p71).

In a society that constructs 'good' mothering as the continual and unconditional provision of sole care and protection for children, mothers must always be in deficit. They are made responsible, indeed culpable, when abuse is perpetrated by others against children or, indeed, against the women themselves. Within our welfare system in South Australia, to the extent that a male perpetrates abuse against children or their mothers, mothers are deemed 'neglectful'. As Thorpe describes, 'the violence of others towards children is redefined as a mother's failure to protect her child(ren)' (p109). I think that service providers often recognise the existence of alienation between mothers and children in abuse, but see this as evidence of the mother's 'neglect' or deficient mothering. The men involved are not even a part of this equation. Thus the extent and pervasiveness of mother-blaming within societal and professional discourses can blind us to the part played by male abuse and violence in maternal alienation. It has operated as an elaborate smoke-screen, closing off opportunities for recognising maternal alienation as a further abuse of women and children, while also reinforcing it.

Of course, mother-blaming is a part of the broader picture of a society that pathologises

women and minimises or denies their voices. How often have we, as practitioners, heard stories like the stories I have quoted from today, and disbelieved them, or labelled these women 'hysterical', or 'personality disorders'? Is it that for us, too, the voices of the men resound as truth, as they do in the courts, as they do in children's ears? This research has illustrated to me how, in all areas of life, women's voices for the most part go unheard, and in their place are professional constructions of what women say. This is certainly true within systems, but my research has shown me that for the most part it is so also in personal relationships, in families. Within mother-child relationships, women's voices and experiences are mostly not listened to, and are even less likely to be acknowledged or validated. In their place stand male constructions of women and their utterances, which are heard. These are the powerful foundations of maternal alienation — the privileged status of the male voice, which largely excludes and replaces the female voice, added to the constructions of mothering and mother-blame in our society. It seems that these factors make it difficult for children to step into the shoes of their mothers, and see life through their eyes, something they seem to easily do with their fathers.

I question what all this means for women as daughters, as well as for women as mothers. 'Mary', an adult survivor of abuse told me of how, for most of her life, the memories of her mother were lost to her — her mother was a shadowy figure that never had a face or personality. As she started to recognise the tactics used by the man that abused her to alienate her from her mother, she started to remember her mother as a constant and loving figure in her life, and felt that in re-claiming this lost relationship, she could begin to heal from the effects of abuse. She said that making visible the strategies used by the perpetrator to separate her from her mother had her seeing the abuse in new ways: that being horrifically abused wasn't the worst tragedy of her life, but losing her relationship with her mother was. In reclaiming loving memories of her mother, she also reclaimed a knowledge that she was loved and was loveable and worthwhile, and reclaimed knowledges and memories of her abuse that acknowledged her own experiences, not the victim-blaming, mother-blaming, abuse-denying versions of the perpetrator that had been privileged over any other 'realities'.

### Imaginary syndromes

For all these reasons, maternal alienation has been a potent weapon used against women and children, and for these same reasons, it seems, it has remained invisible. Ironically, while maternal alienation had not previously been recognised, it had already been colonised — by ideas of 'Parental Alienation Syndrome' and 'Malicious Mother Syndrome', that have arisen in the US in legal and psychiatric discourses. 'Parental Alienation Syndrome' is a term coined by psychiatrist, Richard Gardner, to describe the brainwashing of a child by one parent, ninety per cent of whom are mothers, to alienate the child from the other parent. This is a syndrome, according to Gardner, that arises in custody disputes, and usually involves an accusation of child sexual abuse against the father. Gardner asserts that the first step towards treatment for 'Parental Alienation Syndrome' is removal of the child from the mother's home and placement with the father. In a number of cases in the US, the Family Court has acted on Gardner's advice, even when there has been overwhelming evidence of child sexual abuse by the father. Turkat has created a similar syndrome, which he calls 'Divorce-Related Malicious Mother Syndrome'. Malicious mothers, he asserts, 'not only try to alienate their children from their fathers, but are committed to a broadly based campaign to hurt the father directly'. They are 'skillful liars, highly manipulative, and quite adept at recruiting others to participate in the campaign against the father' (1997, 19).

So these syndromes utilise ideas of 'pathological', 'malicious', 'manipulative' and 'vengeful' mothers who falsely make accusations of child sexual abuse against their ex-partners. While attracting much criticism from psychiatric and psychological experts on child abuse, these syndromes seem to sit harmoniously within an adversarial legal system that constructs mothers who act to protect their children as 'implacably hostile', and scrutinises their mental health (Wallbank, 1998), while depicting 'family men' as 'safe' and 'respectable' (Collier, 1995), a system which tends to support the 'rights' men may seek to exercise authority over 'their' family as property.

Perhaps the irony of these syndromes is that,

while women are readily described as neglectful, malicious, conniving and vengeful, and as liars, men are not. Yet there is much evidence that many men manipulate children and systems in their favour, assert their rights to 'win' at all cost, and to punish 'their' family members for 'wrongs' they have defined. The women I interviewed described their male partner's relentless and punishing and brutal attempts to 'get back at them' in the way that they felt hurt them most. Yet while doing this, these men managed to look like victims. Their children saw a poor, helpless man who had been victimised by his partner, a man who had had no hand in creating the situation he lived in — the victim/hero. As 'Mary' says, 'My sister thinks our father was a hero. All of us were always on a quest to save his life — except we didn't know it. We were all actively engaged in this saving him, because the world was too hard and awful and he was so gentle... He certainly blamed everybody for everything... But we all knew what we had to do so that he wouldn't get upset, or he wouldn't get angry'. Can't this behaviour — of turning children against their mother, yet appearing to be the victim and blameless — be described as 'cunning', 'vengeful', 'manipulative', 'malicious' or 'conniving'? How is it that constructions of dominant masculinity, and even of men who perpetrate abuse, manage to avoid these descriptions? Even within perpetrator programs, it seems that men are still constructed in ways that dignify them — they 'exercise power and control', are 'punishing' and 'angry', like biblical depictions of God the Father. They are not 'conniving' or 'lying' or 'vengeful' or 'malicious'.

Is it that these dominant constructions of masculinity, by describing men as (at the worst) controlling and angry, render men's use of maternal alienation invisible, both within personal relationships and in professional discourse? Do such gendered constructions not only render maternal alienation invisible, but also 'unmentionable' because there has been no language with which to express it, and 'inconceivable', because dominant discourses do not allow us to think that men might behave in these ways? These are questions I have been asking as this research has unfolded. □

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# Breaking the mould

*Clean Break Theatre Company was founded in 1979 by two women prisoners during their sentences at Askham Grange prison. Since then it has grown into a sizeable theatre and education company offering a range of courses and work opportunities for women with personal experience of prison or secure hospitals. Recently the company launched its new building and its latest professional theatre production. In this article, Joan Scanlon looks at some of Clean Break's less widely publicised activities.*

On one of my first visits to Clean Break one of the women on the management committee told the group of aspiring volunteers: 'This place is a life-line for women who have been in prison. That's because it's a place where you can come and be treated with respect.' She was saying this in the company's new, specially-designed space, converted from a Victorian tie-factory in North London, with the aid of a lottery grant from the Arts Council. This same woman had first encountered Clean Break as a student when it was running drama and writing workshops from cramped premises in Kentish Town: 'If anyone

In writing this article, I have drawn liberally on the Clean Break press pack, including articles by Lucy Perman (executive director of Clean Break) in *Artsbusiness*, Bryan Gibson in *The Magistrate*, Bridget Galton in *Hampstead and Highgate Express* and Cheryl Knights in *Camden Chronicle*.

had told me years ago that I was going to do a degree, I would have laughed my head off', she said. Whatever it led to, the point of the story was that Clean Break had been important simply because it had been there, for her and other women in similar circumstances, and because they had access to it. The critical issue is that of entitlement; the women who used the centre needed to know that it belonged to them and that they had every right to what it could offer them.

Although Clean Break is only one of a number of companies working in the area of theatre for prisoners and ex-offenders, it is

unique in being a theatre company exclusively for women. The Clean Break Centre for Theatre and the Arts is an extraordinary resource for women who find their way there from various experiences of disenfranchisement, having been incarcerated by the so-called criminal justice and mental health systems. The space and facilities are astonishing: bright, airy drama and dance studios, a properly equipped theatre, a multi-media suite, a cafe... as well as a team of skilled tutors and support staff. The fact that it's the least these women deserve doesn't make its existence any less astonishing. At first it seems incredible that there would be growing support for a women-only company operating to redress some of the inequality and disadvantage suffered by women in every other aspect of the system. Until you realise, of course, that the combination of its emphasis on the arts and education with the Government's interest in initiatives to tackle social exclusion makes it a likely candidate for various sources of funding. And of course these sources of funding are provisional, so that huge amounts of work are required to ensure that specific conditions are met and grants are renewed.

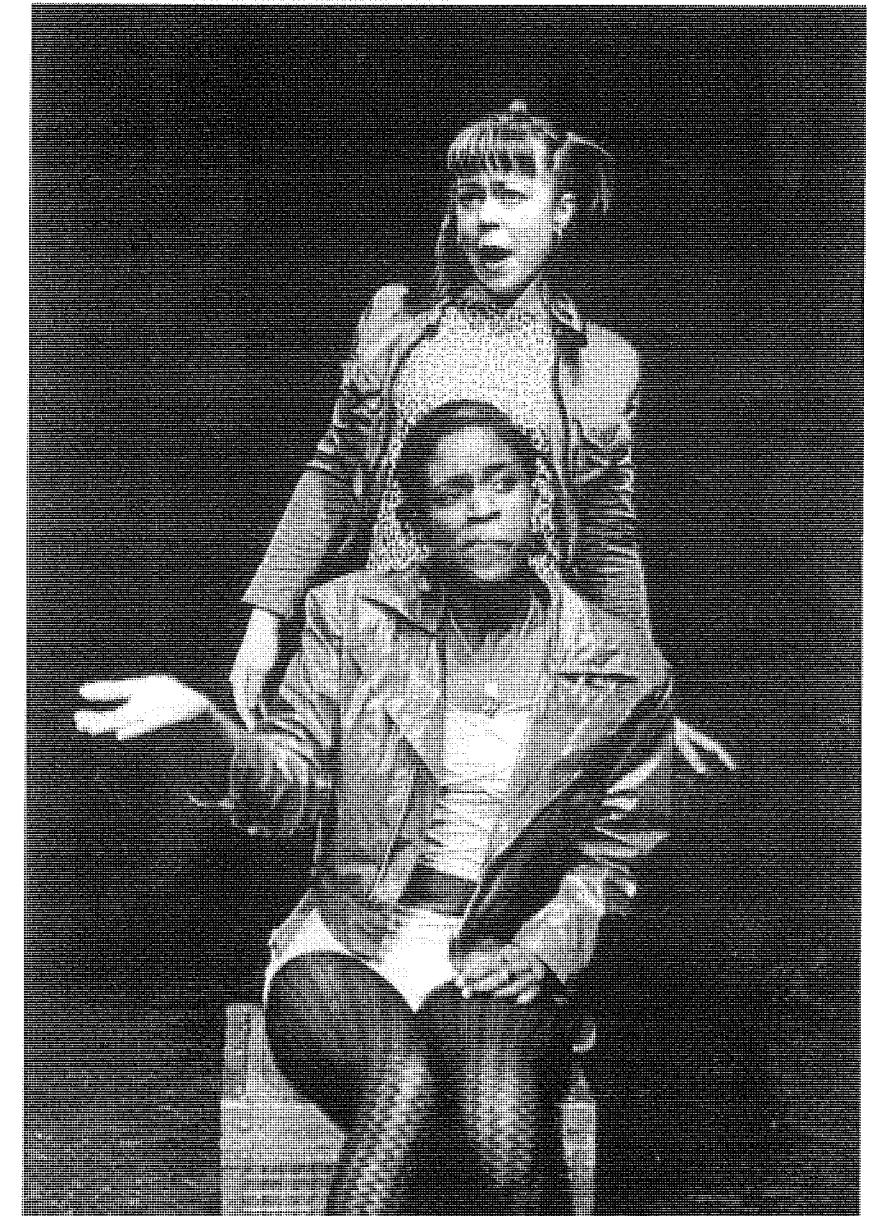
## *Behind the scenes*

One of the struggles too, for a theatre company set up by and for women in prison, is to keep their initial rationale in view, and to keep the political opportunists in check. One of the women who started Clean Break in 1979 voiced this very simply at a recent event, enthusing about the new building, and at the same time expressing the hope that with the growth of the company it would manage to keep to its original purpose. 'It was much easier, in a way', she said, 'when we were touring on a shoe-string'. The event in question was a reading by playwrights who had been involved with Clean Break over the years, and it was remarkable in a number of ways — not least in that these women, whose connection with Clean Break went back as much as twenty years, still felt an incredibly strong tie to the company. Moreover, playwrights are not often actors, and for many of these women it was the first time they had been called upon to read their work — and they agreed to do so for an audience of those women for whom Clean Break exists in the present. Ironically, the event itself was a testimony to the very values that motivated the women who created it: it wasn't a public event for a wide audience, with critics and

theatre aficionados in attendance; and yet (or perhaps for that reason) it was one of the most powerful performances you could ever have hoped to attend.

Clean Break activities behind the scenes are far more complicated than its public profile might at first suggest. The professional production which takes place each year has done a great deal to raise public awareness around issues to do with women and crime. Also, with its emphasis on production values and on collaboration with theatres such as the Royal Court and the Lyric, it

*Clean Break 1998 production:  
Yard Gal*





A studio at the new Clean Break building

has harnessed the interest in new writing to the advantage of women playwrights, actors and theatre professionals. But this is only one strand of the company's work, and it has already had the eye of the media focused on it, with the success of recent productions such as *Yard Gal*, by Rebecca Prichard, and *Mules*, by Winsome Pinnock. Clean Break's latest production, *Hyacinth Blue*, by Kara Miller, having toured the regional theatres, is now performing at various women's prisons, including Askham Grange, Low Newton and Brockhill.

Every year the playwright commissioned by Clean Break undertakes a residency in a women's prison, and every year the production returns to women's prisons in performance. The residency is part of the writer's research towards producing a play relevant to women's experience of the

criminal justice system, and it also provides a parallel opportunity for women in prison to undertake their own creative writing projects. Kara Miller acknowledges that the residency sharpened her understanding of the issues she was dealing with and gave her further insight into what women in prison are up against, particularly foreign black women, who are the bottom of the heap in the prison hierarchy: 'I was encouraging these really talented women to write and not feel stomped upon.'

#### **No luvvies here**

On and off stage, Clean Break offers a challenge both to stereotypes of women in prison and of theatre and its practitioners. As Bridget Galton commented in a recent article about the company's education programme: 'The students and

tutors at Clean Break offer an excellent answer to those sceptical souls who dismiss the theatre as full of pretentious luvvies.' The company does not simply use theatre techniques to explore particular issues about women and crime; it involves women in the process of making theatre as a means of discovering or developing abilities that have been neglected or undermined. It also offers a means of developing skills that many women have simply not had access to or which have not been any part of the outcome of their earlier encounters with mainstream education. For this reason, the company offers literacy training and dyslexia support as well as a variety of short courses (from acting and storytelling to stage management and directing), one year access courses, specialist counselling and careers advice, and welfare services. No less important than the learning support is the practical support for women following the programme: Each student has a tailored package which includes hot lunches, travel and childcare expenses, without which many women would simply not be able to take up their place on a course. It is not just the content of the courses, or the teaching methods,

but the whole framework in which these courses are provided, that makes them accessible to women who have been disempowered by life in institutions.

#### **Breaking in**

The latest education and training initiative is *Breaking In*, a new course which offers traineeships to women to run their own workshops and theatre projects with a view to working as independent professionals. During the ten month programme, trainees will work with young people in schools and pupil referral units across London — including those children who are seen to be at risk of social exclusion. They will also work with a professional playwright to mould a work into a performance which will tour schools and other community organisations. Finally, they will take up drama residencies in various women's prisons. Bridget Eadie, who runs *Breaking In*, says that although trainees will be qualified to work with a variety of groups, most are likely to be inclined to work with vulnerable groups such as young offenders: 'Many of the trainees know what it is like to be written off and

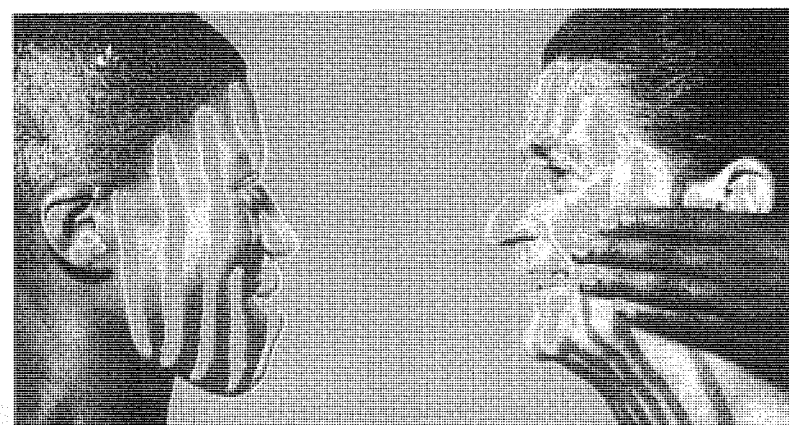


Clean Break 1999 production:  
*Hyacinth Blue*

only do Clean Break provide courses for women survivors of the prison system; they also provide employment for women ex-prisoners wherever possible. There are many women who have not necessarily come to theatre and the arts through Clean Break, or gained skills for acting or for life outside by this route, but for whom the company provides the possibility of work, as actors, writers, technicians, or in the administration and delivery of its education programme.

The final strand of Clean Break's work, which completes the circle, is the outreach programme. It is one thing to support women to change their lives; quite another to try to change

the attitudes of lawyers, probation officers and the prison service. Yet this is part of what the company is aiming to do. Clean Break offers training to a range of organisations, including many sectors of the criminal justice system, and a programme of workshops for schools, community and women's groups. It is here that the larger project of re-education needs to take place, a project which, in a future world, might make Clean Break altogether redundant. For the present, however, one can only be glad it exists, with its simple original intention — to have the imagination to give women back the respect they are due and celebrate their resistance. □



the  
unique voice  
of women  
ex-offenders and  
ex-prisoners

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# More than your job's worth?

*Mary McPherson used to work as a housing support worker for Leeds Shaftesbury Project (now Community Links), a housing charity which provides housing for single homeless people. On the 1st December 1998, she removed pornography from a tenant's new flat. Seven days later she was sacked. Her actions led to the formation of a new anti-pornography group — Leeds Campaign against Pornography. Here, two members of the group, Jude Boyles and Ruth Ingram, interview her about her experiences.*

**Jude:** *Mary tell us about your work at Leeds Shaftesbury Project (LSP), how long you worked there, and what job you did?*

**Mary:** I had worked at LSP for 4 years. The job that I did involved preparation of properties for clients to move into. I'd go to properties, check them over for any repairs and decorations and order all the furniture and fittings for delivery and move the client in on the day.

**Jude:** *So can you describe the process that led you to being sacked last year?*

**Mary:** It was the morning of the first December and my colleague M had organised a move. He asked me if I would help him. As I wasn't particularly busy, I said yes I would do. So off we went to this house and started checking it over, just to see what needed doing. M went into

the bedroom, and then came out, looking a bit shocked, and said, 'I've just seen the largest pile of pornography I have ever seen in my life'. I went in, wondering what on earth he was talking about, and I saw six piles of magazines on the floor. The front two piles had got football magazines on the top of them and the rest had pictures of naked/semi naked women on the covers. I couldn't believe my eyes. I was really shocked at what I saw and had this awful sinking feeling. I thought, 'oh no, I bet this is all pornography' and I thought, 'I just can't walk away from this. I know about the harm pornography does to women. I know how it contributes to men's violence against women'. So I decided I was going to bag it up and chuck it.

M said it belonged to the client, and I said that I didn't care. I said that 'we (the organisa-

tion) have policies about sexual harassment, and we are working on a policy about male violence against women and this stuff is that, and I am just going to get rid of it'.

So I bagged it up. As I was doing that I saw more of the magazines, some of which had covers with women with their legs open showing their genitals.

When I'd bagged them up I rang the client's housing support worker to tell him what I'd done, and why I was doing it. He was very angry when I told him I was going to dump this stuff. He said that it was the client's possessions, that he was into this stuff, and that if I dumped it, it would damage his mental health, that I would jeopardise his move to independent living.

Whilst I was on the phone, M had put the bags of porn in the van. I drove off to our head office in town, looking for support from a woman colleague. I went to see R, who was leaving as she had another job so I thought I could talk to her, as she wouldn't get into any trouble as she was leaving. I told her what I'd done, and said that I just had to get rid of the stuff. She suggested that I talk to one of the managers, and I said 'no' as he would only tell me not to do it and I have just got to do it. So she said she would come with me, so she came with me, and we drove to the tip and dumped the bags in the skip.

**Jude:** You say that you felt sexually harassed by the porn, which is a very powerful and totally accurate way of describing the effect porn has on us as women. How did you come to use that term?

**Mary:** It was the way I felt at the time, a gut feeling; it was offending and threatening me. It made me think, is this how this man views women, as sex objects? That's how I have always felt whenever I have seen pornography. I had never met this client before, but I had met some of the other clients who were using porn before. It had made my stomach turn, to realise that is how they viewed women, and that is possibly how they might be viewing me. That to me is what it means.

### No support from managers

**Jude:** So what was the response of your managers to what happened?

**Mary:** When I got back to the office I was interviewed by two separate managers. I told

them how I'd felt and why I'd done what I did but their main concerns were what I'd done with the pornography and whether I would do a similar thing in the future.

My line manager informed me that I was going to be disciplined, and I got a letter to that effect. The letter said that although they acknowledged that the magazines contained pornography, to which I should not have been exposed, I should not have taken them and dumped them.

The next morning the director took me into his office and said that he had been thinking about it, and it was serious because it was theft and that one of the possible outcomes of the disciplinary was dismissal.

On the 8th December I had my disciplinary hearing and I was accompanied by a full time union official from Unison.

I explained that I was really appalled and upset by what I saw, and that I had felt sexually harassed and that I just lost control, seen red, and dumped the stuff. I explained that I realised after that I should have withdrawn from the situation and gone to a manager, but I just couldn't do it.

They said that my actions were deliberate, that I knew all the procedures, but I had chosen to disobey advice of fellow colleagues. They said it was my political beliefs that had made me do it. And that I was likely to do it again.

The next day the director told me that they had decided to dismiss me. They gave me half an hour to clear my desk.

So I appealed to the Management Committee and the appeal was heard on the 21st December and they upheld the decision made by the disciplinary hearing committee.

**Jude:** The main point of their argument was that this was a deliberate political act, rather than that you were provoked because of how upset you were by what you saw?

**Mary:** Yes, that it was a political act, and that I showed no thought or feelings for the male client. They didn't show any thought for my feelings.

**Jude:** One of their arguments was that you would do it again, because of your political views. You had come across pornography in the course of work before. What was different about this time that you made react so strongly?

**Mary:** Before it was only a small quantity, two or three magazines left by male clients when they moved out. What was different about this was

the vast amount of it. I understand now that he had a collection of some 700 magazines. It was the vast quantity that shocked and upset me so much.

### Porn as sexual harassment

**Ruth:** The other thing you mentioned before was the organisation's policy's on anti-sexism and sexual harassment, and that you were acting as if you were upholding those policies. Can you tell us about those policies and how they came about?

**Mary:** They had a general Equal Opportunities Policy, an anti-racist policy, an anti-sexism policy, and a policy against sexual harassment.

The policy against sexual harassment was one that I had helped draw up through the women's group. So I was quite well versed in what it said. One of the things was that you did have the right as a worker to withdraw from a situation. It wasn't specifically about pornography, but any situation where you felt uncomfortable, or where you were being sexually harassed, or racially threatened. I was very much involved with working on a draft policy about violence against women by known men. Part of that policy was going to address issues about pornography.

**Jude:** So, there was nothing actually in a policy around women workers being exposed to pornography?

**Mary:** No, but we'd talked about porn in team meetings. My understanding was that LSP did not condone pornography, and that if a worker went into a client's house and saw pornography, they would challenge it and ask them to remove it, but what a client has in the privacy of their own bedroom and kept out of sight of people who might be offended is their own business as long as it is legal.

**Ruth:** In the light of this did you expect the organisation to support you?

**Mary:** I thought I would get into trouble for what I did; it was someone's property, and legally I should not have taken it and dumped it. But because of what it was, and because of the policies, I thought I would just get a telling off. I did expect to be supported in principle.

**Ruth:** You mentioned that you were quite active in making the policies. Do you think that any part of you getting sacked was about your role as a powerful woman in the organisation?

**Mary:** It is difficult to tell. I always stood up for my rights at work, and I was seen as just being awkward. I always had a lot of knowledge and awareness around male violence against women. I took that knowledge to LSP, and raised those issues a lot in the team. So I think that they thought I was an outspoken woman and maybe a bit of an awkward customer.

**Ruth:** Why do you think they were so keen to protect his right to own pornography?

**Mary:** They said it was legal. But just because something is legal, it doesn't make it right. It used to be legal to beat your wife, until women fought against it and got the law changed. Who knows how many of the men in the organisation use porn, and how it touches nerves for them.

**Jude:** How did you feel when you were sacked?

**Mary:** Disbelief. I couldn't believe it. Incredible. Devastated. Those were the immediate feelings. Later on I got so angry at the injustice of it all. It was so unfair. What I had done just did not warrant what they had done to me. It is so unjust. It's been horrible.

### Challenging dismissal

**Jude:** So you decided to fight their decision?

**Mary:** Yes. Going to industrial tribunal was something that I felt I just had to do. I felt it was so wrong; if I hadn't gone, I would never have known if I could have won.

**Jude:** What did you argue at the Tribunal?

**Mary:** There were two parts to the case. Firstly, I claimed unfair dismissal and secondly, I claimed sex discrimination. Now you can't take an action out for sexual harassment under the Sex Discrimination Act because sexual harassment isn't a separate section under the act. It comes under detriment, so I had to have suffered a detriment that a man in a similar position wouldn't have suffered. My argument was that exposure to the pornography was that detriment, and that, as they knew it was there, they should have taken steps to protect me, which they didn't do. We thought there was a good chance of winning this part because of the Bernard Manning/DeVere Hotels landmark case. In that case Black waitresses employed by the hotel successfully argued that they should have been protected from being racially harassed by the predictable content of Bernard Manning's act.

**Jude:** What happened at your tribunal?

**Mary:** It was over two days, the 27th and 28th May. The whole thing was done under oath and it was like a court of law. Luckily I've done jury service, so I've been in courts before. Most of Thursday afternoon was taken up by me giving my evidence and being cross-questioned. Their barrister was trying to trip me up and put words into my mouth and, like at the disciplinary hearing, imply that it was a cold deliberate act, that it was a political act. It was a pretty horrendous two to three hours.

### **The personal is political**

**Ruth:** One thing I heard about the tribunal when I got back was about how clear you had been about the connection between personal feelings and political beliefs.

**Mary:** What they were trying to say was that I had done it in a cold calculating manner because it was my political beliefs that had led me to do it. What I was saying was what I know about porn and violence against women is part of me. Yes, I have a political belief that violence against women is wrong, I have knowledge that pornography contributes to that violence and I'd recently been on the volunteer training with Leeds Rape Crisis, so all the issues around the abuse of women were fresh in my mind. Seeing all that stuff made me as a woman feel sexually harassed, upset and shocked, and in addition to that, I had my knowledge and awareness around the issues. It just all merged in together and that led me to do what I did.

**Jude:** It was interesting that they tried to portray you, both at the original sacking and at the industrial tribunal, as a calculating, political feminist who no regard for anyone's feelings and just went ahead and dumped the porn. Nothing about how you felt and how it harmed you.

**Mary:** No, there was nothing about that, just about the client and how his feelings were hurt, and the stress that he was under. However, when they were asked, they had to admit that the client was fine and hadn't suffered by me moving his porn.

**Jude:** Did they think about the women clients and how they might respond?

**Mary:** No. They were asked if they had taken into account what message this would send to women clients specifically, and they said, no, we

took into account the impact it would have on all clients. No acknowledgement that the message they might well be sending to women clients was, 'we're not going to support you, we don't care about you because we're supporting men who keep pornography.' And I know at least a couple of women clients who have been very upset by this.

They were also forced to admit that they had made mistakes that had exposed me to the pornography. They should have followed good practice and not moved anything belonging to him into the house until the tenancy agreement was signed. They had been told to leave the pornography boxed up, which they didn't do, and they'd been told I shouldn't be involved in the move. That message never got passed on.

They were as much to blame, in my opinion, as I was, for the actions of that day. However, in the tribunal decision, they said I'd caused my own detriment. It was my fault I'd seen the stuff because I didn't have to go into the room; having been told by M that it was there, I didn't have to touch the stuff; I should have walked away, so it was all my fault.

Even though they admitted I shouldn't have been exposed to the pornography, LSP said they had decided that dismissal was the only option because they thought I would do it again.

And, lo and behold, the decision of the tribunal hearing was that they hadn't dismissed me unfairly, because they had acted within the bounds of 'what a reasonable employer might be expected to do'. There was no acknowledgement that it was pornography — it wasn't common theft. I hadn't stolen his bloody hi-fi or something, which would have been fair enough. It was pornography, and there were reasons why I did what I did. It was sexual harassment and they had a policy against it. The whole thing was so appalling.

**Jude:** What was the decision in relation to sex discrimination?

**Mary:** In relation to sex discrimination they decided that not only was any detriment I had suffered of my own making, because I had deliberately exposed myself to pornography because I knew it was there, but they also said it wasn't sex discrimination at all. This was because the chairman didn't agree that 'exposure to female pornography was gender-specifically offensive', in that a man would have been as upset as I was by the sight of the pornography.

**Ruth:** I just love the comment Media Watch wrote in their letter of support: 'I can only think of a handful of men who would be upset by 700 pornographic magazines. Most would think it was Christmas come early!'

**Mary:** Which is very true, the number of men who haven't looked at and used a pornographic magazine must be in the minority. Yes, M was upset when he saw it, but it didn't threaten or hurt him or make him have to get rid of the stuff.

**Ruth:** On top of all of this you were also reported to the police. Could you tell us how they came to be involved?

**Mary:** The client reported the theft of his porn to the police. In the same week that I was sacked I had to go to the police station with a solicitor to make a statement. Ironically, the police were quite sympathetic. One of them said that in his job he met a lot of people whose morals took them the wrong side of the law, but the law was the law. I told them I got sacked, and he asked, 'Couldn't they have dealt with it in a different way?' I was cautioned and that's on my record now, although I don't have to disclose that unless specifically asked.

**Ruth:** So was that the end of that, then?

**Mary:** The police involvement ended, but the client then took out a claim via the small claims court for the price of the porn, which he said amounted to £2,000.

I knew this was happening and had sent off my statement. Then I got a letter from the County Court saying that they had had the court case on Easter Tuesday, and because I wasn't there, they found against me for £1,000, and demanded that I pay it by the end of April. I was so surprised, as I had had no notification whatsoever. I had to apply to the court to have that judgement set aside and the case reheard, which it was.

Thanks to various contacts in Leeds CAP and Leeds Justice for Women, a solicitor agreed to defend me for free. This woman judge decided that the client was 50% negligent because he had been told to cover the magazines up and he hadn't done so, and I was 50% negligent because I shouldn't have chucked them. But, as it came out that LSP had already compensated the client for £500.00, she made no further award. That meant I didn't have to pay that slimy little toad anything!

The client was never in the courts. He was

always represented by his housing support worker.

**Ruth:** It seems like he did an awful lot of proactive work to support his client.

**Mary:** Yes. He was only supposed to be an advocate, but he was the one that put in the claim to the small claims court. He got my address and phone number from LSP to do this. He was defending the client all the way down the line.

**Ruth:** Can I go back to the police? As far as you were concerned, it was over, but one of the things that happened was that your name was put on the Department of Health Consultancy Index. How did that come about, and where has that left you in terms of employment?

**Mary:** The first I knew of it was in March when I got a letter from the Department of Health outlining what they did, and how people got on the list. The list is set up to protect children. One of the ways a person's name is added to the Index is when they have received a caution or a conviction about children or whilst working with children. The police will then forward their name to the Index. Prospective employers then check the list to see if job applicants have a record that might mean that they are dangerous to children. I was put on the list by mistake! LSP works with single homeless people, not children or families.

If it is wrong, you are allowed to challenge it, so a woman solicitor wrote them a letter in March explaining what had happened and asking for my name to be removed. We heard nothing, despite her sending a reminder. In June I went to my MP about it. He was appalled and has taken the case up. He wrote to the Department of Health and they assured him they would be writing to me to apologise and would take my name off the list. However, I've not heard from them. So I am stuck on this Index, and already it had prevented me from being able to get work with Reed Social Care, because they will not employ anyone whose name is on this list to work with children or vulnerable adults. They did not ask me my side of it.

**Ruth:** It is just so ironic that that index is set up to protect children, and to some extent women, and you have been put on it for taking action to protect women and children. It makes no sense at all.

**Jude:** So, it has just been a serious of injustices from the beginning.



**Mary:** It bloody has!

**Jude:** *Moving on to the campaign formed to support you, Leeds CAP. A few of us feminist activists in Leeds have been trying to form a CAP for a while, with little success. But your campaign was an impetus to actually getting a group started, which is great. Can you describe how CAP came about?*

**Mary:** It was a bit of an ongoing process, and just came about via discussions with various women activists who encouraged me to have a group behind me. In the beginning it was more of a group of women supporting me and [my partner] Lorrie. The group really formed properly when I decided that I was going to take legal action.

One of the first things they did was to leaflet the change of name event that LSP held. The aim was to publicly shame this organisation, with its 'right on' image. Activists went around passing information about CAP's aims to everybody there. They made sure that the managers of the organisation got copies of our leaflet. CAP wanted them to know they were being watched by the women of Leeds, but obviously did not want to jeopardise the legal situation.

**Jude:** *How did having a campaign help?*

**Mary:** It has really helped. I didn't feel as alone. I know that I was the main player, but I felt they could take a lot of the weight and take up a lot of the organisational tasks there were. The support I have had has been invaluable and it has felt so good, it really has.

**Ruth:** *In the beginning, I remember it was hard for you not to blame yourself and not take on what LSP was saying about you. What I saw happening once you had a campaign around you, was your conviction and the sense of injustice you felt coming back. You weren't on your own — others supported what you had done and understood why you had done it.*

**Jude:** *Yes, by the time it came to the industrial tribunal, you were so strong. I was so impressed at the clarity and conviction you showed throughout that process.*

**Mary:** I needed women to remind me and to tell me I had done the right thing morally, and you did all tell me that. I needed to know there was support, and that I shouldn't blame myself. I felt reassured when people said how wrong it was that I'd been sacked, and that LSP had been

totally out of order. It does affect you, your self-esteem and your belief in yourself. I had never even been disciplined before, never mind a sacking. That reinforcement that I was OK, and that what I did was understandable in the circumstances was so important. During those meetings I did feel stronger, and began taking the lead in what was happening.

**Ruth:** *What kind of responses have you had from other people? Your family, friends, partner?*

**Mary:** My partner, Lorrie, has gone through hell with me. She's been there for me, and has totally supported me. She has also been active in the campaign alongside me. But it has not been easy for us both. We've not always known where to direct the anger. There's been so much daily stress, so many different things to juggle about — you'd worry about one thing and then another would pop up. And just dreading the post; that's one thing, I still dread the post. When it comes through the door I'm thinking, 'God, I wonder what's in the post?' because there's been so many things — the disciplinary letter, horrible letters from LSP, the DOH Index letter, the small court letters coming, or not coming, and you where just wondering what the hell was coming through the door next.

It has been a testing time. LSP have a lot to answer for, as far as I am concerned. But Lorrie's stuck by me through it all, and we are still together.

The rest has been a bit of a mixed bag. My family — my son and my daughter and my brother — have been extremely supportive and understanding.

I've had strength and support from a lot of women — women from the lesbian community and straight women — including ex-colleagues from LSP. I've reconnected with a couple of women I lost touch with years ago. But then there's other people I thought I'd have support from, other lesbians who I thought were politically OK, who haven't supported me. Lorrie has lost friends who were involved in the management of LSP.

It's really sorted out who our friends are. We really know now who are friends and we really know who aren't our friends, and that's been really upsetting.

But it's not only been local support. I've had support from women from across the world. Sheila Jeffreys, who was here visiting someone else, took part in and joined in our campaign.

And some women who live in New Zealand have also been in regular email contact and have been very supportive. They have also sent cards and little presents — home-made chocolates — arriving from Christchurch New Zealand. So the post hasn't all been bad!

**Ruth:** *I think that's the thing that's astonished me, and which, I suppose, outlines how much pornography is a cutting edge issue. It's the reactions of people, and, in particular, women who I've seen as feminists judging by their actions in the past that amaze me. You can't rely on someone's reactions.*

**Mary:** Yes. There are women who have told me about the impact pornography has had on their lives. But there also seem to be an awful lot of women around who don't understand the impact of pornography, who seem to think that if you're anti-porn you're some old reactionary, that we're all liberal now.

I think that everyone's sensitivities have got numbed by more and more exposure to pornography and violence. There's so much exploitation of women around now, and portrayals of women as sexual objects, that women themselves get immune to it.

**Jude:** *I remember you saying that you had seen a difference in reaction between women who called themselves feminist and women who identify as radical feminist.*

**Mary:** Yes, radical feminists seem a lot clearer about the relationship between pornography and violence towards women and the sexual objectification of women. They know that porn can lead men to want to act out pornography with their partners and can lead some men to actual acts of violence. They understand that there's a continuum.

**Jude:** *It's interesting that this whole process has just illustrated how men defend porn all the way to the end and how, for some women, it's a real sticking point in terms of how radical they are prepared to be.*

**Mary:** Yes and it's been a nightmare. In some ways the client's won, because he got his move and I got a caution and lost my job; he got £500 compensation and I've got a solicitor's bill for £2,300 and I've been in and out of work. It's devastated my life, and my partner's life, and it's had a tremendous effect on everyone around us, and he's had all this support from his support worker, and LSP.

**Ruth:** *He's got his lovely support worker and you've got us!*

**Mary:** [Laughs] Oh, I'd have you lot any day, any day!!

**Jude:** *The one thing I hold on to, and I know at the moment it feels like you're the one who's lost, but I bet they had no idea when they took you on that you'd fight back like this, and I bet they're horrified that they had to get a barrister, that it's been in the press, that a city councillor and an MP have supported you! I bet with taking you on they've taken on much more than they ever thought they would.*

**Mary:** And all I wanted was my job back! It would have been nice for them to say sorry, but they will never do that.

**Jude:** *But they might wish that they had. They are going to be the organisation that is remembered in Leeds for sacking a woman worker because she got rid of some porn, and I hope that they have that imprinted under their Community Links title for the rest of their lives.*

**Ruth:** *Unison declined to represent you at the industrial tribunal so you had a solicitor. You mentioned that this cost £2,300. How will you pay that?*

**Mary:** CAP have been working hard on this one. We've had donations from individual women who support CAP — £5 here, £20 there and we've held a benefit.

We had five women entertainers who gave their services free, ranging from amateurs to the internationally-acclaimed singer, Julie Felix!

It was a magical evening. The compère explained a bit of the story and why we were holding the benefit and when my name was mentioned there was all this applause. That was very moving. It made me feel so good.

Several women said afterwards how great it was that women would still come together for a political event. At the end of the evening women were dancing together, holding hands in a spiral, wow! In spite of the fact we hammered them for money all evening!

**Ruth:** *I know it's been really hard but have there been any other positives?*

**Mary:** Well, funnily enough, I've got a better job! The day I went to sign on there was this job with Leeds Housing Concern advertised for a relief project worker to work in the women's sector. I went for the job and got it and they've

been really supportive of my work and of me through the court actions.

It also gave me six months' solid work, and enabled me to apply for other jobs with a reference. Now I've got a full-time permanent job as a refuge worker at a Women's Aid. But I must say I would not recommend that way of improving your job prospects to anybody!

**Ruth:** *You've told us what happened at the industrial tribunal. Have you got any plans about challenging that decision?*

**Mary:** Well, I've put in an appeal to the Employment Appeals tribunal, and my solicitor wrote to the Equal Opportunities Commission asking them if they will fund the appeal. They have declined to do this and I'm currently seeking a barrister's opinion about the chance of success if I do take the case forward. If I do, of course I'll either need someone to represent me for free or a lot of money. If they agree to an appeal it means the case will be re-heard in London.

**Ruth:** *Reflecting on your experiences, what changes would you like to see in the law about women being exposed to pornography?*

**Mary:** Well, I'd like to see sexual harassment be a separate section of the sex discrimination law. It shouldn't come under detriment; it should be discrimination in its own right. And I think laws around pornography should be tightened up. There should be some definitions about what is

pornography, whether or not it's obscene and whether or not it's sexually harassing; I would like it to become illegal to display pornographic material or obscene material, material that people find offensive.

**Ruth:** *To me it's about inciting hatred towards women, and although there is law against inciting racial hatred there isn't anything similar for gender hatred.*

**Mary:** I think that's very true. I think there should be 'incitement to sexist/misogynous hatred, hatred of women', the same as there should be crimes that include homophobia, incitement to homophobia, crimes against lesbians and gay men. There shouldn't be a hierarchy of oppression, we're all oppressed groups and we should have equal protection in the law.

**Jude:** *Finally, just in terms of CAP, where's the campaign going now?*

**Mary:** Well, we're waiting to hear about the chances of success with my appeal, but we're also starting to talk about other actions we might take. There are two sex shops operating illegally in Leeds; we'd like to do something about them. We'd also like to tackle the problem of porn being sold in newsagents. Ultimately we'd like men to stop using porn and to stop being violent to women and children and there's a long way to go on that one. □

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Donations towards the legal fund are welcome (cheques payable to Leeds Campaign Against Pornography).

#### Update...

Since the interview, Mary got a short letter telling her her name has been taken off the Consultancy Index, but has not received an apology. She has written to the Police Authority and to the Parliamentary Ombudsman and is awaiting replies.

# Pre-Millennium Tensions

*As the millennium hype reached its climax, members of the Trouble & Strife collective discussed whether or not it had any significance for feminists.*

**Joan Scanlon:** So, what is the feminist take on the millennium, Dianne?

**Dianne Butterworth:** Well, speaking for all feminists around the world (not)... it is a particular cultural arrogance — a Christian celebration...

**Joan:** Except that most people don't know that it's got anything to do with Christianity..

**Debbie Cameron:** It's a nice round number. The fact is that it has got to do with the way we date, starting with the birth of Christ, in a historically inaccurate manner. But it's about thousands of years. And it strikes me that a thousand years is an ungraspable amount of time; it's just far too long. There has been all this fuss about the record of the millennium, or the dog of the millennium, or the hero of the millennium — and they have all been people (or dogs) who were

in the news last week. I think it's a shame in a way that we are not celebrating the end of the century, because that would be far easier to grasp, and feminists could relate to that better too.

**Stevi Jackson:** Even thinking about the last thousand years, which is what much of the TV coverage of 'the history of the world' has been about, we're still trying to deal with what happened in 1000 AD.

**Liz Kelly:** I think it's all been done through the version of history that we set out to challenge and question anyway. Those versions are all about the great men of history and there are hardly any women in these accounts — or the great wars of history...

**Dianne:** Which is ironic, since most wars, over the span of two millennia, are insignificant.

**Debbie:** If you look at history over two thousand years, a lot of things are going to seem insignificant. I think it makes feminism look insignificant. Even calculating it from the start of the early modern period, and saying there was feminist activity in the 15th century, feminism is just a blip on the millennial clock. How do we feel about the millennium? Do we feel like celebrating?

**Joan:** No. And not particularly for feminist reasons. It's just a nonsensical thing to celebrate. It depends partly on what you feel about New Year to start with. I've never thought the New Year was anything worth celebrating. The calendar itself is a completely arbitrary way of organising time.

**Debbie:** It would have to be wouldn't it? The alternative would be not to divide time up at all!

**Joan:** That doesn't mean we have to celebrate arbitrary units of time.

**Liz:** I know all of those things, but they are still the structures that we have to live with in our everyday lives. They may not be the same structures that everybody in the world lives by, but they are the ones that you are located through and within.

**Joan:** I don't feel located in it...

[general hilarity and raucous laughter]

**Debbie:** Sorry, we don't believe you. The days of the week are part of the trouble.... So when you don't turn up for a meeting on a Wednesday do you say: Yeah, well, it's just an arbitrary male division of time!?

**Joan:** All I mean is that New Year's Day has absolutely no relevance for me at all, and this so-called festive season seems merely to offer men the pretext to get pissed at their annual office party and grope female colleagues with impunity. And as far as New Year itself is concerned — it doesn't feel like a *new* year to me. New Year was originally marked in the Spring, and with our absurd reorganization of the calendar, it now lands on January 1st, which certainly doesn't mark a new year in terms of the seasons.

### *Finding alternatives*

**Dianne:** So would you mark, for instance, the Springequinox?

**Joan:** I'm not completely barking... but it would of course make more sense to mark the Spring equinox, and if it were the general cultural trend

to do so, then I would feel far more inclined to celebrate than I do on the first of January. For us as feminists, it's also got to do with the rituals that are associated with certain public events, and singing Auld Lang Syne doesn't appeal to me remotely.

**Liz:** But you're presuming that if as a feminist you choose to follow certain traditions that you do them in the way they've been done with a traditional patriarchal meaning.

**Debbie:** I think there is a widespread feeling of 'bah humbug' and 'why are we celebrating the millennium?', and 'what's to celebrate?'. I'm certainly not affected by the fact that the division of time is arbitrary; I know it is, but since we've got this great fat number, it does become a time for taking stock...

**Liz:** That's how I see New Year. You have time off work and it's an opportunity to think and reflect on the previous year — what's been good about it and the things that weren't, the things that I might want to be different, and I use it in that way. Also, I think there is amongst feminists a disengagement from collective celebrations of anything, because the collective is everyone, and it includes men. But I really do think there is something significant about large scale collective social celebrations.

**Dianne:** I think that's true if we expand that from celebration to marking; but there is a sense in which a collective marking of events is imposed on us. There is a reason why news readers wear poppies on Remembrance Day but not ribbons for International Day to End Violence Against Women, and part of my distrust of things like Remembrance Day is because it represents a choice that has been made, which I am not party to. I am required to keep silent to mark those particular deaths, and yet I am silenced at other times when I try to talk about other things. So it's not simply that I rebel against collective celebrations that include men; it's about asking who has decided that I should mark this event rather than that. Who has decided to put up a dome or a ferris wheel, and what is the feminist response to these monuments?

**Joan:** Moreover, we are talking about this in terms of a celebration, and actually Christmas and New Year are two of the most traumatic times for many people, who are either homeless, mentally distressed, living on their own not from choice, or living in a violent situation. If you're short of money there's nothing to do, nowhere to

go, everything's shut down; and it's a time when others flaunt their wealth. And it's a time when the crisis lines get most calls — and we are talking about reclaiming it for a different kind of celebration? I'm not saying one should ignore it; there are things we should actively be doing to make it less of a crisis for a large cross-section of people.

### *The problem with history*

**Stevi:** Instead of getting hung up on whether we should celebrate it and how and why, perhaps we could look at what feminism might have to say about the passage of time, because everything that is going on in these very naff television recordings is trying to understand immense social changes, and from a feminist point of view that is potentially significant and in that sense the marking of years does matter because that is one way in which we can measure social change and we can talk about what women's lives were like in the 15th century and what they are like today. Although of course, as Debbie was saying, that's far harder to do over the span of a millennium, let alone two. Over a century we could really take stock of what feminism has achieved and what it hasn't achieved over that period and it would actually be very useful to do that instead of being forced into a bigger time span where the big markers of social change are on the whole the classic male public events. One of the things that is interesting in all this historical stuff is that a lot of the feminist history that has been done has just vanished. It's been written out.

**Debbie:** And the feminist challenge to what it is to do history in general, so you don't see many programmes that suggest that the everyday and the domestic matter at all; it's all the old boys' stuff about dates and battles...

**Stevi:** And style — women appear there — they wore different frocks in the 15th century...

### *Capitalism in Camelot*

**Debbie:** Coming back to what Dianne was saying about everyone having to mark this date, and how the form of this celebration impinges on one... What do we feel about putting up a dome or a ferris wheel and that kind of thing? I'm looking forward to going to the dome, and one of the things I want to do is look at it critically from a number of points of view because I think it's a very indicative construction — I think what the millennium tells us about is our culture *now*

rather than what's gone on over the last thousand years. I think it's significant for instance that this dome is half paid for by lottery money and half paid for by capitalism, in naked form: the sponsors are British Airways, British Telecom, Tesco, Ford. Big business pays for this shop window to advertise how wonderful they are, how philanthropic, and I think it's going to be an incredibly indicative spectacle about the way we live now and the place of consumerist capitalism in our society. The zones are labeled body, mind and spirit (which has been renamed the 'faith' zone); there's communication (sponsored by BT); there's journey (which is all about cars and sponsored by Ford); there's learning (sponsored by Tesco, a supermarket)... I don't think it's going to be that much fun for someone like me, but on the gender issue I feel quite ambivalent, because it really is showcasing quite a lot of famous women on the architecture and design front — I don't think it's going to be masculinist; it's self-consciously multicultural; women have been players on the so-called litmus group which has been deciding what's going to be in it and how it's going to be treated and so on. Floella Benjamin was a very influential figure and so it's a kind of emblem of equal opportunities new Britain, and in another way, because the values of it are so completely unradical in every conceivable respect, it's just a consumerist thing.

**Dianne:** Or is it about how women have been drawn into a patriarchal, capitalist enterprise. Its life span is something like 20 years (and the internal structure is to be removed after a year), and there have been a certain amount of criticisms from environmental groups. Now if I choose to participate in the design and construction of that — and that is my contribution as a woman — what does that say? Do we say congratulations, a woman is doing that?

**Debbie:** Why is that a choice? I would agree with you if you are saying feminism isn't just about all the great individual women artists to go with the great men; it's a collectivist movement. When they did the Festival of Britain in 1951, or the Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace in 1851, women weren't represented in the same way or to the same degree as they will be in the dome, and I do find that a cause for celebration in a certain way, even if I don't think much of Zahar Hadid or Eva Jiricna... Women do have the opportunity to make those choices now, and they didn't in the past.

**Dianne:** I'm glad I'm living now rather than two hundred years ago. But if we celebrate the success of one or two women architects or designers as the sum result of hundred and thousands of women working to bring about social change, then I think it makes feminism invisible. The fact that Ford is setting up the journey zone to promote the car industry, and there's a woman on the panel choosing which cars to exhibit, doesn't seem very exciting. Now, if feminists were celebrating the millennium — and maybe one of our questions should be why aren't we doing an alternative celebration, and what would that look like?

**Debbie:** The millennium womb! That was another dome issue — the body zone — which kind of genitals is it going to have... And now I think it's a kind of Siamese twin hermaphrodite.

**Stevi:** It's partly a distinction between the women who have made it, who have bought into capitalist patriarchal society and those who haven't. If we look at recent social change, over the last few decades, some women have done very well (educated, white, middle class women) while at the other end of the social scale, women's lot is as tough as it's always been. Lots of things *aren't* changing; despite all the rhetoric about equality, vast numbers of women are still servicing men in a number of ways, violence against women is still rife... And once you move outside of this country, particularly if you look at the poorer countries of the world, it becomes increasingly evident. Sure, some women are making it, and that is progress, but it's important to keep it in perspective.

**Joan:** Isn't that precisely what is wrong with the millennium, that it requires us to look at progress as if it were some kind of linear process, when we know that's not true. You can't map out the changes in women's lives in that way.

**Debbie:** That's absolutely true; those kind of celebrations do make you think not only in terms of linear progress, but that history is a narrative of progress, and towards the future, as if things can only get better. Popular history is like that, and there is an awful lot to critique in the manner of these celebrations, but I do have this sticking point which is this: Is there anything we are ever going to celebrate, sisters? We don't like these great collective events, but we don't set up our own alternatives, so we end up never celebrating anything.

**Joan:** We do have International Women's Day,

but in most European countries, certainly here, we are pretty bad at marking it.

### *Futuristic fantasies?*

**Liz:** I think in the 70s and to some extent in the 80s there was much more of a celebratory as well as a critical culture amongst feminists and we saw it as being really important to celebrate ourselves, each other, the movement, whatever it might be, and we don't do those things in the way we used to. And I really miss that, but the sociologist in me — and also the me that wants to think in the possibility of community and connection across differences, one of which is gender — also thinks that those celebratory things give you a glimpse of what might be possible. There's less anxiety, less stress, more sense of coming together over something positive and it does give me some sense of possibility.

**Joan:** I can't share that at all, that desire, or even that notion of community. In fact, I find that idea really quite problematic. I would like to see more opportunities for celebration amongst feminists, and the collective marking of events which remind us that there have been some gains for women — as well as the remembrance of other events too — but at this stage I feel we are miles away, light years away, from the potential for celebrating in a community across gender...

**Dianne:** Because we know that at the celebration some man is going to rape a woman, and some other man is going to get drunk and abusive...

**Debbie:** Liz is talking about being a presence within a larger public space, not just our own space, where we protect ourselves from men.

**Joan:** But why is that desirable?

**Debbie:** It's utopian, a moment of utopianism that interrupts the general dystopia, the general feeling that we probably all share with you that being in a public space with men is usually a bit of a trial. But if there's a big public party, I think what Liz is saying is that you get a glimpse of what it might be like if you took away the oppressive relationships, and feel safe and have pleasure.

**Liz:** Of course most of the time you are on your guard, you're watching, but sometimes there are these moments, and I find them really important, because for me they are about still holding on to some belief that change is possible, and it's actually quite hard at times...

**Joan:** I think you can hold onto the belief that change is possible without that particular utopia; in fact I think utopianism is partly about having to *imagine* a world in which things can change dramatically because you have given up believing that you can change the *real* world. So for me those two things are in complete contradiction. I'm deeply suspicious of utopianism, but I haven't given up believing that things can change.

**Debbie:** I suppose it depends whether or not you believe that holidays, or things like the millennium are time out from normal life...

**Joan:** Or whether they are an extension of it...

### *Christmas vs New Year*

**Debbie:** Yeah, I think there is a tension around that. Clearly, as you were saying, Christmas is a lot of work for women, and a lot of danger for women who are in violent relationships. It's a hard time for people who are lonely or homeless or poor. It's not time out for most women.

**Joan:** I've heard a lot of women lately, on the market stalls, in the pub, saying: Surely it's not come round again. Why can't we have Christmas every five years?

**Dianne:** But clearly there are certain compensations. Many women also get a lot of pleasure from it; from the celebration of the family...

**Stevi:** Precisely; the work that goes into making it 'a good Christmas' for everyone, and women's responsibility for that, is tied in with the whole ideology of the family, and the inevitable disappointment when it doesn't live up to the ideal of the proper family Christmas.

**Debbie:** I think there's very little that's reclaimable for feminists about Christmas — both from a family and a religious point of view. When I lived in Oxford and we tried to celebrate it in feminist collectives, I always felt truly dejected and depressed at the end of it; the attempt to politically subvert everything about it, from not eating meat to not having anything to do with anybody's relatives, not watching the Queen's speech — I think you can imagine — while trying to have a celebration. I would rather have been grouching about a family scenario. But a millennium; we've never had one before in anyone's lifetime.

**Joan:** You're right that you can't just avoid these public moments of celebration. But, ironically, I think there's far more to reclaim about Christmas; there is plenty of pagan

symbolism: decorated trees and food and drink; and there's also all the potentially socialist agenda about poverty, with kings bringing gifts to a child in a stable; and all the controversial stuff about the nativity and the marginalisation of paternity... it's largely about extending those issues and those pleasures — of gifts and food and so on — beyond the family. I find it much harder to see what you can do with the New Year.

**Debbie:** But we can do anything we like with the millennium. There's no tradition.

**Dianne:** Why would we celebrate two thousand years of patriarchy?

**Debbie:** It must be nearly over then?! We'd celebrate the possibility of the future being better than the past. We'd celebrate having a few days off.

**Liz:** Potentially we could have done loads of things. We could have celebrated women's resistance.

**Stevi:** Maybe this is a time for utopian visions. One of the reasons feminists find science fiction attractive is this sense of possible futures — social worlds that are organised differently. Maybe you could think about celebrating the millennium in a feminist way both by looking back and seeing what women have achieved, despite all the odds being stacked against them, how they have resisted over time — and we could also look forward and think; what is the kind of world we would want to live in?

**Debbie:** We know that it's totally contingent, that it's two thousand years, and that counting started from a date we don't care about — it's even the wrong date for that — but we have to understand that we are not as yet the mainstream of culture and that it's not a kind of wonderful political strategy to opt out of that mainstream and not see any opportunities within it when we don't have any alternative. I don't want, when I die, for all my memories of feminism to be of great political events that I was at demonstrating or something like that. But I'm afraid they are going to be, because it's so long since we didn't respond to some public occasion by saying: 'Fuck that, I'm not buying in to all that.'

**Joan:** I can imagine wanting to be part of a celebration that was about the 20th century in relation to feminism, looking at what has been achieved globally, and then taking that as a springboard to see what might be possible in

another century. Because although one century is a blip in terms of the timeline suggested by the millennium, it could be very exciting to acknowledge what has happened in such a relatively short time, and perhaps the millennium has had a stifling effect on our ability to acknowledge social change.

**Debbie:** The 20th century has been feminism's high point, however you cut and slice it.

**Liz:** And I increasingly think that unless we claim some level of success, some level of having made a difference, what is there to keep us going? Many of us are so critical that it's as if we have done nothing, and I think that's really demotivating in terms of having any political energy.

**Dianne:** I agree with you. But what's to dictate that we celebrate on this particular date?

**Debbie:** Well, no-one's going to turn up if we make it next March 8th. Nobody except ourselves.

**Dianne:** But isn't that who we are talking about? Aren't we looking at an alternative celebration?

**Debbie:** Don't we want to publicise what we are celebrating to a wider world? If only those who are already feminist have access to our ways of making meaning in time and space, it's going to be all over when we die, which I'm increasingly feeling is not too far away!

**Dianne:** But the choice, as it exists now, is whether we participate in those larger millennium events or have an alternative celebration.

**Liz:** I think the issue is that we didn't even have those discussions. We didn't discuss whether or not there was any use in making feminist representations about what was in the dome.

**Debbie:** Everybody isn't going to the dome. But on a local level there could have been some intervention about what to spend the lottery money on. And increasingly we do have this attitude: Oh fuck all these moments of public hype, because they are all so commercialised, and centralised and regimented, we do have this great reaction against them, which means that as a feminist you always have a bad time. Although I do plan to go and see the fireworks. I don't think fireworks are just for men. □



# 100 years of attitude

*As we enter the year 2000, the media are full of retrospectives naming the most influential figures of the century and the millennium. Most of those named are, of course, men, while many of the women who make it onto the list are remembered primarily for their glamour and good looks. How might a radical feminist list be different? We asked a selection of women for their nominations: below we reproduce (in alphabetical order) what they came up with.*

*As will be evident, some of them took issue with the politics of the 'women of the century' idea. Others felt it was no bad thing for feminists to recognise individual women's accomplishments, though without forgetting the collective nature of our political struggle or diminishing the contribution of its many unsung heroines. The actual nominations include famous names and obscure ones (how many readers will have heard of Grace Hopper or Lise Meitner?), women long since dead and women still doing important work now, radical feminists and women who are not remotely feminist, and even a few fictional characters. The choices clearly reflect the location and historical knowledge of the women who made them: for instance there is an obvious bias towards European and North American women, and more particularly towards women from English-speaking countries. We welcome other nominations from T&S readers.*



*Simone De Beauvoir*



Marie Curie

**Anonymous** was a woman. The women's movement is collective, it's not about celebrating exceptional individuals.

**Simone de Beauvoir.** For writing a classic work of feminist theory in a time and place (France, 1949) when there was no active feminist movement, and for becoming a supporter and activist when the movement arrived.

**Buffy the Vampire Slayer.** A female hero who kicks ass.

**Marie Curie.** The century's most famous woman scientist.

**Angela Davis.** US race, gender and class radical.

**Bette Davis.** For portraying strong and independent women on screen.

**Diana, Princess of Wales.** A loose cannon inside and outside an archaic patriarchal institution.

**Babe Didickson.** US athlete. At the age of 15, she broke two national records, in javelin and basketball throw. She became one of the world's greatest athletes, with unparalleled success in all sports, including boxing, swimming, shooting, fencing, tennis and billiards. After winning gold medals in the 1932 Olympic Games, she turned to professional golf, winning all major US and British titles. Following treatment for cancer in 1953, she returned to win the US Women's Open Golf Championship for the third time in 1954.

**Early radical feminists.** For vision and daring.

**Anne Frank.** A courageous young woman whose diary became, after her death at the hands of the Nazis, one of the most influential nonfiction works of the century.

**Aretha Franklin.** One of many outstanding African American women musicians this century, she gets my vote for her version of *RESPECT* — in her performance, it's the most inspiring feminist anthem in popular music.

**Greta Garbo.** An independent woman off screen as well as on it.

**Stella Gibbons.** For taking the piss out of the arch-sexist DH Lawrence in



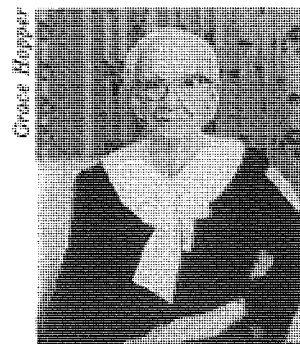
Aretha Franklin

one of the century's funniest English novels, *Cold Comfort Farm*.

**Emma Goldman.** Feminist and anarchist, who said: 'If I can't dance, then it's not my revolution'.

**Greenham women.** For their spectacular and memorable activism. 'You can't kill the spirit'.

**Fannie Lou Hamer.** American civil rights leader, the granddaughter of a slave and the youngest of 20 children. In 1962, infuriated when she was given a hysterectomy without her consent, she tried to register as a voter, and her protest lost her her job. She became more involved with the civil rights movement and in 1964 she ran as a candidate for Congress. She also became a committed feminist and was elected to the Central Committee of the National Women's Political Caucus.



Grace Hopper

**Grace Hopper.** She was a mathematician, computer scientist, and teacher, amongst other things. She invented the compiler in 1953, and contributed to the development of the COBOL programming language.

She also is credited with inventing the word 'bug' to refer to a flaw in a program when she opened up a computer and found a dead insect between two circuit boards.

**Amy Johnson.** Aviation pioneer who more than held her own with her male peers, though she was not allowed to join the Royal Air Force alongside them.

**Käthe Kollwitz.** One of the great artists of the twentieth century.

**Nella Last.** An 'ordinary' woman (not a journalist or professional writer) who started a war diary in 1939 for the social survey organisation Mass Observation. Her writing gives an outstanding picture of women's experience during the second world war.

**Doris Lessing.** Her novel *The Golden Notebook* includes the first tampon in world literature.

**Jan Macleod.** Jan has worked against violence against women and children for over 20 years



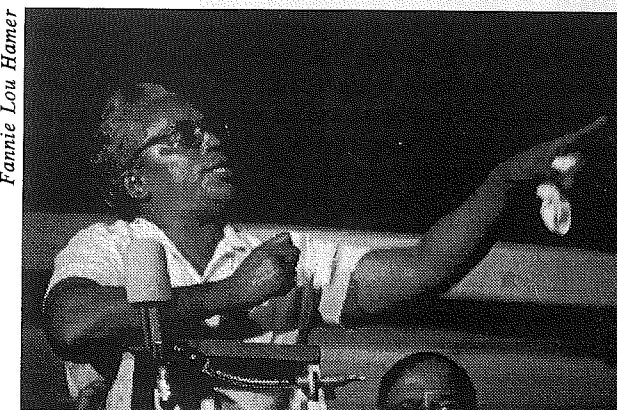
Rosa Parks

doing paid and unpaid work. I would like to nominate Jan for making a difference — for being reliable and competent and knowing what needs to be done and what to do about it!

**Madonna.** An allegory in her own time, and a role model for Catholic rebels.

**Margaret Mead.** Anthropologist who argued early on that sex differences were socially constructed and variable across cultures.

**Lise Meitner.** Physicist who first described nuclear fission. An Austrian Jew, she moved to Berlin to study, but found herself excluded from the lab on the grounds that her hair might catch fire. Nevertheless, she went on to become Professor of Physics at Berlin University in 1926. She escaped from Nazi Germany in 1938 and worked in Holland and Sweden, where her most important work was done. According to the Macmillan Dictionary of Women's Biography, 'when invited to join a team working on the nuclear fission bomb she refused, stopped working on nuclear fission, and hoped the project



Fannie Lou Hamer

would prove impossible'.

**Hannah Mitchell.** Women's suffrage activist.

**Maria Montessori.** Educational theorist whose ideas have influenced early childhood education throughout the world.

**Toni Morrison.** First African-American woman to win a Nobel Prize for Literature.

**Martina Navratilova.** Revolutionised women's tennis, and 'she wouldn't wear that damned skirt'.

**Lilian Ngoyi.** South African activist and president of The Federation of South African Women. Her whole life was a struggle against the poverty and oppression of her people. She was arrested in 1956 and, along with other leading activists such as Helen Joseph, Frances Baird, Dora Tamana and Ruth First, was charged with treason after an elaborate trial that lasted for more than four years. She was acquitted in 1961 but was confined to her home in Orlando Township under banning orders until her death in 1988.

**Nobody.** I'm not playing the nominations game. Why is T&S going along with this 'great women of the century' shit? How is this different from what you get in women's mags like *Cosmopolitan*?

**Rosa Parks.** The woman whose refusal to give up her seat on the bus inaugurated the Civil Rights movement in the US.

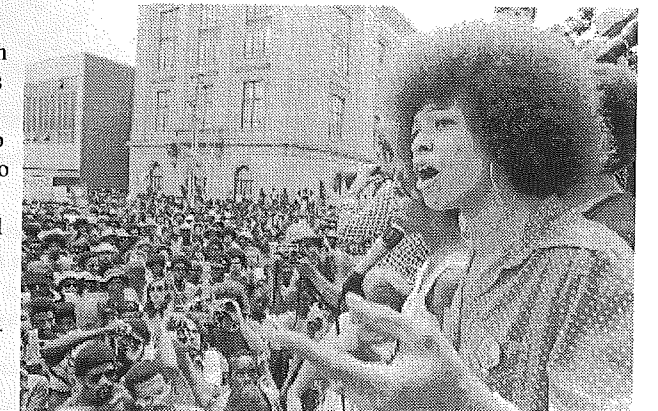
**Adrienne Rich.** If feminism had a poet laureate, she would be it.

**Ripley.** Sigourney Weaver's character in the *Aliens* films, which provide a rare example of a strong female hero in mainstream sci-fi.

**Dr Raine Roberts.** For her contribution over 30 years to the care of women and children who have experienced sexual assault.



Käthe Kollwitz



Angela Davis



Rosie the Riveter



Suffragette meeting, London

**Mary Robinson.** Irish President and UN Commissioner.

**Eleanor Roosevelt.** A woman-identified American 'First Lady'; unlike many of her more recent successors she used her position to pursue a social reform agenda that was radical for its time.

**Rosie the Riveter.** A symbol of all the women who went out to work when men went off to war.

**Muriel Rukeyser.** A great and undervalued feminist poet. Her poem *Käthe Kollwitz* contains the lines 'What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?/ The world would split open'.

**Nawal El Saadawi.** Feminist theorist and activist of the Islamic world.

**Ethel Smyth.** Activist, suffragette and composer whose work includes 'The March of the Women'.

**Valerie Solanas.** For going over the top. Her SCUM Manifesto is a feminist classic and still an exhilarating read.

**Suffragists/suffragettes.** The right to vote, which women now have (at least in theory)

Nominations by Anonymous, Meryl Altman, Dianne Butterworth, Debbie Cameron, Milly Dorégos, Janette Forman, Liz Kelly, Ann Sargé, Joan Scanlon, Jane Taubman, Lauren Taubman-Franks.

almost everywhere in the world (whereas a hundred years ago they had it nowhere), is one of the major feminist achievements of the century, and we should recognise the many women who fought to make it happen.

**Margaret Thatcher.** Politically no feminist, but the first woman elected in her own right — not because she was somebody's wife or daughter — to wield such huge political power.

**The Unknown Activist.** The greatest feminist achievements of the century have come about through the actions of many women whose names history/herstory does not record.

**The US women's soccer team.** For proving that the beautiful game can be played

brilliantly by women too.

**Rebecca West.** One of the century's most important women journalists, who made the remark 'I don't know what a feminist is; I only know men call me one whenever I say or do anything that differentiates me from a doormat'.

**Virginia Woolf.** Influential feminist, pacifist and socialist. Her essays *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* are all-time classics of feminist writing in English.

**Mrs X.** Think of any male hero of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and then consider how much of his success he must have owed to his wife. □



Amy Johnson

# Victorian Values

*It is sometimes claimed that many of the problems associated with prostitution would be solved by legalisation. Here Mary Sullivan examines what has happened in the Australian state of Victoria since the law was changed, and concludes that legalising prostitution doesn't work.*

Prostitution was legalised in the state of Victoria in Australia in the 1980s. Proponents of legalisation argued that it would solve the problems associated with prostitution, such as the industry's unregulated expansion and criminal involvement. In fact, legalisation solved none of the problems and has led to many more. The state's experience of legalised prostitution demonstrates that government sanctioning of the trade perpetuates the culture of violence and exploitation that is inherent in the trade. The new liberalised climate has facilitated the expansion and diversification of the industry, with increasing numbers of women and children commodified for exceedingly high profits. The sex industrial-

ists — former souteneurs, procurers and pimps now given immunity through the law — control the trade, while the state benefits through increased taxation, licensing fees and the promotion of prostitution tourism.

Any suggestion that a more permissive approach to prostitution may benefit women is discredited by the reality that most prostituted women are economically worse off than before legalisation and they must now accept as part of normal work practices sexual violence and harassment that is unacceptable and unlawful in any other workforce in the state. More disturbingly, alongside the legal industry, a black market in women's bodies is flourishing. Legislative

changes introduced by the Victorian government to counteract these illegal activities are proving ineffective, since once any form of official toleration of prostitution is in operation, police willingness to act against any prostitution-related offences is markedly decreased.

### **The legal approach**

A liberalisation of the Victorian prostitution laws began in the early 1980s when the newly elected state Labor Government initiated its program of prostitution law reform, which was taken up by successive Labor and Liberal governments. Central to this shift in public policy was the conviction that prostitution was principally an economic exchange. New legislation introduced in 1984 legalised prostitution in brothels with a valid planning permit — an approach that recognised brothels as acceptable commercial practices to be dealt with as a legitimate land use for town planning purposes. Labor comfortably distanced itself from taking either a moral or an ethical stance on prostitution by adopting the libertarian position. To Labor, the practice was a matter of private sexual behaviour between consenting adults that should not be criminalised 'simply because money changed hands'.

Victoria's legalisation of prostitution, it could be argued, was not intended as a total sanctioning of the sex industry. It was a harms-minimisation approach. Proponents argued that the prohibition was ineffective against a highly visible massage parlour trade (a euphemism for brothels), and increasing street prostitution. The existing proscriptive legislation was also seen as ineffectual in eliminating the traditional criminal involvement and drug use from the sex industry. Nor could it diminish the health risks, particularly sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs), either for prostituted women or their johns. New prostitution law therefore was in part intended to minimise the extent of the industry and its impact on the public. The appearance of the AIDS epidemic in the mid 1980s was a further stimulus to reform.

Legalisation, however, brought with it new issues. On-going adjustments to legislation have become necessary as state policy makers attempt to deal with a myriad of unforeseen issues that are not addressed by treating prostitution as commercial sex — child prostitution, trafficking of women, the exploitation and abuse of prostituted women by big business. As the industry expands so does the variety of ways which are

offered to men for the expression of their sexual dominance, such as tabletop dancing, and further adjustments are required. The forms of degradation that the industry develops to cater to men's demands are unimaginably diverse and no legislation is able to foresee these possibilities.

The existing model for the state's prostitution law is based on the Prostitution Control Act 1994. Under the Act, licensed brothels and escort agencies operate legally, although subject to local planning controls determined under the Planning and Environment Act 1997. These controls ensure that sex establishments are not located close to schools, churches or other areas where children frequent, ensure their exclusion from residential areas, and limit the size of brothels to six rooms. The Act established a Prostitution Control Board composed of lawyers, police and industry figures in order to ensure 'a rigorous licensing procedure for prostitution services and for the disciplining of licensees'. Other prescriptive measures include the requirement that prostituted women are registered and must undergo regular health checks for STDs and AIDS. Most significantly, street prostitution remains a criminal offence.

By 1997 the Attorney General, Jan Wade, and her supporters were promoting the state's prostitution industry as 'a highly regulated profitable, professional and incredibly well-patronised industry ...that pays taxes.' The legislation itself she saw as a model for other states.

### **Expansion and normalisation of the industry**

When one examines the impact of legalisation in light of its intended aims, it becomes evident that it failed in even its most trivial aim of containing the industry. An investigative report by Victoria's *Age* newspaper, found an increase in the number of legal brothels from 40 a decade ago to 94 today, along with 84 escort agencies. Each week 60,000 Victorian men spend \$7 million on prostitution, with the legalised industry turning over more than \$360 million a year and drawing on some 4,500 workers. When one considers that Victoria's population is around 3.5 million people, these figures attest to how mainstream buying a woman has become in the state. Ironically, the real growth area is in the illegal sector. With over 100 unlicensed brothels they now outnumber 'legitimate' sex businesses.

The legalisation process has brought with an

explosion in other forms of sexual exploitation in the industry. Tabletop dancing, bondage and discipline centres, peep shows, phone sex and pornography — all are an increasing part of a multi-million dollar trade in women. Tabletop dancing, where women working as dancers perform nude or semi-nude on tables or podiums surrounded closely by groups of men, has come under close scrutiny because of its phenomenal growth since its inception in 1992. The 1997 Dixon Report, a government advisory committee evaluation of the legalised industry, included tabletop dancing among its main terms of reference. The performances include close contact with or touching of men, double acts with other women or men (showers, oil wrestling) and personal or lap dances where the dancer sits on a man's lap 'gyrating, twisting and generally stimulating his groin area, or rubbing her breasts in the patron's face'. Penetration of women with objects that included mobile telephones being inserted into the dancer's vagina or anus was common. Our politicians uselessly grapple to create an adequate legal definition of prostitution, ignoring the fact the government's own committee found that the sex industry is expanding and men are demanding ever more explicit forms of 'sexual services'.

The increasing magnitude of the sex industry is only matched by its growing acceptability. With legalisation, parliamentary rhetoric began to portray the industry in a new light, casting aside the illicit associations historically associated with prostitution. One apologist for legalised prostitution commented during the passage through parliament of a 1997 amendment bill, that 'prostitution in the 1990s no longer involves tawdry, unkempt small rooms off laneways frequented by desperates wearing raincoats who seek sexual gratification'. The claim was substantiated by evidence provided by a Melbourne madam. According to the woman, 'Those men who used the prostitutes were well educated professional men, who visit during the day and then go home to their families. Most of [the] clients', she concluded, 'have secure marriages and have no intention of leaving their wives'. It is interesting that no member of parliament considered it important to discuss how this fact might impact on married women.

The degree of normalisation of prostitution that has resulted from legalisation is illustrated by the fact that the Melbourne University Students Union invited the Prostitutes Collective

of Victoria to hold a seminar on how students could combine sex work with studies. This fits in well with federal government policy in Australia to cut expenditure on higher education. When economic rationalist policymakers promote 'work for the dole' schemes that demand the unemployed work for welfare assistance, as has happened in Victoria, it is feasible that prostitution would be among the jobs women will be expected to perform.

Once the commodification of women's bodies was legitimised as a commercial practice, few ethical barriers remained to prevent new forms of exploitation. The sex industry was quick to recognise that along with a woman's vagina and anus, her reproductive capacities were sellable products. The sex-industry's 1999 *Working Girl/Working Boy* magazine highlighted in a piece entitled 'The Working Mother to Be' the benefits in women marketing their reproductive capacities. As the writer states 'pregnant women may find themselves with a whole new group of clients who find pregnancy a turn on'. In addition, if one chose to offer the service 'a surprising number of men find drinking breast milk either arousing or soothing'.

The annual staging of a trade show for the sex industry illustrates just how acceptable prostitution is in Victoria presently. SEXPO markets prostitution both locally and internationally (via the internet) through the promotion of brothels, escort agencies, tabletop dancing, pornography and other forms of sexually explicit 'entertainment' and 'adult products'. Once inside the R-rated exhibition space, crowds attending the 1998 SEXPO could immerse themselves in an array of porn — in the flesh and on video. Corpulent images of oversized vulvas and breasts flashed from screens which were then transmitted via the internet around the world, selling Melbourne internationally as the new sex capital of Australia. On stage, women pretended to orgasm, while in the open stands men sat with their faces between women's thighs, having paid between \$A10 to \$A35 for a personal lap dance, the price depending on whether a woman wears a G-string or is nude. The women were sold for little more than the produce advertised at the frozen yogurt stand next door. What is of most concern, though, is that this public event is held at the state-operated Melbourne Exhibition and Convention Centre (MECC), which gave front page coverage to SEXPO in its business section, alongside a profile of Australia's sex industry



which has an estimated annual turnover of \$A1.2 billion. The 1999 SEXPO to be held in December promises some approval of the state for prostitution.

State support has undoubtedly buoyed the sex industry. SEXPO's rapid transition from a relatively unrespectable sideshow held at Melbourne's Carlton Crest Hotel, to a mainstream public event is evidence of this. The first SEXPO was staged in Melbourne in 1996. It had 24 exhibits and attracted 10,000 people. The most recent SEXPO, staged in Melbourne in November 1998, had over 220 stands and 70,000 attended the exhibition over a four-day period. Seemingly sustaining the claim that SEXPO is of increasing economic importance to Victoria, the 1999 SEXPO to be held in December promises some 90,000 visitors.

The government profits from the commodification of Victorian women. Already at the time of the passage of the Prostitution Control Act 1994, there was evidence that prostitution was an accepted sideline of the tourism and casino boom. The Labor Opposition, referring to an *Age* article entitled 'Brothels cash in on casino trade' brought to the parliament's attention the fact that the Government-sponsored casino, seen as the financial basis of Agenda 21 — a government initiative to revitalise the state's economy — has authorised the redeeming of casino chips and wheel of fortune bonuses at local brothels. Taking the point further, Labor opposition member, Jan McClean, speaking of the hypocrisy surrounding Victoria's prostitution trade, said that 'Our scummy casino chips are accepted as legal currency in local brothels [and] that is apparently is quite acceptable'. With the Top of the Town brothel claiming a 30% boost to its daytime trade, McClean drew the obvious conclusion that 'clearly despite condemnation by the Premier Mr Kennett, this was ultimately part of Liberal party policy to promote brothels, especially in the daytime, for the workers'. It was the future implication of this trend that McClean found deeply disturbing. 'The commodification of women would only intensify' she argued, 'as Australia is part of a new wave of world tourism that is made up of package tours with all services supplied including prostitution'.

#### **Sex work or legalised exploitation?**

For feminists, one of the most persuasive arguments underpinning legalisation was that once prostitution ceased to be a criminal offence,

prostituted women would be able to choose their own working conditions, their johns, and, if working for an employer, would have industry health and safety standards in place. The experience of Victoria dispels the claim that legalisation empowers women. Large operators — former pimps now given status as respectable businessmen — dominate the industry.

This take-over by sex industrialists was aggravated by the failure of Victoria's specialist prostitution licensing board, the Prostitution Control Board (PCB), to effectively monitor licensing. Although illegal, multi-ownership existed, with instances of one proprietor owning as many as six brothels. Licensing procedures will prove even more inadequate in the future, as 1999 saw the PCB replaced by a general Business Licensing Authority with no specialist knowledge. This is perhaps indicative of just how far the government has moved along the path to seeing the sale and commodification of women as being like any other business.

A further, and more fundamental barrier to prostitutes taking control of brothels was that legal parlours tend to be expensive, capital-intensive buildings, allowing for the monopolisation of the industry by more wealthy owners. When the 1994 Prostitution Act was passed, brothels were changing hands for over \$A1,000,000. Some concession was made in the Prostitution Control (Amendment) Act 1997 to allow for a cottage type industry where one or two women could work in private parlours. These remain illegal in residential areas.

Women's 'choice' to control their own working environment is therefore still restricted. The only option for prostituted women to work on a small-scale basis legally is, in reality, in industrial backblocks or docklands. This leaves already vulnerable women open to violence, fear and isolation. Prostituted women face exorbitant costs as well, as they are required to disclose their business to landlords, who in turn, charge grossly inflated rents. It is really part of this crazy hypocrisy that we market women's bodies so openly and yet must keep prostitution away from children and 'nice' suburbs. What other respectable business must be kept out of the sight of children?

For women working in legal brothels, managers and owners demand up to 50% to 60% of takings. This is in the face of strong competition among prostituted women for johns as increasing numbers of women enter prostitution,

and, as men now have an excess of sexual services on offer for them to buy. It is difficult to see how sex industry advocates could claim that women in the trade are even economically better off after legalisation.

The major area where prostitution law does deal with the conditions of women in legal brothels is in regulations accompanying the 1994 prostitution legislation. This requires prostituted women to register and have regular health check-ups for STDs and the AIDS virus. The 1988 Report on the First National AIDS Conference concluded that such a requirement only created barriers to health care for workers as women do not wish to identify themselves as sex workers and would not access health services. Moreover, registration totally bars women from the illegal sector of the trade from seeking health care.

Such regulation places the blame upon the prostituted women for the spread of STDs and, as feminist foresisters pointed out in campaigns against the Contagious Diseases Acts in the nineteenth century, it leaves the male sex unchallenged. This hypocritical double standard was the focus of these earlier feminist campaigns. The Acts had allowed compulsory examination of women suspected of prostitution in garrison towns and ports in UK and Australia. Feminists argued that they were an abuse of women's civil liberties and they were repealed. Today in Victoria the state chooses to ignore this historical example.

#### **The violence of prostitution**

Legalisation promised greater safety to prostituted women. But prostitution, as spokeswomen from the survivors' movement such as Evelina Giobbe of WHISPER argue, is violence in and of itself, commercial sexual violence. In the everyday practices of the industry women must engage in acts that are sexually and physically degrading and are forced to disassociate by using drugs or alcohol to survive. The acts that men buy the right to perform on prostituted women include all the forms of sexual violence that feminists are seeking to eliminate from women's beds, homes, workplaces, streets. One is that of sexual harassment.

In Victoria at a time when other women are seeking to desexualise their workplace, assisted by union organisations, women employed in the sex industry are expected to endure behaviour not tolerated in other work environment. Spokespersons for the Prostitutes Collective of Victoria

(PCV) have explained to me that men are more demanding in the type of services they want and the demand for oral sex, for instance, has been replaced by the demand for anal sex frequently demonstrated by men simply sticking their fingers into women's anuses during their 'bookings'. Other 'normal practices' they say 'include women being lined up and looked over like any other commodity' and sex without condoms. These views are supported by a 1998 study conducted by the Macfarlane Burnett Centre for Medical Research done in conjunction with the PCV. Forty per cent of men in the study did not use condoms when using prostituted women.

Prostituted women who need money are forced to engage in whatever the customer requires. Further studies conducted by the PCV and Victoria's La Trobe University substantiated that women who are economically vulnerable often have little choice to refuse services which they found unacceptable, or, from a health aspect likely to cause diseases such as hepatitis, chlamydia and genital herpes, let alone AIDS. One young woman student wrote in an issue of *Working Girl/Working Boy* of the pain experienced by having men repeatedly thrust their penis in her vagina as they attempted to climax. She would need to artificially lubricate her vagina because it was dry and painful but some men became aggressive especially if they were drunk, her actions seemingly a threat to their maleness. At tabletop dancing venues a private shower performance entails a dancer having her naked body lathered by a group of men who have consumed alcohol. Pauline Burgess, a Women's Policy Officer evaluating the working conditions of tabletop dancers reported that the experience was so disturbing that women were moving into the area of peep shows to prevent personal contact with the men who abused them.

#### **Street prostitution**

Legalisation is not in the interest of women. The clearest evidence that the government never seriously addressed the concerns of women in the industry is that, alongside the marketing of women's bodies in state legitimised brothels, there is the ongoing criminalisation of street prostitution. Street prostitution still exists because it is related to wider social problems, such as drug abuse, homelessness, sexual abuse. Street prostitutes are women, children, males and transsexuals. The government's Advisory

Committee on prostitution determined that women are the vast majority of street prostitutes and remain in the industry for between 10–15 years, 'entrenched in a life cycle of prostitution, drugs and prison'. A study, 'Off Our Backs 1996' confirmed that 80% of street prostituted women are heavy drug users, with a \$A100–500 a day drug problem. 46% are mothers with children in protective care.

Because of the illicit nature of their work, prostituted women are moreover doubly vulnerable to violence that has not been paid for. Statistics produced by the PCV prior to the passing of the 1994 Act reveal that that rapes of prostituted women averaged 2 rapes per week, with one assault per night and 2 murders over the last year. Street prostituted women are harassed by police and gutter crawlers. However, where prostituted women are criminalised, women cannot demand police protection or claim legal recourse for robbery or coercion, for they thereby expose themselves as implicated in a criminalised trade. The Victorian government nonetheless ignores the violence committed against street prostitution putting it in the 'too hard' basket.

#### *The rise of a black market*

Legalisation was intended to eliminate organised crime from the sex industry. In fact the reverse has happened. Convicted criminals, fronted by supposedly more reputable people, remain in the business. Fred Lelah who owns Sasha's International, one of Melbourne's inner suburban legal brothels, is currently before the Melbourne Magistrate's court for introducing girls 10–15 into his business. Lelah has already served a two year term for the same offence.

Recently it has been revealed that Victoria sex industrialists are involved in the lucrative international sex trade run by crime syndicates which is worth \$A30 million in Australia. An Australian Institute of Criminology study estimated that Australian brothels earned \$1 million a week from this illegal trade. Some examples of the trade have come to light in the last few months. One concerns a Melbourne businessman bringing 40 Thai women in as contract workers, depriving them of their passports and earnings until their contracts were worked off. In another case 25 Asian workers were found in similar circumstances in one of

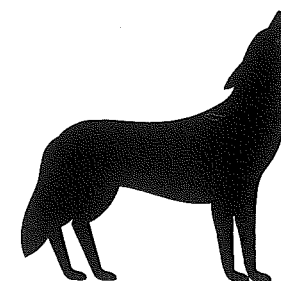
Melbourne's legal brothels. These incidences are likely to be but the tip of the iceberg.

The commercial sexual exploitation of young people in Metropolitan Melbourne is also rife. According to ECPAT's 1998 report for the Australian National Inquiry on child prostitution, of all the states and territories, the highest number of reported incidences came from Victoria. There was clear evidence of organised commercial exploitation of children. In a study conducted by the Victorian Department of Human Services young people involved in commercial sexual activities were identified as having 'significant' contact with paedophile rings. These young people disclosed that as a consequence of their involvement with paedophile rings they experienced rape and were forced into pornography.

Feminist campaigners who worked through the League of Nations against the traffic in women between the wars argued that licensed brothels acted as warehouses for trafficked women. Currently they create a demand for constant new recruits, and fuel the illegal trafficking industry.

The reality is that prostitution cannot be made respectable. Legalisation has caused the business of sexual exploitation to flourish. Men have been taught that it is their right to buy and abuse women and they are clearly indiscriminate about whether they use the legal or illegal industry. The normalisation of prostitution as a job just like any other has also eased the way for pimps, traffickers and brothel owners to draw women into the trade.

However it is not just women in the industry who are affected by the expansion of Victoria's sex industry. Recently sex clubs featuring tabletop dancers as part of their promotions are targeting the corporate world for product launches, conferences and the like. These new 'men's clubs' simply ensure the old glass ceiling stays intact. In addition men using these clubs have been found to be sexually aggressive to women they encounter outside the clubs, denying women the right to use public space. All of the customers relate to women in some way and these relationships are impoverished as men are taught to enjoy subordinating women. The legalisation of prostitution erodes the status of all women. □



# 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 Jane Bond makes mincemeat out of academic feminists who drool about 'women's agency'.*

## Secret agents

Recently I heard it said that students are interested in lesbian S/M because it demonstrates women's 'agency'. Quite apart from other, more prurient, sources of students' fascination, statements like this suggest a rather peculiar view of agency — and one which is becoming rather common in the rarefied world of academic feminism. Here agency is equated with 'transgression' — specifically sexual transgression — on the assumption that this is in some way

radical or progressive. We are left to conclude that those with less extravagant sex lives have no agency, that, for example, a woman who sees her lesbianism as political but opposes S/M lacks agency (it goes without saying that heterosexual feminists, unless engaged in seriously exotic sexual practices, have so little agency they may as well be cabbages).

This odd view of agency comes from 'sex radicals' who want to defend practices like S/M,

along with butch and femme lesbian roles, against those who question or criticise them. Those who criticise them, who dare to question where the desire to play games of dominance and submission comes from, are accused of 'denying women's agency', of assuming that those who engage in S/M are victims of false consciousness. Obviously it is a profound misunderstanding of feminist critics of S/M to say that we all regard it as 'false consciousness' and therefore something which cannot be freely chosen. What we're trying to do is question how such choices become possible under particular social conditions and what this might say about the social world we live in. Moreover, there are double standards at work here. Those who oppose 'sex radicals' are easily and frequently dismissed as sexually repressed prudes — in other words, *we* are the ones who have failed to liberate ourselves from the 'false consciousness' of an anti-sex morality. Hence those who bleat loudest about radical feminists' supposed inattention to agency are quite happy to imply that radical feminists themselves have no agency, that we are driven by our 'repressed' sexuality.

Self-styled proponents of women's sexual agency frequently see pornography and 'sex work' as opportunities for women to 'express' their sexuality. When we expose the violence entailed in prostitution and pornography, we are told that we are reducing 'sex workers' to mindless victims of exploitation and so denying their agency. This is the old refrain about our reducing women to victims. How many times have we heard it said that radical feminists campaigning against sexual violence and exploitation are perpetuating a form of 'victim feminism'? Here 'agency' is wheeled in as yet another conceptual stick to beat us with. Women who are raped, beaten or unwillingly trafficked for prostitution are, in a very real sense, being robbed of agency. But it is not *we* who deprive them of agency, but the men who abuse them. Men's agency is here being used against women — but escapes scrutiny. Is it not absurd that activists who have devoted their attention to remedying such violence, who fight for women's self-determination, are the ones accused of denying them agency. Why is it, for example, that a woman who claims to enjoy working in the sex industries is seen as expressing her agency, while women who have been abused in these industries and work to support other women trying to escape are not? Why is it that individual

acts of 'transgression' come under the heading of 'agency' while collective action and resistance do not?

### *A club only 'bad girls' can join*

The idea that sexual transgression exemplifies agency comes from those who see themselves as challenging a feminist orthodoxy. This was one motive for those lesbians who embraced queer politics — as was made evident in Cherry Smyth's book *Lesbians Talk Queer Notions*. Here a new generation of lesbians are depicted as more adventurous than their prudish big sisters, playing around with S/M, butch and femme roles (and doing other 'shocking' things such as flouting established dress codes by wearing lipstick!). In many writings around sexuality, the 'bad girl' image is embraced as a new form of identity. More recently, this has been explicitly linked to agency. One example I found is an article by Laura Harris and Liz Cocker tellingly entitled 'Bad Girls: Sex, Class and Feminist Agency', which is published in their edited collection *Femme: Feminists, Lesbians and Bad Girls*. Here is an extended quotation from their conclusion:

It is not a coincidence that many femmes self-image as bad girls; rather the prostitute as independent sexual agent offers a role model or fantasy for femmes of feminist agency... The image of the prostitute is one of sexual aggression in the guise of seductive and passive female subservience; this image could enable the femme to script the sexual scene. The fantasy of a prostitute is a woman who consciously manipulates the economics of heterosexuality and, in doing so, establishes control over her status as a sexual object. In this way, femme bad girl role-modelling is a strong expression of a feminist consciousness that allows women to break down the virgin/whore dichotomy, among others, and produce female roles for their own transgressive and pleasurable use. (p101)

This quote has it all — bad girls, transgression and agency, all linked to the image of the prostitute and given a 'right-on' gloss in the body of the article by suggesting that this is a working class image that only stuck-up middle-class feminists are likely to object to! While the dangers prostitutes face in their work are mentioned, these are made to seem exciting, adventurous and glamorous. True, it is a 'fantasy' of prostitution that is being talked of here, but it has the effect of making all of its less appealing aspects disappear from view. The message seems to be: come on girls, let's have fun

by being as tarty as we can. This hardly seems to be likely to rock patriarchy's boat.

### *The abuse of 'agency'*

The idea of agency is an important one in feminism since agency is what makes human action possible and is therefore a pre-condition for any form of resistance to patriarchal structures and practices. Some of the ways in which the word 'agency' is currently being played with, however, are decidedly idiosyncratic. Within debates on sexuality, the term is, at best, used in a very limited sense and, at worst, misused. There are two false assumptions evident here:

1. Agency is expressed only through 'transgression' (especially sexual transgression) which is then equated with being 'progressive'. Hence anything sexually 'naughty', whatever its political consequences (indeed whether or not it has any) is a good thing because it breaks the rules and flouts social convention. Thus agency is seen as an act of defiance — yet it can sometimes be an empty gesture and at other times simply recycle male fantasies of available women — as in the 'bad girls' syndrome.

2. In these contexts, agency is seen always as an individual phenomenon, not a collective one. Even more sophisticated theorists can fall into this trap. The well-known feminist theorist, Judith Butler, has a great deal to say about agency played out through 'queer' transgressive and subversive acts. In her book *Bodies that Matter*, for example, she suggests that 'queerness might be understood ... as a specific reworking of abjection into political agency' (p21). It is not clear here whether she means individual or collective agency; most of her examples here and in her earlier book, *Gender Trouble*, are of individual 'subversive' acts. Even when she steps outside the realm of sexuality, or sexual politics more generally, she still seems to privilege individual rebellion. In *Excitable Speech*, she uses the case of Rosa Parks to demonstrate the ways in which conventions can be overturned by claiming an authority which has been denied to the oppressed. She criticises the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu for being too deterministic, for holding an overly static view of the social and linguistic order, for failing to recognise the 'possibility of social transformation'. Here she is talking about large scale change, but chooses an individual act to exemplify the possibility:

When Rosa Parks sat in front of the bus she had no prior right to do so guaranteed by any

of the segregationist conventions of the South. And yet, in laying claim to the right for which she had no *prior* authorization, she endowed a certain authority on the act, and began the insurrectionary process of overthrowing those established codes of legitimacy. (p147)

There is no doubt that Rosa Parks' courageous act did demonstrate agency and that it had real political effects. The reasons why Butler's account disturbs me is that she cites this as one isolated example in a general theoretical argument, ignoring the fact that the 'insurrectionary process' she refers to (the Civil Rights Movement), involved collective action and was effective for precisely that reason. Had this collective action not occurred, Rosa Parks' bravery would have had little lasting effect. Moreover, collective action also entails agency — and many other involved in the struggle against institutionalised racism in the US South also displayed exemplary courage. It follows from what I have said that agency is not only about transgression, nor is it only evident in individual acts. Moreover, it is not to be confused with mere 'choice' nor is it the same thing as 'free will'. So what does it mean?

### *What is agency?*

The term 'agency' has been around a long time in the social sciences. Agency is the human capacity to act autonomously and it is based on the assumption that we are reflexive creatures (we reflect on ourselves and on the world around us), that we thus endow the world with meaning. Importantly, it is because we can do this that we can act collectively — we can figure out where we fit into a social scenario and how to act within it, we can imagine how things look from others' points of view and therefore take them into account — as people we can do things with or people who we wish to oppose or challenge. Agency makes social life possible; without it we would be unable to co-operate with others (unless we imagine human beings as programmed robots). It also makes collective and political action possible.

Agency is not the exercise of individualistic free will, because we are always taking others into account in some way and because the meanings we mobilise when making sense of the world come from that social world itself. Also we act within the constraints of a world which exists outside us (what social scientists refer to as the agency-structure tension). As feminists we

recognise that social structures — patriarchal, capitalist, racist, etc. — limit us in a variety of ways, but we also envisage the possibility of agency, of taking action within and against those structures. It is important to note that agency is expressed not only in resisting but also in conforming. A woman who accepts her lot because it looks better than the alternatives may lack choices, but she is not totally without agency. Collectively agency is expressed not only in challenging the status quo, but also in preserving it. For example, men who act in defence of patriarchal interests are expressing agency just as women are in resisting.

This brings me to the question of men's agency, so often hidden in feminist discussions of the concept. Men's agency is taken for granted, which may be why so many of those who identify agency in sexual transgression identify it as women behaving like men — for example, being sexually 'assertive'. Yet there is a long tradition of feminists, and especially radical feminists, taking men's agency seriously. We have demonstrated for example how, historically, men have acted collectively to defend their privileges against women — for instance through campaigning for and defending a 'family wage' and keeping women confined to low-skilled, low-wage jobs. We have demonstrated how men express agency in domestic life through keeping women dependent, demanding their right to women's labour and sexual services and resorting to violence to keep women 'in their place'. Yet even in some unlikely places, men's agency is now being ignored. Often, for example, violence against women is spoken of without the male perpetrators of that violence being identified as such. It is as if the violence just happens without anyone actually doing anything, thus rendering men's actions (and agency) invisible.

#### ***From sexual transgression to feminist political agency***

The equation of agency with individual sexual transgression has something to do with the

reliance on psychoanalysis in some variants of academic feminism. Psychoanalysis is supposed to offer a radical account of human subjectivity because it suggests that our gendered and sexual identities are always precarious, never entirely determined by the society and culture in which we live. But the reason for this is the unpredictable effects of the unconscious. Hence agency is confined to those unruly aspects of the unconscious which have escaped the forces of repression. It can therefore only ever be an individual phenomenon, never under conscious control. This is why agency is so often equated with transgression — yet this version of agency hardly seems to me to be agency at all.

If agency has to do with our ability to reflect upon our social world and act on the basis of that reflection, it is, above all, the outcome of consciousness. Our subjectivity and our opportunities for agency are constrained by the realities of the social world, our position within an unequal society, but this does not mean we have no agency. Agency can be expressed in deciding that it is in our immediate interests to conform as much as in deciding to kick against the traces. Often, it is true, people go about their lives doing things out of habit and without questioning much — without there being much scope for agency. But potentially, at least, the capacity to reflect is there and comes into play whenever we face something unfamiliar which shakes our taken-for-granted daily routines. And whenever we decide we have 'had enough' and fight back, a form of political agency comes into play. Hence a woman who decides to walk out on a violent husband or take action against sexual harassment at work is expressing at least as much agency as the lesbian sado-masochists we started with (and with more chance of 'destabilising' the status quo). It is precisely because we can take action on the basis of what we think of a situation that we can act collectively, and express political agency in a form which counts — in the pursuit of real changes that might make a difference to women's lives. □

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