

Trouble

The radical feminist magazine

& Strife



What the gender-f*** is going on?

No. 41
£4.50

Korea and Viet Nam: Women breaking silence

The sexual politics of money

Film review: *Boys Don't Cry*

Ritual abuse: beyond disbelief

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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2001: A cyberspace odyssey?

Most members of the current *T&S* collective joined in the early 1990s, and all of us remember (in some cases rather nostalgically) when producing the magazine required what you might call traditional craft skills. We employed a professional to set the type, but we pasted up the final product ourselves on large boards, using scalpels to cut the bromides to column length and cow gum to stick down the type and illustrations on each page. It took some half a dozen women a whole weekend, we needed to borrow a large space to do it in, and since we varied in how skilful we were, the results weren't always perfect. If you look at certain issues before about number 30, you'll find the odd sloping margin or not-quite-right angle.

In the mid-1990s we went over to desktop publishing using Pagemaker software: we no longer needed a typesetter, or boards and scalpels and gum, and most of the layout could now be done by one person sitting in front of a computer screen. We retained the design we had had since the beginning of *T&S* in 1983, and the illustrations — especially cartoons — that had made the magazine look distinctive, but we also started to make use of clip art; later on we became able to download images from the internet and to scan in

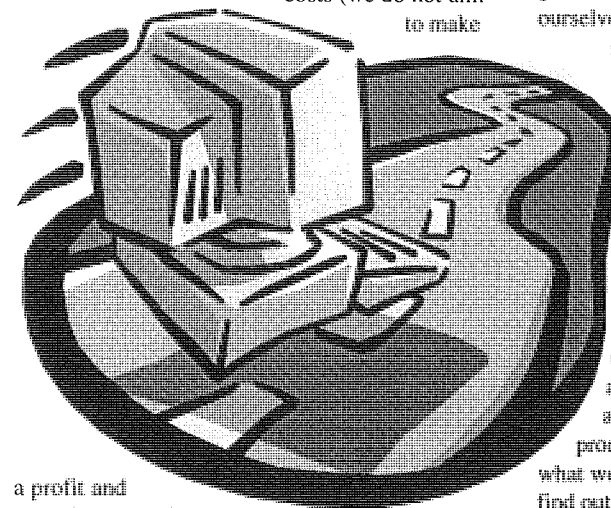
photos and printed illustrations. Some of us did initially regret the passing of traditional paste-up, which offered the opportunity to work communally and to physically handle what would become the finished product. But we wouldn't want to go back now. Even if we did not see the advantages of new methods for ourselves, the rise of the computer has changed the face of publishing in general, and at some point this trend would have become impossible for us to resist.

All this is by way of introduction: we are writing this because, several years after we embraced DTP, we are contemplating another change, and considering the possible long term irresistibility of another trend — the move from print to on-line publishing. This trend is partly technology-driven (that is, it is made possible by the new medium of the internet/World Wide Web), but it is also economic. Here we want to explore — and solicit opinions from our readers about — the question of whether in future *T&S* should become an on-line publication accessed via the Web, rather than a printed publication that you buy in a shop or have delivered direct to your postal address.

Luxury goods?

Let's begin with the economics. For small, independent, nonprofit publishing organisations, the production of a physical object — a magazine or whatever — is looking increasingly like an unaffordable luxury. In the case of *T&S*, for instance, though the collective's and contributors' labour is free, we pay for the commercial printing of about a thousand copies every six months; for posting copies out to subscribers; for a distributor to supply copies to bookshops; and for unsold or returned copies to be kept in storage. In the past we were able to cover these

costs (we do not aim
to make



never have done) because we had a healthy number of subscribers. But that has changed over time. Our highest-paying subscribers — institutions like university libraries and feminist organisations — have been starved of resources and the numbers subscribing have dwindled; inevitably they look for cost-cutting opportunities and we can no longer rely on their annual renewals to bring our bank balance up to scratch. Numbers of individual subscribers, similarly, have fallen steadily. We have fewer subscribers than bookshop buyers, and it is only from subscribers that we receive the full price of the magazine, since our distributor takes a large cut of bookshop sales. The result is that we can barely stay solvent now, and if subscriptions go on falling we will eventually find ourselves in real trouble. We are aware that raising the cover price would probably lose us more subscribers, which would make things worse rather than better; anyway, we ourselves do not want *T&S* to cost as much as we would probably need to charge.

That said, we do not really think the decline in our sales has happened because women are poorer than they were a few years ago. Without denying that *T&S* is more expensive than most magazines (because we do not have advertising revenue), it only costs about the same as, say, a packet of cigarettes or (outside London) a cinema ticket. There are, of course, some feminists who can't afford to smoke or go to the pictures, but many more find it reasonable to spend £4.50 on these pursuits — and not just twice a year either. Those who decide that *T&S* is too expensive must mean 'too expensive for what it is/what I get out of it' — in which case we have to ask ourselves why they have come to that conclusion.

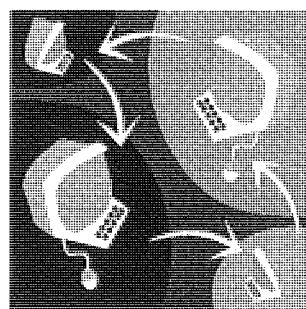
Galloping consumption

Some might say our sales are in decline because fewer women want to read radical feminist publications: radical feminism itself is out of date. We think that's too pessimistic, but it may well be relevant that the feminist and other political networks through which potential new readers would see or hear about *T&S* are not as extensive or as tight as they once were. We can't afford much in the way of advertising and promotion, so if women don't already know what we have to offer, it's not easy for them to find out. Thus a lot of our readers have been with us for many years, but those who drift away for whatever reason are not being replaced by new ones. That's something we would like to address for political reasons as well as purely economic ones.

There's also been change in people's habits with regard to what's grandly known as 'cultural consumption' — the books and magazines we read, the music we listen to, the films we see, and so on. Few feminists can (or would necessarily want to) entirely resist the logic of a consumer society in which there is more and more 'product' to choose from, and for many, less and less time in which to process the stuff available. Our lives have speeded up, with ever-increasing pressure on our working time, our leisure time, the time we spend doing politics or domestic work. We're more accustomed than we used to be to getting things (from our shopping to the news to our next meal) quickly, at the moment when we need or want them, from the most convenient source; we'll order things over the

phone or on the internet rather than wait until we have time to go out and get them. In that context perhaps it becomes more difficult for people to develop or maintain the habit of sending off a subscription form every year and waiting six months for the goods to be delivered.

T&S is not by any means the only publication that has experienced falling subscriptions, it's a widespread phenomenon, and to some extent it must reflect not just market competition but the way every activity nowadays has to compete for space in crowded lives. (The



objection that these 'crowded lives' are in reality only the lives of economically privileged people is a point we'll come back to later on.) Arguably, the traditional

'periodical' — a physical object that appears at intervals and requires an effort to get hold of — does not fit well with the new speeded-up culture of consumption. And this applies whether its subject-matter is feminism or angling or needlepoint. Even the porn industry has had to recognise the change.

These are the considerations that have made us think seriously about moving to a different communication medium, abandoning print and publishing *T&S* on-line. It is clear that to do this would dramatically cut our costs (no printing, storage, postage or distributors); but while that is a pressing practical consideration, for us in principle a more important question is whether on-line publishing would also have other, more positive benefits. After all, we produce *T&S* for political rather than commercial reasons. 'Saving' the magazine in monetary terms is pointless if we cannot also further our political goals in the process. And it is also important, of course, to consider what non-financial costs might be involved in moving on-line.

New possibilities...and new problems?

We can see several potential advantages in the move. First, *speed*. On-line we would not necessarily have to stick to the magazine format

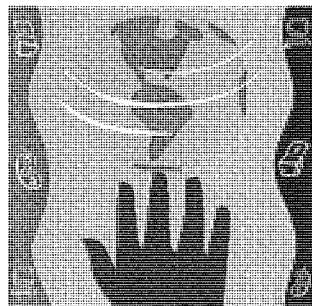
of ten to twelve new pieces every six months; we could add new material as and when it was ready (and archive the older material so it stayed available.) What was there for readers to look at could alter month by month or even week by week, and we would be able to publish more topical pieces, including responses from readers to what we had published before.

Second, *ease of access*. More people in more places would be able to find us in cyberspace using the various tools that exist to search the net, and access would be instant — no waiting weeks for the post. Though we have not yet worked out in detail what we might want to do about on-line subscription, it is conceivable that we could make access free of charge as well.

Third, *diversity of content and purpose*. While we imagine that the core of an on-line magazine would remain similar to that of the print version, i.e. a series of articles, on the Web we could theoretically do other things as well. We could for instance run a forum in which women could post information or request it from others. We could set up direct connections (hyperlinks that can just be clicked on) to other sites we thought *T&S* readers would find interesting. We could institute chat sessions where radical feminists were on-line at the same time to discuss particular issues. These features would enable an on-line *T&S* to serve the needs of the radical feminist political community in ways a printed publication cannot.

If these are the advantages, what about the disadvantages?

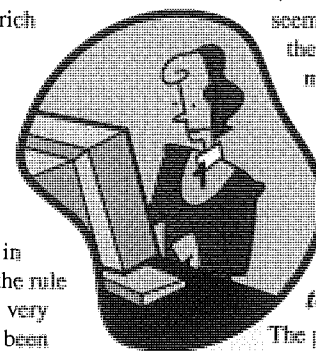
The most obvious one is something that has been extensively discussed by commentators on gender and the internet: though often touted as a 'democratic' medium, the net in practice is not equally accessible or congenial to all. Even if there are no economic barriers to access, many women do not feel confident or comfortable with the technology. This is not just a 'women versus men' issue but at this point perhaps even more an issue about age and generation, about education and about social class. In going on-line, would we be excluding the very women whose



access to radical feminist ideas we should be making most effort to facilitate? And what about feminists in the poorer countries of the world, where even elite professionals can't always take for granted easy access to the necessary technical resources? One solution in the case of our existing subscribers outside the rich world might be to produce a printout of the on-line material and send it to them annually. But the general issue of inequality of access is undoubtedly a serious one. It does seem to us that computer use and internet access among feminists in western countries is now more the rule than the exception, whereas not very long ago the reverse would have been true. It's easy now to get internet service free, though the phone calls still cost, and using the net can still be a pain if you don't have your own home computer. But there remains variation in what people habitually use their access for. Even in the *T&S* collective, which routinely communicates via email, some of us have had little practice navigating the Web.

Another potential disadvantage arises from the fact that websites are relatively easy to discover. The more accessible we make an on-line publication to the women we want it to address, the more accessible it also becomes to every obsessive nutcase or misogynist with a search engine and a grudge against feminists. We do, in fact, have a few male subscribers now — we've never refused to take their money — but since they have to go to a certain amount of trouble and write us a cheque to get their copy, we doubt they are motivated by anti-feminism. On-line, where all you have to do to go anywhere is click, we could find ourselves bombarded with all manner of vile communications from men (possibly disguising themselves as women, which is not difficult in the virtual world). Of course we wouldn't have to publish their rantings, nor would we, but would women feel inhibited by knowing they were out there?

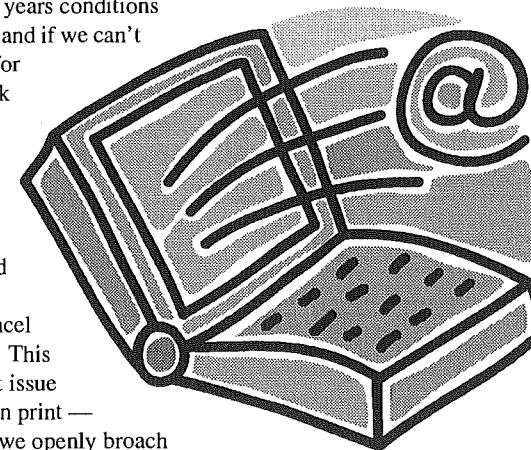
Finally, there's what some writers about computer technology call 'the romance of the book'. Books, and magazines too, are pleasurable to have, hold and use, and many people are attached to them as physical objects, over and above what they contain. We have always been committed to making *T&S* as appealing aesthetically as it is radical politically. For both us and



many of our readers, its demise as a physical object would represent a sad loss. Of course, websites can also be more or less pleasing to look at and to navigate, and so long as you have access to a printer, you *can* still read their contents in bed, in the bath or on the toilet! But it does seem most people have not yet developed the same strong feelings for new digital media that we have for more familiar ones. If pleasure matters (and we certainly hope you don't read this magazine only because you think it's your radical feminist duty), then this might matter too.

Where would you like to go today?

The purpose of this piece has been to raise questions that we believe can no longer be avoided about the future of the publication you are reading. We think the economic realities we've discussed here will eventually force not only *T&S* but all publications of its type — small-scale, independent, without revenue from advertising or subsidy — to change or go under. We are the longest-surviving independent feminist journal still publishing in the UK. In our time we have watched many sister publications both here and abroad go under because of financial and other problems we have managed to avoid; but in recent years conditions have changed rapidly, and if we can't adapt, our prospects for continued survival look increasingly grim. However, we aren't notifying you unilaterally of a definite decision to stop printing *T&S*, and we certainly aren't encouraging you to cancel your subscription yet. This definitely isn't the last issue we will ever produce in print — just the first in which we openly broach the subject of whether we can go on printing, posting and storing *T&S* indefinitely. One of the many things we have to discuss as we talk about possible futures is what kind of publication our readers want us to be: so please, write to our editorial address (or email us at troublestrife@yahoo.com if you prefer) and let us know what you think. □



Fast FORWARD

Taking Marleen Gorris's A Question of Silence as an important example of feminist film-making, Carol Morley looks at the impact of the film 20 years on. She discussed the issues raised by the film — sexuality, the family, violence, the criminal justice system — with a group of 19 year old women, and asked them what feminism meant to them.

A Question of Silence

Director: Marleen Gorris, 1982

The narrative of *A Question of Silence* revolves around the murder of a male boutique owner, by three women, who are strangers to each other. The 'downtrodden' housewife, seen shoplifting by the owner, is supported by two other women who ostentatiously begin shoplifting too. Drawn together, the three women, with makeshift weapons of glass ashtrays and coathangers, murder the boutique owner. The murder trial and the involvement of a female psychiatrist shows an unspoken allegiance between the film's female characters across class, occupation, and age. The assumption of the male characters is that the women killers should be diagnosed as mad, that there is nothing rational about the act they committed, how can there be? The film depicts a society in which women are silenced and undermined and ultimately works towards a possible form of resistance — separatism — in which the women connect in implicit and mutual understanding.

A Question of Silence must be one of the most successful feminist films of all time. It is frequently cited as a powerful example of feminist film-making and has reached a large audience since it was released in 1982. In the UK, thanks to the female distribution company Cinema of Women (which later merged with Circles to become Cine Nova), the film had a healthy life in the repertory cinemas throughout the country. While the film won prizes at film festivals, and has subsequently become a crucial text in feminist film theory, *A Question of Silence* was slated by the (male) film critics. One reviewer wrote:

Genocide is a comparatively modest moral device compared to the ultimate logic of this film's message. (Milton Shulman, *The Standard*, 17 Feb, 1983)

The film has endured and continues to court controversy, and to retain various distribution outlets. It was televised relatively recently on UK terrestrial TV (admittedly at about 2 am in the 'graveyard slot'), and in the USA it is now available on video.

Twenty years on

I first saw *A Question of Silence* in 1990, and from what I have heard of the original impact of the film, found it undiminished; it was one of the most powerful films I'd ever seen. I was curious to know what the group of young women whom I was teaching would make of it now. This group consisted of 15 women, all nineteen years old, but from a range of cultural backgrounds and nationalities. From the discussions the group had previously had, I expected that they would respond to the overall spirit of the film, and enjoy the sense of female solidarity and humour. Instead they read the film very critically and were, on the whole, disconcertingly disparaging about almost every aspect, from the cinematic devices to the narrative itself.

It seems partly that *A Question of Silence* failed to make a direct impact on the group at least partly because the stylistic elements appeared to them old-fashioned. So the film has dated; women who were born around the same time as it was made are seeing it as historic and distant from their lives. It seemed they found it difficult to move beyond the formal elements, and again, considering previous discussions, the 'educational' context alone would not sufficiently explain this reluctance to empathise with the mood of the film. Take the murder scene: they found the music 'awful' and

The murder scene, I don't know if it's because they're bad actors, but they just looked so blank and they just go at it with their ashtrays.

Taking it literally

In *A Question of Silence* you never actually see the body of the man being attacked. We only see the women attacking; the focus is on their almost ritualised involvement in the murder, rather than on the suffering of the victim. In other words it is not about the individual man; instead he is intended to represent generic 'man', and it is men as a class that women are here shown to be confronting, and taking revenge upon. For this reason, the women ganging up against the man, with other female shoppers looking on and seemingly condoning the murder — supported also, implicitly, by women in the audience — creates a powerful sense of female solidarity. Or rather, it did in the '80s. Instead, the large majority of this group of young women saw the film as a straightforward endorsement of random violence.

They didn't show remorse, maybe if they were upset, you would sympathise with them.

They're fighting for their rights and killing an innocent person to prove it. It just undermines everything.

The whole thing about the murder, it just doesn't carry the message it should.

A lone supporter of the film, defending the murder scene, said:

I agree the murder was over exaggerated (but)... I don't take the murder as a murder, the whole thing is a metaphor.

The group pointed out the oppressive conditions which united the main characters in the film: the secretary whose ideas are appropriated by her boss, the cafe worker who works for little financial reward, the beleaguered housewife who is given no support by her husband and stops speaking, the psychiatrist who is belittled and ignored by her husband. One member of the group, at least, was in complete sympathy with the film's intention:



the attitude within the court, the judge, the lawyer, the barristers, they were all men, showing their patriarchal dominance within the highest ranking roles within society, so they produce, have a say in what's right and wrong and their attitudes towards the female psychiatrist, trying to dumb down her verdict, her report, reflected in general how women felt, how they were being suppressed, not heard. I think that guy was symbolic of that because he was a capitalist, patriarchal shop owner.

Female solidarity vs individualism

In all the documentation of the film the overall impression is that female audiences came together collectively and celebrated the film, both for its unprecedented daring in depicting women's resistance within the framework of a recognisable genre — a thriller, unlike any other. Yet, the group, sympathetic as they seemed to be to the idea of female solidarity, did not recognise it in this form, and felt no affinity with the women's actions.

I found it scary. Is that the only way women can meet? You see these isolated women getting on with their lives... and when they have something happening between them and finding power, that's a good thing. But to kill!

While considering the film 'unsubtle' the group acknowledged that it defined an experience that they were not familiar with. They generally felt that the notion of collectively and solidarity didn't really exist for them. They all agreed with one of the group who said that they felt they lived in an epoch of individualism.

If you compare the film to nowadays, I think our time isn't at all politicised... Many people I know are not really aware of things. I think it's like you go and do your own individual thing. It's not seeing the system anymore.

Silence and Resistance

The 'silence' of the title deals with the double meaning of women being silenced and choosing silence as an act of resistance. It seems the housewife has chosen silence as an act of defiance and as an acknowledgement that there's no point talking because no one is listening anyway. Most of the group did not see her silence as resistant, but as troubling and causing her to repress her emotions which directly led to her part in the murder. They felt very strongly that she was the controller of her own destiny and that it was down to her, individually, to change her circumstances.

In the scenes before the murder, you didn't see the housewife do things that could change her situation, she didn't do anything or say anything to change anything. All the women are keeping it inside and it's growing and growing and then they go and kill an innocent person.

As the film progresses the psychiatrist begins to doubt the women's insanity, comes to understand the women's motive as sane and begins to identify their situation as similar to her own. The overall feeling of the group at this point was understanding, they saw that the psychiatrist had more in common with the women standing trial than the male lawyers in the courtroom.

The psychiatrist was a symbol of new woman for the times, she was independent...

...but she's starting to see things in her life. She was unaware at the beginning, she had a good job, and time for herself. But these other women didn't have the opportunity and she started noticing things in her life, like when her husband was at the dinner table, he was really forceful about his opinions, he was the only one talking and he was talking to the man across the table.

The group recognised that the film was highlighting the struggle of women to be heard, to be acknowledged.

I thought the film made clear the patriarchal world. Especially at the end in the court where they're all silent and all these men are talking about the case and don't let the women talk. If they want to find out why the murder happened, why don't they ask the women?

I take the court room scene as a picture, a symbol for men thinking that it's insane that women are fighting for their rights. Men can't understand it, they just think they're in the right, in power.

Having a laugh

The film earned its director some controversial international exposure in festivals and also earned her the dreaded label of 'feminist filmmaker', with all the dour humourlessness that that brand came to imply, disparagingly in the '80's. (www.film.com/film-interview/1998/10274/829/index.html)

A Question of Silence must have one of the best courtroom scenes in the history of courtroom scenes. A male lawyer claims that three men killing a woman would be exactly the same as three women killing a man. The silent/ silenced housewife begins the laughter, until eventually every woman in the court is laughing, including the female psychiatrist. It is not the laughter of despair or desperation, but of hilarity and

solidarity. It is a celebration of mutual understanding and of connection. It seems ironic that feminism has come to be equated with 'humourlessness' (part of the attached 'stigma' that we'll come to later), when a *A Question of Silence* so clearly celebrates female collectivity through laughter.

At the start of our group discussion, the ending was the first thing to be mentioned:

I didn't understand the film. What happened at the end?

It's supposed to show some kind of complicity and understanding between women that men don't have access to.

But while the group could identify that this was what was being represented, most of them could not identify with it. They did not laugh, or feel like laughing, they felt detached from it

If you show this film in the cinema now and in the end women laugh, I'm not sure why they'd laugh and if it would be the same reason as then. Because we don't know why they laughed.

I understood why they were laughing. Because the men didn't understand why it would be different if they had killed a woman.

I'm not sure men would take this film seriously now

I could understand if I was a man sat in an audience and all these women were laughing at men, at me, I would feel threatened.

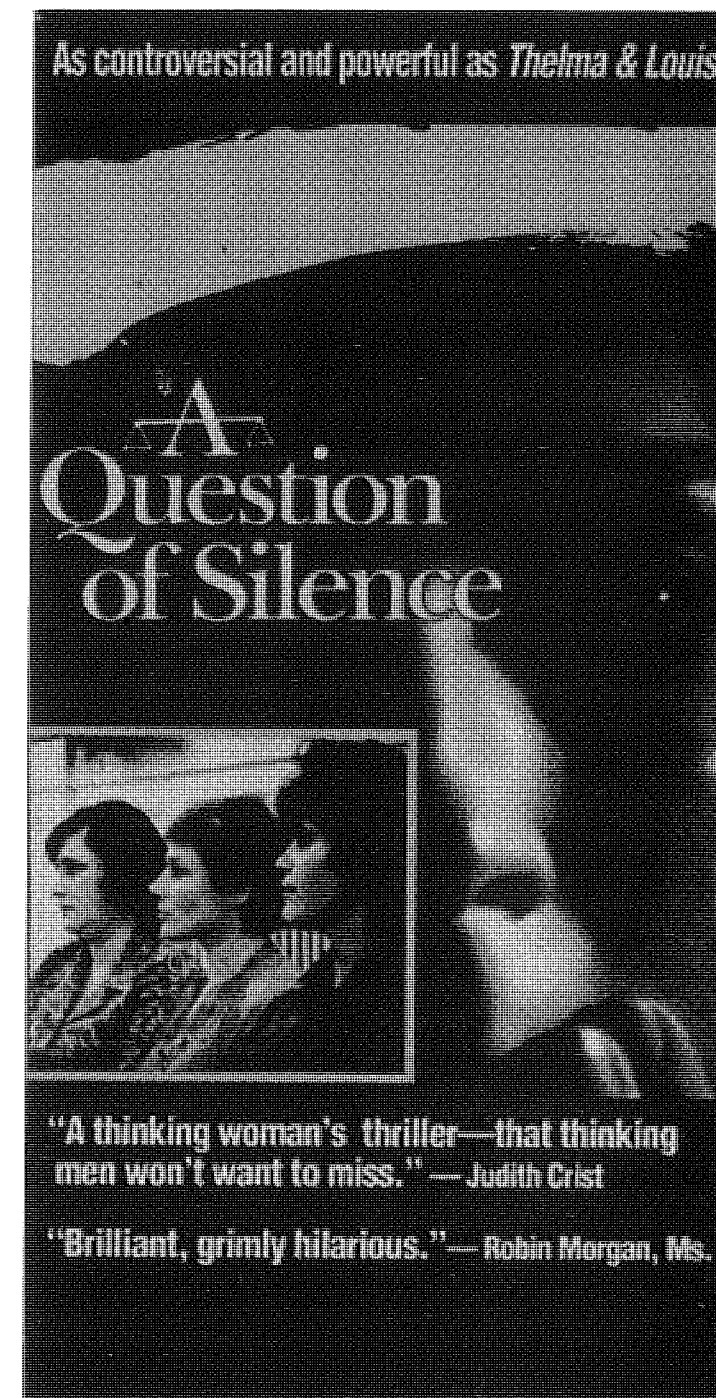
It depends what kind of man you are.

There are few films that enter the mainstream and openly and categorically speak out to women as the primary audience, *A Question of Silence* was at the time shamelessly targeted at women's audiences. Interestingly enough, the cover of the new US video release of the film, boasts the quote 'a thinking woman's thriller- that thinking men won't want to miss', clearly a distribution strategy that doesn't want to miss out on capitalising on a male audience, even with a film that deliberately mocks male power and authority.

Feminism as stigma

A Question of Silence can clearly be categorised as a feminist film. But what meanings does it generate now, for an audience who were born around the same time as the film was made, whose reading of the film is obviously informed by their age? When asked if they considered themselves feminists all these young women side-tracked the question, rarely giving a direct answer unless pushed.

I think there's a problem with the word, how



we represent the word feminism, because everyone says they're not, but they might still think about their rights, but it's such a word.

There was a real reluctance amongst the students to identify themselves as feminists,

even though all of them, in different ways, had what could be viewed as feminist ideals/ ideas/ principles.

I don't think I'm a feminist. Actually I wouldn't like to call myself a feminist. 'Cos they're waiting with the gun, or the coat-hanger (reference to one of the murder weapon in AQOS) ... I believe we should be equal with men and we're getting there but at the same time there are different situations where women are more powerful than men and the other way around.

We wouldn't be here, we can all criticise the feminists but if it wasn't for them our lives would be completely different and people seem to forget that.

That's the trouble with the word, it's got so many associations and the associations we're fed, now we're living in this society and relatively free, we can't understand what it must have been like. We need a new word.

An interesting part of the discussion, was when one of the group claimed that 'patriarchy has never existed for me' and a colleague challenged her with 'who's the powerful one in your family?' to which she replied, 'My dad', who she said was paid more than her mother and had more authority. But generally it seemed the group were in denial of their own oppression as women. While acknowledging that other women were oppressed; women in history, women elsewhere, they found it difficult, even problematic, to see their own lives as in any way marginalised.

I'm not sure I've been in a situation where I've been treated badly because I'm a woman.

The more you think about it, the more you realise how much it's changed, even an issue like wearing a skirt. Now it's your choice, you can wear trousers and now even some men are wearing skirts.

And even when the group acknowledged that there was discrimination and inequality, they saw it as something that is down to the individual, something to be overcome through 'ability' and not solidarity.

I wouldn't say I'd call myself a feminist because things should be looked at in terms of ability and not gender. I know it's not fair between men and women.

Feminism has allowed women to identify and articulate their experience of oppression. The majority of the group rejected feminism as something which was useful to their lives as women now. They saw it as something historical,



that had enabled them to 'be themselves', that had contributed to them being 'more free'. They felt that they were different than their female predecessors, that they had arrived somewhere:

I know I'm benefiting from lots of things, like studying. My Grandmother thinks I should have a family now. But things have changed and I'm benefiting. I don't know if I'm a feminist.

On the whole, while accepting that feminism 'had' been important, a general distaste for feminism was aired, as though it was something redundant or too extreme in its present form.

I think that feminism has been developed by knowledgeable people, but carried away by ignorant people, and then it's all about being paranoid and obsessive.

Naively I thought that the group (who had, after all, chosen to take a course called Gender Studies) would all be feminists and that *A Question of Silence* would have a currency which the group would have an affinity with. I also thought that the message of the film was unquestionably clear. It never crossed my mind that a group of women would find the film and feminism so problematic.

What was fascinating though, was the struggle the group went through to try and define their own position, there was no word for them that could illustrate where they were coming from. There was a refusal, in a way, to be defined. They didn't want to use the word feminism, which for them generally seems to be stigmatised. There was a fluid and ongoing grappling with who they were as women, and how they placed themselves. There was also (from the lone student who defended the film) a sense of regret at how she saw society around her becoming more and more about individualism. While *A Question of Silence* didn't win them over in an uncritical way, it enabled a viable discussion to open up that allowed the group to begin to define their own positions in relation to a film that did, and always will in one way or another, speak out to women about the struggle of women. Even though the majority of the group were resistant to the film they did acknowledge that the film had made them think, had opened up a debate.

This film is different to any film I've seen before in its subject matter and despite its faults I'm sure it did politicise and inform. It's made us talk. □

Facing up

When child sexual abuse occurs within the family, it is often seen as different from abuse that occurs outside: there is a long legal and medical tradition of viewing incest as a symptom of 'family dysfunction', for which the abuser's wife or partner and even his victim(s) may be as much to blame as he is. But this view, argues Lesley Laing, depends on uncritically accepting what men say about their own and other family members' behaviour. Here she describes a treatment programme in New South Wales, Australia, which challenges men's right to define reality in their own interests: it demands that men 'face up' to their responsibility for child abuse by revealing the tactics they used to entrap children and deceive women.

Men who sexually assault children are viewed as deviant and dangerous predators, and the community attaches severe criminal penalties to the crime of child sexual assault. When a father is exposed as the perpetrator of sexual abuse against his child, the community is confronted with a terrible dilemma: now the threat to the child and family comes not from outside the family, but from the parent who is charged with the care and protection of the child and family.

Historically, society's solution to this dilemma has been to deny the existence of incest. The silencing of victims was aided and abetted by the powerful institutions of the law and psychiatry, where the dominant discourse about incest was that it was rare, and that where it occurred, it

was the fault of either the 'seductive' child, or the deficient, 'collusive' mother. With victims silenced and mothers shamed and blamed, the community could avoid the dilemmas raised in dealing with the incest perpetrator, dilemmas which prompt troubling questions about the nature of families and the power of fathers.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, second wave feminism created a context in which for the first time, women who had experienced sexual violence at the hands of men could speak out and be heard. Suddenly society was confronted with the reality that sexual abuse of children was common rather than rare; that it was perpetrated most commonly by persons known to the child rather than by strangers; and that among those

perpetrators were fathers. A common policy response to this dilemma — reduced or minimal criminal sanctions for father/offenders in exchange for acknowledgement of guilt and legally mandated participation in therapy — was proposed as the best way to reduce further trauma to the victim and family. It was argued that to respond to father/offenders in the same way as to extrafamilial offenders — with the full weight of the criminal law — risked further damaging the family and exposing the victim to an unsympathetic legal system, with no guarantee that the victim would receive protection.

Thus a very different response was proposed for intrafamilial, as opposed to extrafamilial, sex offenders against children. In the most popular type of therapeutic approach used in the specialist incest treatment programmes which proliferated in the United States from the late 1970s, men who sexually assaulted their children were constructed as different from other sexual offenders against children: they were seen as less dangerous, more amenable to treatment, and less likely to re-offend. Support for this view was drawn from two primary sources: a body of literature which explained incest as originating in the interactional patterns of family members, and in which the role of the mother is central; and a selective use of theories of sexual offending. In contrast to the treatment of extrafamilial offenders where a core treatment concern is deviant sexual responses to children, the role of sexual motivation in offending by fathers was minimised. In terms of a popular typology of sex offenders, the incest offender was seen as the prototypical 'regressed' offender whose sexual involvement with a child is a departure, under stress, from a primary sexual orientation towards adult women. In contrast to the image of the predatory extrafamilial offender, incest is often portrayed as occurring within the context of an otherwise loving father/child relationship.

'Dysfunctional' families

Particularly influential in supporting this differential approach to incest offenders was a body of family psychiatry literature published over a 20 year period starting in the 1950s. In this literature, incest is seen as a 'symptom' of family dysfunction, the key to which is a troubled marital relationship. The focus of this literature is on blaming mothers for creating the familial conditions in which incest can occur, chiefly due to the woman's failure to conform to

rigid, stereotypical roles as wife and mother. While the mother's personality and actions are carefully scrutinised, the father is seen as a pathetic figure, almost an innocent victim of his wife's pathology. Despite the sexist notions underlying this literature, it was adopted enthusiastically by the newly developing incest treatment programmes. According to a book published by Henry Giaretto in 1982,

Incest can be regarded as a symptom of a dysfunctional family: a family headed by parents who are unable to develop a satisfying marital relationship and who cannot cooperate effectively as parents (p. 4).

Such formulations continue to be highly influential in the American and European literature. Unlike the extrafamilial offender who was viewed as a dangerous sex offender, incest offenders were viewed as troubled men in dysfunctional families, the incest a symptom of 'family dysfunction' for which their wives shared equal responsibility. Reconstitution of the family was frequently the goal of intervention.

There is, however, considerable research evidence which challenges many of the core assumptions on which this type of incest treatment has been based. For example, research by Gene Abel and others in 1988 established that contrary to accepted belief, incestuous offenders have also frequently abused children outside the family. Of offenders identified because of incest against a girl victim, 49 per cent had also assaulted girls outside the family; 12 per cent had been involved in incest with a male victim; and 12 per cent had assaulted a male victim outside the family. In a 1992 study of 118 biologically incestuous fathers, the researchers Williams and Finkelhor found that 34 per cent had committed a sexual offence as a juvenile and that 58 per cent had sexually abused someone in addition to their daughter. These findings challenge the notion that incest is predominantly a result of internal family dynamics, that it is about meeting non-sexual needs and that it is regression under stress to previously uncharacteristic behaviour.

The assumption that incest is part of an otherwise loving relationship appears to greatly understate the complexity of offender/victim interactions, which an emerging literature on offender tactics, including the use of threats and force, is highlighting. A number of studies of both victims and offenders suggest that a considerable proportion of incest offenders are also physically violent to their partners and children. For example, the Australian researchers Goddard and

Hiller found that there was domestic violence in the families of forty per cent of cases of child sexual assault presenting to a Children's Hospital.

It could be argued, then, that offenders inside the family pose a greater, rather than a lesser threat to children than those outside. Because of his access to the child, the incest offender is in a unique position to identify the child's vulnerabilities, to use this knowledge to create the conditions for entrapment of the child, and to shape the perceptions of the mother and other family members about his victim/s. Arguably, treatment programmes based on notions of family dysfunction and assumptions that incest offenders are different from and more treatable than extrafamilial offenders have remained popular, despite emerging evidence to the contrary, because they maintain the 'status quo': men who abuse their children are converted from dangerous sex offenders into troubled men in difficult marriages who are amenable to treatment and who can be restored to their position of power and trust in the family. Effectively the silence about incest is restored.

Making offenders responsible

Is it possible then to 'treat' incest offenders in ways which locate responsibility for the abuse solely with the offender and which lift the burden of guilt and responsibility from its victims, both children and mothers? Between 1989 and 1994 I conducted a study of the NSW Pre-Trial Diversion Treatment Programme which operates in Sydney, Australia. The programme has a legislative base and involves a co-ordinated response by the criminal justice system and the NSW Department of Health. Incest offenders who plead guilty and are assessed as eligible by the treatment programme are diverted from the criminal justice process to a two year treatment programme, but can be returned to the legal system if they breach the stringent conditions of programme attendance. These include the offender moving out of the residence where his victim and family live, having no contact of any kind with the victim and other children in the family without the permission of the Programme Director, and making satisfactory progress in treatment.

The NSW programme differs in several significant respects from other programmes in its stated goals and underlying premises. For example, the programme is based on the explicit

premise that women are not responsible for their partners' abusive behaviour, and family reunification is not the goal of the programme. Rather, it is a child protection programme which aims to prevent further sexual abuse. The treatment programme draws on current developments in sex offender treatment, rather than focussing on the hypothesised family dynamics in cases of incest. In particular, it draws upon the growing body of research about the tactics by which offenders target, abuse and silence victims. The treatment programme emphasises the offender taking responsibility through a process of making transparent the tactics which he has used to abuse the child — a process termed 'facing up'.

My research addressed the following questions. Does participating in the treatment programme increase offenders' acceptance of responsibility and empathy for the harm caused? Do changes in the offender's stance regarding responsibility and empathy help the victim and mother (and their relationship) to recover from the impact of the sexual assault? Is there a shift in the power relationships in the family? Are the child's needs and safety given priority?

The research sample comprised clients who were accepted into the programme over a two year period and who were prepared to participate in the research. Fourteen of the 15 offenders who were assessed as eligible to enter the treatment programme agreed to take part, together with 13 of their women partners. They participated in in-depth interviews at intake, mid-treatment (12 months later—at this stage ten women participated) and completion of treatment (2-3 years after intake). Victims who completed the programme were also invited to participate in a research interview (for ethical reasons, it was not considered appropriate to interview the young people until they had completed treatment). There were 15 victims in the programme at intake, 14 female and one male. Using the severity of abuse classification system developed by Diana Russell, the majority of the victims in the study had experienced sexual abuse at the 'very severe' level. Ten of the offenders were stepfathers, four were biological fathers and one was an adoptive father.

The following discussion describes changes in the mothers' perceptions about the abuse, the issue of responsibility, and their relationship with the abused child between the start of the programme and the mid-treatment interviews, approximately a year later. In order to maintain

confidentiality, 'O' refers to the offender, 'V' to the victim and 'M' to the mother whenever direct quotations from the interviews are used.

The mothers at the beginning of the research

At the beginning of the programme, the women were still reeling from the impact of the disclosure and were struggling to rebuild shattered lives:

I was in shock, traumatised. It destroyed me, like an atomic reaction. I felt sick, numb, dead.

In all couples but one, the crisis precipitated by the disclosure had been resolved with a decision to continue the marital relationship, based on a belief that the man would not re-offend. Consequently all but one of the women entered treatment believing that the issues arising from the abuse had been largely resolved. Hence the requirements that the men move out of the family home and have no contact with any children in the family were experienced as creating additional stress and as undermining their efforts to rebuild the family.

Shame, embarrassment and a desire to protect others contributed to reluctance by the women to tell others about what had happened. The subsequent isolation of the women meant that in most cases the offender was their main source of support, and their main source of information about what had occurred: 'No. I know nothing, only what I've been told through O'. At this stage of the programme, less than half of the women attributed sole responsibility for the abuse to the offender. Some blamed themselves and their partner, and others included the victim in those held accountable. For example:

I had a little to do with it...O. is very demanding sexually...partly because I was so cold. O. ninety per cent, me ten per cent.

The three of us are responsible: O. more, then me and V. equally. Me, maybe I didn't take any care, didn't talk to V. properly. I was pregnant, and left her to do the housework and look after herself...V. by not telling me.

I have so many questions — why it went on so long, why she'd go out with her father when he was sexually abusing her...I don't want to go through life wondering why.

At this stage, the mothers fell into two groups: half the women were estranged from the victims, and angry with them, whereas the other half reported improved relationships following disclosure of the abuse. An example of improve-

ment was a case in which the woman had decided to divorce her husband, and had been engaged in extensive discussions with her daughter about the abuse and the abuser's tactics. With the offender threatening her, and her relatives siding with the offender, this woman and her daughter grew closer: 'the two of us against the world'. For another woman reporting an improved relationship, the disclosure enabled her to make sense of her daughter's difficult behaviour, which she had, until then, been attributing to adolescent rebellion. In another case, the improved relationship was more worryingly based on the victim's recanting of much of her disclosure, a recanting which confirmed her father's (minimal) acknowledgement of the abuse, its duration and the accompanying violence.

For women in the 'estranged' group it was very difficult to empathise with the child's experience of abuse.

Maybe it never happened, I just don't know...If it was going on for so long, why bring it up, she knew it was wrong...she knew what was wrong or right from the word go, so why did she let it carry on? Was she abusing the law system to be able to move out from home?

...that's probably the reason why she didn't do him in. She was enjoying what she was doing and what he was doing to her, so why would she? Then she got sick of it or something, I believe.

For women who reported long standing difficulties in their relationship with the child, the sexual abuse appeared to have made things worse.

She wanted her own way. Maybe to hurt O. and myself. She wants me to get back with her (biological) father ...I've never had real love from her like it should be...she blamed me for the separation from her (biological) father.

Were these the 'bad' mothers of the literature who 'fail to protect' and who have created such poor relationships that their children could not come to them when abused? Allied with their partners against the programme, and in fifty per cent of cases, estranged from and angry with their victim children, it would be understandable if they were viewed as 'collusive' mothers who were prepared to sacrifice their children for their relationship with the offender. However, the interviews with the offenders revealed the context within which these women's views of their children were being shaped.

'Of course I'm totally responsible, but...'

In their initial interviews, the men were eager to assert their total responsibility for the sexual abuse. This is understandable, given that some acceptance of responsibility was a condition of entry to the treatment programme and diversion from criminal justice proceedings. However, this acceptance of responsibility was soon revealed to be quite superficial. Through their discussions about the sexual abuse and its impact, the men revealed that they were involved in a process of actively attributing responsibility for the abuse to other people—most commonly the victim and at times their partner—and to other factors such as alcohol or stress.

Blaming the victim for encouraging, initiating or enjoying the sexual contact was a theme in the explanations for the abuse of more than half the offenders. For some men the attribution of responsibility to the victim was quite blatant:

There were many times when I wasn't interested in sexually assaulting her, regardless of what I've done, and I remember on a number of occasions I would be leaning on the edge of the pool like so minding my own business and she would fondle me underneath the water, I didn't ask and I didn't come near her to do it...

For others, the responsibility was presented as shared:

It was like a love affair. On many occasions she approached me. I never forced her.

In fact, agreeing to plead guilty and claiming to accept responsibility for the abuse did not mean that the offenders were accepting all their victims' allegations. In half the cases there were discrepancies between the victims' accounts of what had occurred, and the accounts of the offenders in their interviews at programme intake. They actively disputed their victims' accounts of the duration of the abuse, the extent of the sexual behaviours involved, and of their use of threats and force (despite both physical and psychological coercion being reported clearly in the victims' police statements). However, because of programme entry requirements, some men explained that they were not disagreeing with the victim's account in their interviews with treatment staff. For example:

[She] says a couple of times I came into her bedroom and pulled her out of bed. I don't remember, but it must have happened... I can't recall, but I won't argue.

The offenders were asked their views about

the timing and delays in the victims' reporting the abuse, so that I would be able to identify any ability to empathise with the victims' experience of the abuse. When asked, for example — 'Why do you think that the child disclosed at the time s/he did?' — not one man answered that the child disclosed in order to end the sexual abuse. Consistent with the age of the victims at programme intake (most were adolescents) four men attributed the disclosure to the adolescent victim's attempts to get more freedom from parental rules and restrictions. For example:

To get more freedom. We'd just moved house, and she'd had to change schools. When it came out she wanted to stay with her friends where we used to live... like 'killing two birds', getting back plus getting it out into the open.

Several of the men gave answers which suggested that the child's disclosure was motivated by bad intentions towards them. For example:

She thought she was pregnant and was trying to blame me for it.

...she'd virtually stopped it, but guilt got to her and revenge at me, because I was playing a harder role in the family, her mother had handed discipline over to me...Maybe she thought it was an opportunity to get rid of me and get her [biological] father back..

Though they claimed to be honest and open with their partners once the abuse was disclosed, the men were in fact carefully controlling the information which they shared with their partners about the abuse. Some indicated that they only admitted as much as they had to, particularly where their partner was concerned.

At disclosure [my wife] didn't know the full extent of it... it was only months later that I admitted it totally.

During that period of months, his partner had decided to reunite and as a consequence was estranged from her daughter. Another man explained that he was saying one thing to the treatment programme, and another to his wife:

I have to plead guilty to get into the programme, but I don't agree with all that [victim] says. I told my wife it's not all true.

What were the offenders telling their partner about the abuse? Five women reported being told by the offender that the child encouraged the sexual contact. For example: 'She (victim) tried and he stopped her, she wanted intercourse, he said 'no way'. Five women reported that their partner was telling them that the child enjoyed the sexual contact: 'O. said V. actually partici-

pated.' Two women were being told by the offender that the child initiated the sexual contact: 'Yes, V. initiated it. He told me she'd call him into the bedroom...'

A new understanding – the women one year later

In taking responsibility, the programme required the men to 'face up' to family members about the abuse and the tactics they employed to perpetrate it and to maintain secrecy. As a consequence, their partners at mid-treatment had come to hold a very different view about the abuse, their partner and about the issue of responsibility.

I suppose just the underhanded way which they do it, the secrecy of it all, the tactics used.

In contrast to the situation at intake, where many women saw both themselves and their victim daughters as sharing some responsibility for the sexual abuse, at this stage of treatment all the women attributed sole responsibility for the abuse to their partners. For example, one woman who judged herself as partly responsible at intake because of sexual problems within the marriage now took a different view:

O. is totally responsible for what he did as far as I'm concerned. I might be responsible, partly responsible for the problems between us, but that's got nothing to do with his solution to the problem as far as I'm concerned.

At mid-treatment, eight of the ten women demonstrated an understanding of the tactics which the offender had used to abuse the child and to avoid detection. This represented an enormous change, since at intake only one woman (the sole woman planning to separate from her husband) had demonstrated such an understanding.

The sorts of tactics which the women identified related to the offender's choice to target a particularly vulnerable child, a range of tactics to prevent the child from telling anyone about the abuse, including tactics to undermine the mother-child relationship, and emotional manipulation and isolation of the child. Awareness of the offender's tactics, particularly in dividing mother and victim and making the child feel complicit, gave the women a new view of the abuse, and in most cases resulted in increased empathy for the victim and an improved mother-victim relationship. Two women talked about their ideas about why a particular child was

targeted for abuse, because the offender was aware of a pre-existing troubled mother-child relationship:

V. and I always had a bit of a problem, like it wasn't an actual mother and daughter relationship and he built around that, to keep that, instead of trying to get me to get closer to V...I mean I didn't see it but he dragged me away further from her, so she really thought well I can't go to mum, because mum's not going to listen.

A number of the women described how the offender went about undermining the mother-daughter relationship. For example, one man did this by telling the child that the abuse was her mother's fault; another did this by siding with the daughter against the mother over discipline issues. One of the most powerful ways that the offenders had ensured the child's silence by undermining the mother-child relationship was to give her the idea that her mother knew about the abuse, thus blocking access to the child's most likely ally. Three women described how they came to realise that their daughters blamed them for the abuse, because the girls believed that their mothers had known what was going on. One woman said that she had been in the programme for some time before she realised this:

O. had said all along, 'I always made sure you were in the house', whether he said that innocently or whatever, thinking, thinking, thinking, why the hell would he say something like that, and then sort of I think, gee, V. must have been under a funny impression if I was always there, and then I checked with her and said 'V. did you think I knew because I was always there?' and she said yes...she blamed me that I knew it, she obviously thinks that I knew.

Another woman discussed how the offender would abuse the child in the spa, outside the kitchen window, where her mother was cooking. She later understood why the child had been so keen for her mother to come into the spa, and why she had stormed off when her mother said she was too busy. Other offenders used the tactic of simply telling the child that their mother would not believe them.

One woman demonstrated her awareness of the ways in which the offender had emotionally manipulated her daughter, to make her feel complicit in the abuse:

He used to say to her; 'If I abuse you again, say no', and then she'd say no the next time and he'd say things to her like 'You don't love me then, you don't care'... blackmail!

Inviting the child to protect the mother from

hurt, or the offender from going to jail, was another common tactic reported by the women: 'He kept saying: "don't tell mum it will destroy her"' constantly saying that all the time...' Another woman described her partner's tactic of isolating the victim from others in the family who might have helped her:

It's just the way that they manipulate everybody...They push the victim in the background and the victim just thinks well, I can't go to mum because mum won't believe me, I can't go to me brother or something... they just kinda manipulate, and they put a bond around everybody else and the victim feels I can't tell anybody, nobody's going to believe me, they're just going to think I'm making this up...

Two women mentioned the ways in which their husbands had deceived them, concealing their actions by appearing to be helpful to them. One man would offer to mind the children and cook meals while his wife went to work, using his 'helpfulness' as an opportunity to gain access to his victim. Another feigned concern for his wife:

Now I think of it is, when I used to go to bed early, he'd come up, quite often I'd just go to bed and read, he'd keep coming up, it never worried me, I just thought he was coming up over concern. He was coming up to check if I was asleep, you know!

Several women described how their knowledge of the offender's tactics answered their questions, many unspoken, about the victim's role in the abuse:

You go through that (wondering if the child liked it), it goes through a mother's mind, well why did they leave it for so long, they must have wanted to do it, they must have, things like that...

The degree to which the offender had 'faced up' to the abuse, particularly about his tactics to enforce co-operation and the child's silence, was reflected in the mid-treatment changes in both the mother-child relationship, and in the mother's empathy for the victim's suffering and entrapment. The women's ideas about why the child did not disclose immediately also revealed an increase in empathy for the victim's position in most cases. Apart from the one woman who did not believe her daughter and who answered 'don't know' to this question, all the other women gave an explanation which demonstrated understanding of the victim's entrapment. Eight of the ten women linked the child's failure to disclose directly to actions on the part of the offender, attesting to the power of the offender's

making transparent his tactics in increasing the mother's understanding of the victim's entrapment:

...she couldn't talk to me because of how O. had torn that relationship apart...He just kept saying, 'You'll destroy your mother', constant things like that, all the time.

The women now understood the child's silence in the context of her desire to protect the mother and family:

It was me having a breakdown that gave him the edge. She didn't want me to have that again I suppose, so she was terrified.

One case illustrates the link between the offender making his tactics transparent, increased empathy by the mother for the victim, and the improvement in the mother-victim relationship. At intake, one teenage girl was unable to live with her mother because of friction, and had left to live with grandparents. The woman said in the initial research interview that she was desperate to find out why her daughter had not told her what was happening and why she had continued to willingly spend time with a father who was abusing her. These questions suggested she saw her daughter as sharing responsibility for the abuse. At the second interview, the mother reported that the daughter had returned home within a short time of the family entering the programme. It was apparent that this woman was extremely empathic with the victim's experience of the abuse, and now understood the barriers to her disclosing, given a new understanding of her husband and his role in the abuse:

The way he was so cunning...the way he made it hard for her to disclose. I find that very difficult, I didn't think he could do anything like that...just the way he made it so hard for her to disclose, the things he said to her — 'if you tell anybody you'll break up the family,' things like that. He made it so hard for her, made her feel guilty, blaming her for what was happening...

Prior to the offender admitting to these tactics, the mother knew only from the victim that she had been given cigarettes and money. This additional information, and developing an understanding of how the offender had emotionally manipulated the victim to increase her sense of complicity, enabled the mother to view her daughter's position with sympathy and compassion, rather than with confusion and anger.

Making tactics transparent

The requirement that the men 'face up' to family members about their tactics challenges the

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offender's power by addressing his ability to divide family members through secrecy. As long as offenders control the information which is available to family members, their power in the family is unchallenged. If mother and child are divided or in conflict they are unlikely to discuss the abuse, and the offender is able to deceive his wife about the sexual behaviours involved, the tactics used, and the victim's role in the abuse, in particular painting a view of the child as a willing participant. Even in cases where the mother does not overtly blame her daughter, the offender's failure to disclose his tactics of entrapment can feed a mother's unspoken fears that the child was in some way a willing participant. This unspoken fear builds a barrier between mother and victim, as some of the women acknowledged at the completion of treatment. However, they could only discuss this 'worst fear' after it had been allayed by the offender's facing up to the tactics he used to entrap and silence the victim.

Much of the offender's behaviour following disclosure and during treatment can be understood as aiming to return to the family with his power as little challenged as possible. However, requiring the offender to make transparent the tactics which he used to entrap and abuse the child, and which he employed after disclosure to minimise the consequences of his actions, can provide those affected with a new understanding of their experience. This process also provides protection against further abuse, since the offender's tactics lose their power once they are exposed.

It would be easy to see women who are initially resistant to the programme as denying the seriousness of the abuse, or as cruelly rejecting the victim. But their behaviour has to be seen in relation to the offender's use of secrecy and division as tactics for preserving his power. By maintaining a focus on the offender and his tactics, it is possible to avoid blaming mothers and to hold the man accountable. One of the young survivors, who throughout the abuse and for many months into treatment lived with the belief that her mother knew about the sexual abuse, described the change in her relationship with her mother and the new understanding about her stepfather's manipulation of power which she had come to through participating in the programme:

Well, the relationship between me and my mum has grown incredibly close, like we don't have any secrets whatsoever...When I went to the programme I realised how he was hiding it and how he was being so awful to her that she (mother) couldn't see anything, she could only see him because he was the main figure in the household, and everyone else just had to do things for him...

While the context for this research was a programme which treated all members of the family, it is suggested that any treatment — whether of child victims, adult survivors, mothers or offenders — needs to actively counter division and secrecy and make transparent the tactics, intentions and effects of the offender's continuing abuses of power. □

Body shopping

It seems that any new word designed to describe something other than sex difference is eventually reabsorbed into that same biological discourse, so strong is the impulse to discuss gender relations in terms of nature. Not surprisingly therefore, feminist usage of the term 'gender' has been displaced almost entirely by the common tendency to use it as a polite — or politically knowing — euphemism for the term 'sex'. At first glance, this would also appear to be the fate of the emerging vocabulary of 'gender outlaws'. In this article, however, Debbie Cameron argues that, far from being outlaws, these self-styled 'sex radicals' are far more deeply wedded to the relationship between sexed body parts and gender identity than any die-hard Darwinian.

In politics, words matter; in feminist politics, one of the words that matters most is *gender*. Recently, though, something peculiar seems to have happened to this useful and important word: something that interests me as a linguist, and irritates me as a feminist.

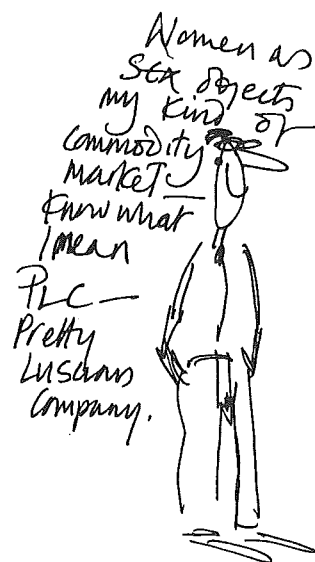
It's easy to forget how recently *gender*, meaning something to do with women and men as opposed to something you learn about in grammar lessons, entered the vocabulary of the English-speaking public at large. In 1976, the British socialist critic Raymond Williams published his influential book *Keywords*, which traces the history and usage of various politically significant words. A revised edition appeared in 1983¹. But even in the later edition, the word

gender does not rate an entry. Instead it is discussed briefly in the entry for *sex*, and what Raymond Williams says about it shows very little awareness of feminist usage over the previous decade. He remarks that after the emergence of a critique of sexism in the 1960s, some writers began using *gender* where before they would have used *sex*. He suggests that these writers were trying to avoid 'the C20 associations now gathered around *sex* (cf. the rejection of views or presentations of women as *sex objects*'. In other words, *sex* had acquired a primarily erotic meaning, and consequently speakers felt the need for another word to refer to the difference between men and women.

This is not the reason most feminists would



Cartoons by
Angela Martin



give (or would ever have given) for preferring *gender* to *sex*. For feminists the point is a theoretical one: that the social condition of being a woman or being a man is not the same thing as, and does not follow 'naturally' from, the biological condition of being female or male. Since that point was first made, the distinction between sex (biologically given) and gender (socially constructed) has been subject to criticism from within feminism (postmodernist feminists have questioned it, so have materialist feminists like Christine Delphy, and so have ethnomethodologists, as Stevi Jackson explains elsewhere in this issue of *T&S*). Nevertheless, the insight that being a woman or a man is a matter of culture rather than nature remains fundamental to just about every kind of feminism.

But outside feminist circles, it seems that this understanding of what *gender* means has limited currency. The word itself is now common enough, but often it is used simply as a substitute for *sex*, with no necessary implication that the phenomenon denoted by the term is social rather than biological. Sometimes, indeed, the implication is the opposite. For instance, I once heard a biologist on TV explaining that there was still no reliable DNA test for 'gender'. If *gender* is understood in the feminist sense then this observation is redundant. What he meant, of course, and in context it was quite clear, was that contrary to popular belief, scientists still cannot categorise individuals as biologically male or female with 100% reliability by inspecting their chromosomes.

The avoidance of the word *sex* in this context is remarkable. (If a biologist cannot talk about biology, who can?) It suggests that *sex* has become some sort of 'dirty word', whether because of its strong association with the erotic or because of a perception that *gender* is to *sex* as *Black* or *African American/Caribbean* is to *coloured* — it means the same thing but is somehow politer or more 'politically correct'.

Another example comes from a 1999 letter to *The Guardian* in which the writer Adam Mars-Jones drew attention to the

apparent existence of homosexual behaviour in colonies of King Penguins, noting: 'Courtship activities such as "bowing" and "dabbling" take place between males, as well as between penguins of different genders'. Penguins of different *genders*? Here, the use of *gender* can hardly be motivated by squeamishness about sex in the 'copulation' sense, since that is the whole subject of the letter. But if Adam Mars-Jones thinks penguins have gender, he evidently doesn't understand the term as meaning socially constructed femininity/masculinity. This is strange, given that Adam Mars-Jones is not just any old writer, but a well-known gay activist and intellectual. Gay and queer theorists as well as feminists have a stake in the term *gender*, since they have also questioned, albeit not always for the same reasons as feminists, the assumption that particular characteristics, desires and behaviours follow 'naturally' from the possession of particular kinds of sexed bodies.



From gender to transgender

It is queer theorists and activists who have recently added a new term to the social constructionist vocabulary: the word *transgender(ed)*. *Gender* provides the root from which this term is derived, while the *trans-* prefix echoes two older words, namely *transvestite* (someone who cross-dresses) and *transsexual* (someone who changes sex). In current activist and scholarly usage, *transgender* is an overarching term which encompasses these already familiar possibilities — but importantly, it is not limited to them. Whereas *transvestite* suggests a fairly superficial and temporary kind of 'crossing', and *transsexual* an absolute, permanent switch (living as someone of 'the other sex' and re-sexing the physical body by way of surgical procedures and hormone treatment), *transgender* is potentially more complex and ambiguous.

For example, in Brazil there is a group of people — born and brought up male — who are known in Portuguese as *travesti*². The word means 'cross dressed', and travestis do wear women's clothing, but their 'crossing' takes other and more drastic forms as well. They adopt women's names; they take hormones and inject silicone into their breasts, buttocks and thighs to produce a feminized body-shape; they are erotically attracted to (non-feminized) men. At the same time, they retain their male genitals and penetrate their sexual partners as well as being penetrated by them. Unlike those transsexuals who seek surgery on the grounds that they are suffering from the clinical condition of 'gender dysphoria'³, Brazilian travestis do not regard themselves as 'women trapped in men's bodies'. Indeed, they regard MTF (male to female) transsexuals who want to *be* women — and are willing to lose their penises in that cause — as insane. Travestis say quite clearly that they are homosexual men, and that they reconstruct their bodies in order to be attractive to the kind of men they desire. Travestis' bodies end up having a mixture of male and female characteristics (e.g. a penis and breasts). 'Transgendered' is not a word they would use for themselves, but it is considered by people who have studied them to be an apter label than 'transsexual', which tends to suggest switching rather than mixing.

Prominent among those who do claim the label 'transgendered' for themselves are those western 'gender outlaws' who undergo sex-change operations but refuse (as an act of

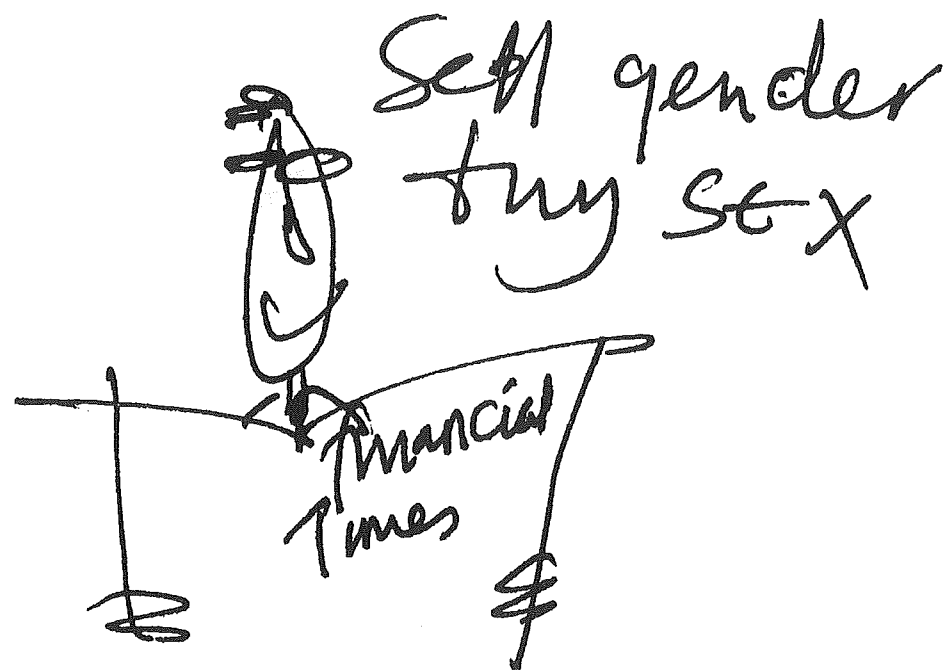


conscious political subversion) to categorize themselves as 'women' or 'men', to adopt all the conventional markers of their chosen gender or to identify as heterosexual. The law such individuals are breaking is the one that says sexed bodies, gendered social identities and erotic desires should all 'match' — and this in a framework where there are always exactly two positions (male/female, masculine/feminine, hetero/homo). *Transgender* in these people's usage is meant to challenge the idea of a pure, two-term system in which every individual is (whether 'naturally' or not) 'either one thing or the other'.

But, hang on a minute: wasn't challenging the presupposition of an absolute and immutable binary opposition part of the business of the word *gender*, part of the reason for using it as an alternative to *sex*? Although feminists were bound to acknowledge the overwhelming social fact of two genders as well as two sexes, there was nothing in the feminist definition that ruled out the possibility of gender 'crossing', or of a future society with more than two genders or of one with no gender at all. So why do we need to refer to people who are anomalous within the binary system as *transgendered* rather than just *gendered*? One might suggest that 'trans' emphasises the processual aspect, the 'becoming' that is evident in transgendered people's life stories; but again, 'becoming' was one of the things feminists had tried to build into their theory of gender, where it applied to everyone, not only the 'anomalous' cases. (In Simone de Beauvoir's classic formulation, 'one is not born a woman; one *becomes* one'.)

Arguably, *transgender* is needed because *gender* has failed: at best it is understood as a

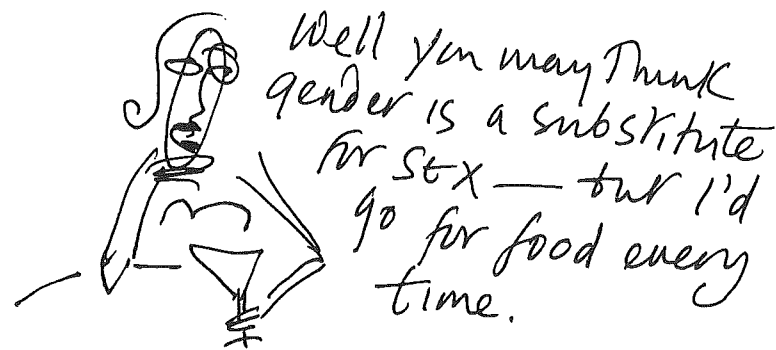




sort of cultural icing on the biological cake, while at worst (which is even more common) it is understood as synonymous with *sex*. It seems possible that *transgender* itself may meet a comparable fate as it is taken up by a wider speech community. Perhaps it will come to be equated with the phenomenon most people currently call *transsexualism* (altering the body to fit the man/woman you always knew you 'really' were). In that case a new term will be needed for cases that are harder to fit within the dual gender system.

Not the revolution

I said at the beginning of this piece that words matter in politics; but the issue isn't just words. Not all languages have two words corresponding exactly to the English *sex* and *gender*. The



absence of the distinction in the vocabulary of, for instance, Swedish or French (the language in which Simone de Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex*) clearly hasn't prevented feminists who speak those languages from distinguishing between biology and culture. But because English does have two words, it is possible to see, by looking at the way they are actually used, how the distinction is understood in English-speaking societies. Examples like the ones I've quoted here suggest that it is *not* really understood. The idea that differences between women and men are rooted in nature remains far more powerful than the idea that they are socially constructed.

The newer term *transgender* does not seem to me to represent either a conceptual or a linguistic advance. As I have already said, it would not be needed in any case if the feminist usage of *gender* had achieved the kind of currency its originators intended. But beyond that, there is something deeply contradictory about the whole idea of *transgender*, or at least the version of it that is most often put forward by transgender activists in their speeches and books.

These activists not surprisingly agree with feminists that women and men are made rather than born — in other words, that gender is a social construct. They vociferously denounce the essentialist position that leads to the persecution

of people like themselves on the grounds that they are flying in the face of nature. They are also critical of the medical authorities who will only prescribe treatment if a patient is willing to conform to gender stereotypes. But if you have grasped that gender is socially constructed, and that conventional gender norms are oppressive and limiting, should the logical next move not be to *reject* gender as we know it? If you argue that gender is fluid rather than fixed, and that there is no necessary connection between sexed bodies and gendered social identities, why should making the move to a different or ambiguous gender involve drastic and permanent alterations to the physical body?

Whatever we think about the beliefs of travestis, and of transsexuals who claim to have been born with the 'wrong' body, at least their practices are consistent with those beliefs. There is a logic there which is absent from the more 'sophisticated' arguments of the (trans)gender outlaws. To me, the phenomenon of transgender does not challenge but rather underlines the continuing power of sex/gender dualism, and the persistence of the tendency to ground gender in sex. Men and women are conceptualised as assemblies of body parts, and the 'radical' aspect of transgender is simply that you can mix and match bits from the two available models. Saying that this revolutionises our ideas about gender is like saying that customising cars revolutionises our ideas about transport.

Crossing gender boundaries is something of a

theme in this issue of *T&S* (see also the pieces by Stevi Jackson and Liz Kelly), and no doubt that is a sign of the times. From the tackiest talk show to the most acclaimed film, popular culture is currently obsessed with the subject. Even while I was writing this I was interrupted by a TV researcher working on a series in which 'ordinary' men and women will be given training and then sent out to see if they can pass as members of the other gender. (When I raised a few elementary theoretical objections to the way the programme makers proposed to go about it, the researcher reminded me that the aim was to entertain. Oh, so that's all right then.) Meanwhile, the plasticity or otherwise of sex-linked characteristics, and the possibility of manipulating them deliberately, is one of the hot topics of contemporary science and medicine.

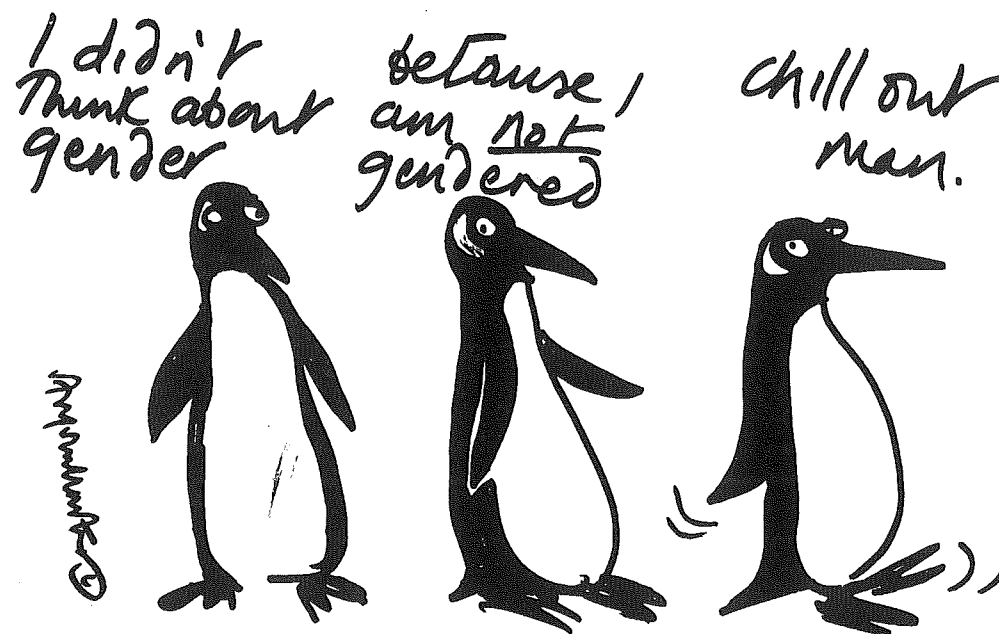
I see these developments as part of our culture's ever-increasing individualism and consumerism. Gender, sex and sexuality are being sold as matters of individual choice (though as always in a consumerist culture, many so-called choices are only available to those who have the cash) and also as forms of individual self-expression. I believe it is important for feminists to respond to this tendency, making clear why we are critical of it without just lapsing into the kind of 'it's unnatural' rhetoric favoured by social and religious conservatives. Recent linguistic and cultural changes have tended to take the politics out of gender; feminists must try to put them back. □

Notes

1 Raymond Williams, *Keywords*. (Fontana, 1983).

2 The source of my information about the travestis is an anthropological study by Don Kulick: *Travesti: Sex, Gender and Culture Among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes*. (University of Chicago Press, 1998).

3 The term 'gender dysphoria' is itself an example of the way *gender* is persistently reduced to *sex*. What (allegedly) causes the 'dysphoria' (= 'bad feelings') of the people this term is applied to is their conviction that they have the wrong *body* for their preferred social role and identity. Typically they have to prove to the doctors that they are *not* ambivalent or confused about their 'true' gender.



Life stories, death stories

*Survivors of ritual abuse are often met with disbelief, especially when they reveal their everyday familiarity with death, which seems strange and disturbing to most of us. In this extract from her forthcoming book, **The Politics and Experience of Ritual Abuse: Beyond Disbelief**, Sara Scott explores the meaning of death in the accounts of women survivors.*

Survivors' memories of witnessing and participating in violent deaths have probably aroused more incredulity than any other feature of their life stories. I will suggest that this automatic disbelief originates in contemporary attitudes to both death and religion such that 'ritual sacrifice' is always already consigned to a distant time or place. Killings which appear to have resulted from a search for sexual gratification or pecuniary gain, on the other hand, make sense within contemporary understandings of human motivation. At the same time late modern societies shelter their citizens from death in ways that make the death-saturated life-stories of ritual abuse survivors extremely alien to most people's experience. Taken together, the attitudes towards

and experience of death and religion amongst the audience for survivors' accounts is crucial in understanding their reception.

Belief and experience

When I first began caring for Sinead¹, I remember how contagious her terror could be. On numerous occasions on a bus, in the street, or talking at the kitchen table, fear would clutch at my innards and fill my mouth with a salty saliva which my throat refused to swallow. What I absorbed was perhaps a homeopathic dose of the terror I regularly saw in Sinead's rigid jaw and dilated pupils. Through this second hand experience, I felt her dread to be of a world-shattering kind which rendered our life together no more than a

fragile fantasy — one that might be ripped away at any moment to reveal the inescapable reality of ritual abuse. Her terror was of death: Sinead feared her abusers might kill her or anyone connected with her. Early in our acquaintance, when she herself was 'on the run' and sleeping rough, she had her much loved dog put down in order both to protect her from the parents who had abused them both and to ensure that threats to harm Gemma could not compromise her own determination to make a new life. If it had not been for the intensity of her determination and evident anguish over this decision I might have found this a melodramatic gesture on Sinead's part. Only later were some of the experiences on which her fears were founded shared with me. In other words, my acceptance of the 'truth' of Sinead's memories was grounded in my acceptance of the emotional truth of her terror. Her flashbacks were vivid, visceral and exhausting and the events she described made sense of the nightmares, self-hatred, despair and rage which was the stuff of our daily lives.

From this position the scepticism which haunts most public responses to stories of undiscovered ritual murder seemed a natural attitude.

This kind of knowledge about ritual abuse is embedded in relationship. It is the foundation for the claims of therapists and foster parents certain that what their particular client or child has told them happened really happened. Hearing accounts of witnessing death from other survivors whom I interviewed for the research was a very different experience. For the most part we met as strangers careful to maintain some emotional distance from the 'material' and from each other. From this position the scepticism which haunts most public responses to stories of undiscovered ritual murder seemed a natural attitude. There were after all some bizarre and confusing memories which interviewees could not explain and could not disentangle from the effects of drugs, pain and terror. From the standpoint of most interlocutors it might not be surprising that such memories — severed from the contexts of whole lives — could be dismissed as the nightmares and delusions of the severely disturbed, and considered to require no further explanation. However, I recognized the need to

expose to critical scrutiny the assumptions behind the 'common sense attitude' which awakened incredulity to some stories rather than others. First amongst these seemed to be contemporary ideas and experience of both death and religion.

Death in late modernity

Birth and death are both in decline in late modern societies. My mother tells a story from her childhood in the 1920s. There was a woman her mother knew who sometimes stopped to speak. It seemed to the child that each time she did so she had the same tale to tell, and it always began: 'Eh, Lizzie, I've buried another 'un.' The image my mother conjured up of this woman digging another in a row of infant graves (coupled with her tendency to comment meaningfully on my mother's 'mawkish paleness') gave her nightmares. The story is one of my mother's markers that differentiate between 'then' and 'now'; the past is a foreign country populated by dead babies, we do things differently these days. Infant mortality rates have declined dramatically over the eight decades dividing then from now. But the dead babies of my grandmother's friend no longer exist in another sense. For the death of a baby in twenty-first century Britain is a tragedy encased within well-developed medical and therapeutic discourses. There are specialist organizations dealing with the aftermath of cot death, still birth, children with cancer, support for parents of murdered children, miscarriage, meningitis. The thing itself has become rare; para-professional advice for those affected by it is plentiful.

Modernity has increasingly removed death from everyday life and placed it in the hands of specialists, so that even our best loved departed are no longer welcome in our homes as corpses. Violent and horrific deaths may be the constant stuff of media fantasy and 'news' but we no longer attend public hangings. Actual deaths are only rarely encountered by most of us in late modern societies, a fact which encourages our reception of the stories of ritual abuse survivors as fiction rather than actuality.

It has often been claimed that the key function of all religion is to make death meaningful. In general, this seeking of meaning in religion in order to avoid the dread of death is regarded as benign and functional; while the secularization sometimes supposed to be inherent in modernity is seen as a challenge to human abilities to cope with mortality. The ready everyday rationality

Sara Scott's book, *The Politics and Experience of Ritual Abuse: Beyond Disbelief*, will be published later this year by Open University Press.

which renders so much about ritual abuse counter-intuitive dismisses as 'impossible' stories of contemporary human sacrifice. This may result in large part from the hegemony of an evolutionary account of sacrifice in both anthropology and religious studies. 'Other' world religions may still condone the stoning of women taken in adultery, the infibulation of pre-pubescent girls or the ritual decapitation of cocks and hens but religiously motivated brutalities seem unthinkable in late modern societies. When such apparently do occur (the Manson murders, the Jonestown massacre or the recent Heaven's Gate suicides) we seek where possible an 'explanation' in terms of a charismatic (and psychopathic) leader and beyond that dismiss them as weird and incomprehensible.

The idea of the psychopath killing for pleasure or the gangster doing similarly for profit provides a residual category of mad, bad and dangerously damaged *individuals*, but it does not fit with survivors insistence on the collective practice and identity of their abusers. According to survivors, animal and human life is ritually destroyed to enhance the 'power' of those involved. It is supposed to bind together the 'faith community' in a shared experience of transcendence. Such an idea of absorbing the 'energy' or spirit substance of an animal or human sacrificial victim is attested to in many pre-modern cultures, and in some it has also been a 'mystery' rite binding initiates together through the solidarity of illegality and the ownership of a 'secret' which places them outside the ordinary social world.

Immediate contact with the dead and dying is unfamiliar to most of us

Ritual abuse survivors' experiences of death are difficult then in a number of ways: the kinds of deaths they claim to have witnessed are to the rest of us 'media experiences', confined to horror films; immediate contact with the dead and dying is unfamiliar to most of us, and any experience we do have tends to be confined to 'good, clean deaths'. In addition, our ability to believe or make sense of the deaths in accounts of ritual abuse is curtailed by the hegemony of the grand narrative of modernity. The apparently inevitable progress of secularization renders religious motivation largely irrelevant.

Death, meaning and doubt

Death potentially disrupts individuals' unquestioning acceptance of the inevitability of social arrangements: nature rips the social fabric showing it to be a man-made backdrop. So when I began examining the various reports of deaths in my interviews, I had an idea that they might represent 'fateful moments' during which the stability and inevitability of the social worlds inhabited by survivors might be undermined. If this were so, I imagined that the recognition: 'It doesn't have to be like this' would be likely to be bound up with moral judgements: 'This is wrong'. One factor which more easily permits the judgement of extreme 'wrong' in this context, is the availability of an alternative set of meanings in the wider social world surrounding the ritual abuse cult. What solidifies this understanding of some deaths as 'wrong' is an active, if not always wholesale, rejection of the belief system of ritual abuse within which they took place. In other words, this 'threat' to taken for granted meanings was one which some of the ritual abuse survivors I interviewed appeared to have transformed into an 'opportunity' to escape the discourse of their abusers.

The occult beliefs attached to the ritual abuses reported by survivors apparently operated to make some deaths more 'meaningful' than others. The reports of survivors suggest that multiple meanings can be generated in relation to different deaths and that certain types of death — those most marginal to the ritual system and those most emotionally and physically personal — may serve most readily to allow oppositional meanings to be generated.

Ritual abuse occurs in opposition to, but also inside and continuous with, the societies of late modernity. Understanding this is crucial to making sense of survivors' lives. The illegal international markets in pornography, drugs and child abuse with which ritual abusers are involved are twentieth-century creations. In addition, it can be argued that the very machinery of modernity: the increased mobility, anonymity and privacy of the individual, the separation of work, family and leisure (at least for a large number of middle class men), the hiding away of death and violence from everyday life may all enable abusive and secretive groups to thrive. At the same time, those practising ritual abuse form rigid, hierarchical, patriarchal secret societies which are violently opposed to many aspects of late modernity — most particularly of course to

any advances towards the emancipation of women and children.

There were three main types of death which survivors reported actually witnessing or being involved in. I have categorized these deaths as: incidental, personal and ritual

Types of death

The survivors I interviewed described lives saturated with the fear of death. There were three main types of death which survivors reported actually witnessing or being involved in. I have categorized these deaths as: incidental, personal and ritual, and will explore the significance accorded to each in survivors' accounts. It is interesting that, with the exception of occasions when an interviewee related the sacrifice of her own baby, the least emphasized of the three were deaths which had taken place in a ritual context. This is not to say that other ceremonial killings were not spoken of, but these tended to be generalized as 'what sometimes happened at ceremonies'. The deaths discussed in most detail were those which were 'personally meaningful', all of which had in various ways resulted from abuse but either had no ritual element or were related in ways which downplayed the ritual context.

Certain experiences of death appeared to provide the survivors I interviewed with 'moral opportunities', and some used memories of particular deaths as personal 'fables' through which to explore the moral meanings of the world of their childhood.

Incidental deaths

It would not be appropriate to call the deaths I want to discuss first 'accidental', for it suggests a mistake, something to be regretted. Rather these deaths were consequences (not always intended) of abuse, and appeared to have been inconsequential to those who caused them. They are examples of marginal deaths, the deaths of people that 'did not count', except to the women who remembered and chose to 're-tell' them as part of their own life stories. None of these were ritual killings, they were not punishments, they were not rendered to survivors as meaningful in any way. The intention of the actions of the

perpetrators was their own 'pleasure'; that they cost a person their life was incidental.

These 'chaotic', undisciplined and inadvertent deaths best illustrate the constant presence of the fear of death in survivors' lives. These were often deaths which no amount of obedience or self-control could ensure protection against; deaths in which interviewees expressed their identification with the victim whose place they could so easily have occupied. Elizabeth reflecting on the murder of a young man she witnessed as a teenager expresses this as follows:

Seeing people killed, particularly this young man, and thinking: 'well what did he do that we're not doing all the time. What's different about what happened that time than when I'm getting raped'. And when I saw Schindler's List it was something that was said to the housekeeper: 'You will always be afraid of death — it was the chap that was her boss — that he might kill you because you don't know why he kills people. He kills people at random'. And that's what it was like in the cult. People were killed at random, it seemed to a child and even a teenager, no rhyme or reason why someone would suddenly be killed. It was their turn. So you never knew, what was it you might do that meant next year you'll be dead. And I grew up with that. I lived my whole life with that fear ... Like what is it you have to do that makes people kill you? And so I always had to be really, really good. Really well behaved, never put a foot out of line, never say what you want, never say: 'I don't like that, I don't like you doing that', because they could kill you.

Despite the equally evident randomness of a child's death remembered by Kate, her account still emphasizes the importance of self-control in guaranteeing her own safety. Kate insists the little girl's death was an aberration, if only she had obeyed the rules and not cried out it would never have happened. Kate knew not to cry, she believed her own survival depended on it, this was therefore the sort of death she thought she could avoid for herself.

She was at a ceremony with her father and I was with mine. Afterwards...I don't know where her father went...but there was me and my dad and a couple of other men and the girl. I know that one man was having sex with me, one man in the kitchen, and my dad was having sex with this little girl and she was crying. And if that's one rule that you learn very early on is you do not cry. Come hell or high water don't cry. You weren't allowed to, if we did we were punished. And my father got very angry with her and I remember him throwing her against the wall, and picking her up and really shouting at her telling her not

to cry. He took one of the knives off the wall, cos there were racks, and he stabbed her and took her off down to one of the back rooms and I had to go and look after her. I was told to stop the bleeding and I couldn't. She was still crying and I remember saying to her: 'Don't cry, you mustn't cry', because I was so frightened they'd come back in the room and do something more. And in the end she stopped crying. At the time I thought 'O, good, she listened to me, wonderful'. Looking back on it I realize she just went unconscious and she basically bled to death. I remember covering her in a green towel, and this man just coming in and picking her up. Literally carrying her out under one arm. And I never saw her again. I was left with this massive pool of blood. That was it.

The story emphasizes the lack of significance that Kate's father, and those with him, attached to a child's death. Kate's indignation falls on the way the girl was carried away under some man's arm as if she was just something to be disposed of. By contrast, Kate herself had covered the body with a green towel and a moral universe yawns between the two actions. This death mattered to someone, and allowed Kate to identify a clear distinction between her abusers and herself. It seems it was the very meaninglessness of the death that allowed space for the creation of meaning.

It seems to me that these incidental deaths were available for the inscription of meaning by survivors because they were so meaningless.

It seems to me that these incidental deaths were available for the inscription of meaning by survivors *because they were so meaningless*. Ritual sacrifices seem to have been far harder to re-write, being as it were already full to the brim with the significance of an occult cosmology and a set of ritual practices. Survivors comment on the attention to detail in the rituals they participated in, the rehearsals, detailed organization and participants' dismay at the smallest variation or mistake. Such meaning-full deaths leave little room for ontological insecurities, which, it seems, were far more likely to creep in by the back door of incidental deaths.

These incidental deaths were those of strangers, but some survivors also suffered the deaths of significant others. Emotional attachments within ritual abuse groups were described

as extremely rare. Children often didn't know each other's names, and self-isolation was a survival strategy commonly embraced in the face of suffering over which they had no control. Personal deaths were therefore most often the deaths of women's own babies.

The death of one's own baby

Although pregnancies of various duration had been numerous in the lives of most of the survivors I interviewed, five women highlighted one birth-and-death as particularly significant. Invariably this pregnancy ran to term or was only induced only a little prematurely.

The focus of much child death discourse is the grieving mother. News, soap operas and self help guides all emphasize the naturalness of a mother's grief and the necessity of expressing it. But at the same time the 'grief' expresses the 'mother', confirms her goodness, her proper affections, her sisterhood with other women and her place within humanity.

This is the discursive context into which survivors of ritual abuse must speak their stories of repeated births followed swiftly by sacrificial deaths. Such stories do not readily fit the available discourses of birth and death, contradicting what we 'know' they are met with widespread disbelief. However, accounts must still be constructed of extreme as of mundane aspects of our experience and survivors have little choice but to borrow what they can from available accounts of infant death, in order to make sense of their experiences to themselves as well as to communicate them to others. Ambiguity is not ironed out in this process: those shaping their experiences to fit what can be said, may also indicate an incomplete 'fit'. Clues about different versions are present in those told.

The accounts considered here suggest that it is through the experience of pregnancy and childbirth that ritually abused girls may come to think about themselves as women, and therefore as members of a category of persons continuous with others outside the cult. At the same time, it is within these experiences that a 'mother' is born — a person subject to the discourses of maternity.

The women who attached particular importance in their life to the loss of a single late-term baby, described these experiences as having helped them get away from their abusers, enabling them to define themselves as different to those who had abused them, and providing a

focus for their anger and pain. These babies were invariably named by their mothers, an action that may have been informed by two different strands of thought. First, within the world of ritual abuse survivors describe names and naming as significant and powerful, to give a dead baby a 'secret' name is therefore a subversive act. Second, in contemporary discourses of bereavement, naming even a stillborn baby is considered a 'healthy' thing to do. According individual identity to the baby is meant to facilitate the expression of grief, rendering the loss more real.

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Lynn described the birth and death of her baby daughter as *the* pivotal event in her escape from her abusers. Her account, which I will quote at length, also makes clear her abusers deliberate encouragement of her attachment to the child:

I had three other children, at various stages I should add. [...] The third one was a full term pregnancy. Funny enough, it was about the time I ran away each time, so I think there was a deep inner knowing of what was going on. Even if I didn't want to really announce it to myself, I believe I knew. [...]

And what happened to this was that she was induced and she was born within a few hours. And she was a normal healthy little baby girl. [...] And when they brought her back and I was holding her, there was a lot of "Would you like to keep her?" and "Was I worthy of keeping her?" I had to prove that I was worthy of keeping her and look after her. And if I promised to be good, and really, really try, they would give me a chance, and these were things I would have to do. And that was OK, and I agreed to all those things and I believed them. You know, we have a deep-rooted need to be loved, but we also have a deep-rooted need to give it back too, and I believe that this is what was happening here. I really wanted, more than anything, not just love this baby but look after her. [...] Throughout that whole week, a lot of abusive things happened. [...] And there were other things going on, preparations, things if I had wanted to I could have seen, the things I was making myself not see. Because I believed I was protected then. And I...between, as I would go back and in this bedroom, there she was, and what they'd done is they'd con-

verted the bottom drawer for a sideboard into her bed and I would take her out and love her and nurse her and I would bath and clean her and feed her. And for the first time in my life, I really believed it was going to be OK.

[...] I was encouraged by other people. "Yes, you really love her, don't you?" and "Oh, look at the way she looks at you". And so there was a lot of...and there was a relationship growing there. And I suppose some people would say that's a natural bonding going on there, but it was there nevertheless. [...] And this continued the whole week till Friday. Then on the Friday they came and removed her and I think I knew then. [...] And I was drugged, there was a lot of abuse around that. On the Saturday, I was picked up and [...] I was taken to a church, an old church, and because it's my baby, I was supposed to have the honour, only I think I was getting really rebellious [...]... there was my mother and father at the altar, they were high priest and priestess, and my little girl. [...] At the end of it, what was left of my little girl was put in my arms and I was taken out and made to lay her in a grave, and it was shortly after that I decided this...and that was how I got out. Her name is Melanie and I can share that. I find it really hard to... [...]

And anyway that night she died, and I think a huge piece of me died with her, and yet she gave me the right to be free. That seems kind of hard, that my child died, but if it wasn't for her I wouldn't be here...

Tell me why.

After that night; I'm pretty certain that they didn't care whether I died or not that night. That in many ways they knew I'd become a danger to them. And I think they thought: 'well if she dies during this we'll find a way of explaining it, and if not...'. I was very badly beaten that night, and tortured. And although I did survive it, I survived it in a place that told me I had to run. [...] But also my dad had started saying things, and my mum mentioned like. One of the girls in our group had committed suicide about a year and a half before this by jumping in front of a moving train. She kept saying that if I did that it would be all over, all over in minutes, never know a thing about it. My mum put loads of pills by the side of my bed and said: 'well you can take them if you want, you'll never wake up again, it'll never happen again'. [...]

There was so much going on at home. Lots of morbid, sick stuff about where Melanie was. And they would talk about her dying moments of agony. Real sick, sick stuff. So I actually just ran. I knew that I'd reached my limits with them, that if I didn't run they would eventually get me to kill myself.

Lynn refers to 'a deep inner knowing' in relation to her pregnancies and the impending horror they signified. This idea of knowledge, or

of an alternative moral order, being located in the body, a secret opposition that 'grew inside me', appears in more than one interview. Her baby, once born, represents this knowledge of otherness in external form. Melanie is described as a 'normal, healthy little baby girl'. She is the 'normal', 'natural' outsider to the world of ritual abuse.

Lynn was 'tricked' into allowing herself to love her baby. On the other hand she acknowledges that she allowed herself to believe in the possibility of 'this time being different'. She refers to the fact that some people would interpret her attachment to the baby as a natural bonding. In this way she connects her story to a dominant model of motherhood, without actually claiming this as true for herself. The details she selects emphasize both the connection and difference between her experience and that of 'ordinary' mothers. The baby's cot is a bureau drawer, and it is the remains of the little girl which are put into the mother's arms.

It is Melanie's death which Lynn describes as the springboard for her bid for freedom. However, her actual description of her parent's nudging her towards suicide in the weeks after the birth suggests a more complex picture. It is not so much moral outrage at the murder of her baby that inspires Lynn's escape, but her consciousness of the nearness of her own death. This in no way undermines the symbolic importance attached to Melanie, or her role in Lynn's sense of herself as a mother. It is more that clues about different versions are visible in the account. There are two meaning systems present in Lynn's report. The meaning of Melanie's birth and death are partially understood through contemporary discourses of motherhood and bereavement, but they are also acknowledged to have been highly meaningful ritual events within the cult. Lynn weaves her personally significant account between these, even though the 'normal' discourse clearly dominates. The survivors I interviewed did not much emphasize that the deaths of their infants had occurred within a meaning system they had rejected. Lynn did say a little about this, but the distancing devices she uses, and the lack of detail, contrast sharply with the vivid accounts of her own experience. In the context of describing an earlier infant's death, she reports:

The ceremony was actually...it was about the 3 stages of giving your body...you know, giving your body, somebody else's body and then your soul. So it's like the 3 stages, so

giving Melanie apparently was giving my soul. Have to say it probably felt like my soul at that age.

But this was much more about giving your body, somebody else's body, feeling much more incriminated, like you'd deliberately done this. You'd had this child that wasn't... you'd only carried it for whoever the deity was, and they were claiming it back. So bizarre some of the things that they say.

From sentence to sentence the shifts between meaning systems are apparent. In written form, the ironic tone is lost but the distancing comments: 'Have to say it probably felt like my soul at that age', and 'So bizarre some of the things that they say', are evident. In this account, the apparently meaningless cruelty of encouraging Lynn to love her baby is connected to the significance of the ritual as 'giving one's soul'. These other partially hidden (occult) meanings are present nonetheless.

If Lynn saw Melanie's death as a 'last straw' experience, Sinead describes the death of her baby as an epiphany:

When I decided I didn't want to do this any more it was I suppose for selfish reasons... which was when they killed Bethany. I decided I didn't want anything to do with this any more...You know...I didn't want this child, and then when I had this child, I couldn't have this child. I didn't want it, I was made to have it. Then when I had it, I wanted it and it was taken away. That was it. I'd had enough and I was going to wait my opportunity and I was going to get away from them. From that point on I could hear the cries of other kids. I could hear the fear and I knew what I was doing was wrong.[...]

I suppose in a way I was lucky that they didn't let her live. [...] But I think what hurt most was that they didn't just kill her outright, they gutted her first while she was alive. It took ten minutes for her to die. And I had to hold her while they done it, and I was still bleeding and confused and hurting from the birth. Just watching her. She had masses and masses of jet-black hair, she was just perfect, not a mark on her. [...] I remember her being born on this slab floor and picking her up. She was huddled up really tightly. My Mum just got the cord and halved it, cut it with a knife and tied it in a knot and that was it. I held her...And my Mum looking and saying: 'She's beautiful, perfect. My first grandchild'. And that was it. Next thing she just grabbed it by the neck and hauled her off me and held her up and everybody's looking. Then she started howling, wailing and shivering. And she was dropped onto the slab and they started.

I just thought: 'No'. [...]

I was an awkward bitch though, from that day. I would not co-operate, I would not do my training, I would not listen. And that was what decided me to get out, I'd had enough. I ran away a number of times then, after her birth. Every opportunity I run....got found and brought back.[...]

There [...] were times even up to a couple of months ago when I'd quite often think about it and get upset, but I resolved that by thinking that she was better off where she is. I mean I wouldn't be out if she'd be alive anyway, I'm sure I wouldn't. I wouldn't have left and they wouldn't have let her go.

Sinead makes a direct connection between her experience of giving birth and seeing her baby killed, and her moral development. Again the connection is made through the body: her ears are opened to the cries of other kids with whom she has no direct connection. Again the baby's natural, undamaged state is emphasized: 'not a mark on her'.

Such borrowings from the 'normal' world of death serve as both bridges to, and claims of, a different morality.

Sinead believes herself 'saved' by her baby's death in a different way to Lynn. A living child would have been a tie that she might not have been able to break. There is also an awareness in other ways of how ambiguous was her relation to motherhood: 'I didn't want it, they made me have it, then when I had it and wanted it, they took it off me'. Sinead was 19, at the time of her interview, Lynn was 43 and the mother of two grown up children, their relations to dominant discourses of maternity were therefore different in terms of both generation and their stage in the life course.

Not everyone I interviewed felt able to talk about experiences surrounding the death of a baby. For example Gene, at 18, began her interview by telling me: 'I had a baby and it died...you know...and I don't want to talk about what happened'. Kathleen, who found talking about the ritual aspects of her experience almost impossible — she 'drifted off', or dissociated, whenever she got close to discussing such things — was still able to tell me how she had made the death of her baby the basis of a highly symbolic action:

Well I know how they killed her. But when I go to talk about it all I can see is her. It's

because I was standing in front of her and I couldn't do anything about it, and she was alive one minute and then she was dead. I saw her alive and I couldn't stop her becoming dead. There just wasn't anything I could do. [...]

You know, my sister got married a couple of years ago and my parents put a family notice in the newspaper [...] And I knew everyone in the family would get a copy of it, so I put an 'In Memoriam' in the same day for my daughter. And I thought they won't know it, but everyone who keeps that is going to have the truth.

Kathleen, who couldn't stop her baby 'becoming dead', attaches great significance to her memory and the truth of her abuse which it embodies. Another survivor I interviewed had arranged a memorial service for her baby. Such borrowings from the 'normal' world of death serve as both bridges to, and claims of, a different morality.

Ritual deaths

The three categories of incidental, personal and ritual deaths are not exclusive. As is evident in the above discussion of the deaths of infants, these most frequently occurred in a ritual context. However, the ritual element was faded out in these accounts, at the same time as the personal meaning was foregrounded. The ritual deaths I now turn to were discussed less frequently in interviews. In each, the interviewee was directly involved in the killing and the victim was an older child or adult. It is clear in each that the ritual context is important to survivors struggling with issues of personal responsibility. These are the deaths which it seems were most difficult to translate 'between worlds' being already over-interpreted, their meanings given by the rituals within which they had occurred. It is interesting that although religious and ritual aspects of their abuse were generally minimized in survivors' life histories references to symbols, deities and 'theological' explanations were spoken of in this context. Each of these deaths was a human sacrifice, by definition something that can make no sense in profane terms. In addition, they represented individual 'rites of passage', a stage in the initiation of the speaker themselves. Inside such a framework individual moral responsibility is irrelevant, outside that framework it is everything. The fact that these are such 'strange deaths', without parallels in the surrounding society, also renders them less porous to alternative meanings. These facts need to be placed alongside two others: the 'full person-

hood' of the victim, represented by their age, and contrasted with the 'potential personhood' of babies and foetuses; and the survivors direct participation in the ritual death. It is these factors taken together which seemed to make these deaths the most difficult for survivors to discuss, and thereby incorporate within their life stories.

It is clear in each that the ritual context is important to survivors struggling with issues of personal responsibility. These are the deaths which it seems were most difficult to translate 'between worlds' being already over-interpreted, their meanings given by the rituals within which they had occurred.

As an interviewee, Lynn was the most able and willing to talk about the ritual aspects of her experience. However, I think the following description illustrates the particular difficulties in relation to meaning and responsibility around a ritual death in which she was forced to participate.

This one's really difficult [...] I still to this day find it really hard to think that I held the knife. And I mean I've always found that extremely... I have to say the reason is that I'm talking about an 11-year-old person, an 11-year-old boy. There were two kids there and I was told I had to choose which one I was going to marry. I didn't want to choose, and of course I was made to, and of course he dies. I was made to feel I had done that. I was one of them. I'd killed for Lucifer, which I'd done before but not an older person. But the thing is when it actually came to the ceremony, we'd had the marriage ceremony and all that: I was married to the boy who became Lucifer because he'd died. That was the whole point. Lucifer consumed his body cos he died. He was taking the role of Lucifer, they never told me he was going to die, and as Lucifer could take on any shape or form, or that's what we were told anyway. So we were married and all the rest and he was placed on an upside down cross. Lots of other things happened (voice trails away.) And he was directly in front of me and er, my mother put the knife in my hand and said: "you know what to do". I stood there and there was a lot of noise, I raised my arm and then just as I was about to pull away her arm came down on mine and pushed it in. I then, although I had my hand on it as it entered, I

then pulled back and let go. I think it was because he in some way reacted, and she finished it. I've always found that extremely difficult...very...Like I didn't know this boy, he'd never done me any harm...I'd seen him, but he was from another group in the same town, he'd been at our meetings sometimes. Very beautiful child too...And I was made to take parts of his remains (mumble) and they were brought back at another ceremony a week or 10 days later absolutely riddled with maggots and then we were made to eat them. Part of that is when the heart and the brain, parts like that, are riddled with maggots, that means that Lucifer is consuming them, then we eat it to show (voice trails away). Stupid, stupid stuff. It's sort of like horoscopes in the newspaper, you can make them fit anything. Like Freud this stuff, you can make it fit anything, they've always got an answer, it's so all consuming.... Like God, there's always a reason even if we don't understand it.

Through these ritual meanings, which Lynn can only describe now as this 'stupid, stupid stuff', (and which for the uninitiated she compares to Freud, God and horoscopes), the process of becoming 'one of them' is intended to take place. As 'one of them' such events are meaningful, as 'not one of them' they are appallingly senseless. It is interesting that in Lynn's account the locus of resistance is the body. Her incomplete absorption into the world of ritual meaning is demonstrated by the parental hand which forced the knife.

Sinead's description of her father's death as a 'voluntary sacrifice' is distinctive because of the relationship between them. The contrast between her father's 'faith' and her own disbelief is probably the clearest statement, in any interview, of the serious commitment to a different universe of meaning which ritual abuse may sometimes involve:

Then my Dad took ill in the September — just after my birthday. He had a bad heart and he'd had it from birth and he'd had several operations on this. And in the October he took quite ill and had a heart attack and went into hospital. He gradually picked up a bit but they said he would have to have a heart transplant. He would probably die anyway, he had a short life span owing to it.

The thing is...I think it's every 17 years within a cult group they can have a voluntary sacrifice which gives them a lot of power, a lot more power than enforced or chosen sacrifices.

It was set for this date in November [...] He was dressed in a white robe — which was often what was used for a sacrifice. But he wasn't like.....Normally when somebody is

being sacrificed they are drugged and spaced out, he wasn't. He was himself, he'd refused drugs....which was going to mean he was going to scream...y'know [...] He got to the altar and was lifted on it. And the robe was removed. And he had the marks on — they're painted on — it's the mark where... where you put the knife...where it's been decided it will go.

[...]The athame and that was brought in, and it was his. But...and I thought: 'There it goes, that's it'. But it was taken away and mine was brought. And I knew then that he'd actually decided he wanted mine... he wanted my knife to be the one to have his blood on, and not his.

[...] I could see that he didn't want to die. Once it had been done. And there was buggar all I could do about that. And at that point I didn't want him to die.[...] Whatever the sod had done, once it had happened I didn't want him to die — I didn't want him to have died that way anyway.

Within the universe of ritual meanings such a voluntary sacrifice makes sense (even though I don't expect there would have been a superfluity of applicants for this seventeenth year privilege). I think Sinead's account clearly displays the tension between the 'ritual meanings' with which survivors are brought up, and the 'abuse meanings' through which they reinterpret their experiences. I do not mean to suggest that this is an entirely post-hoc re-interpretation, for the two meaning systems at least begin alongside each other in survivors lives.

Ritual deaths seem to me to be the half-hidden heart of ritual abuse, but within the discourses available to survivors to describe, categorize and make sense of their lives, these deaths are hard to place.

Ritual deaths seem to me to be the half-hidden heart of ritual abuse, but within the discourses available to survivors to describe, categorize and make sense of their lives, these deaths are hard to place. If a culture of sexual and financial greed, incorporating a criminal lack of respect for the value of certain human lives, can 'explain' what I have termed incidental deaths; then enforced pregnancy and abortion can be seen as continuous with physical and sexual abuse — as something done to the body of the survivor — while the death of a baby can be felt as a personal

maternal loss and a key to future freedom. However, the available discourses around the abuse of women and children based on an analysis of power and the pleasures of power (frequently through its sexualization), cannot fully incorporate these accounts of ritual death which stubbornly refuse to translate into late modern terms.

In discussing a series of ritual killings in Peru and Bolivia in the 1980s, Patrick Tierney has described the mix of deities and beliefs drawn from ancient Andean civilizations with the Satan of Christian derivation. In explaining the involvement of drug traffickers and mine-owners commissioning such killings and the shamans performing the rites, he argues that:

Although the perpetrators of these sacrifices are sincere in their faith that human sacrifice is the ultimate magic, the resulting violence is conducive to their illegal and immoral purposes. It continues because it works. (p.324)

It may be that in relation to the ritual killings described here this remains the most 'modern' explanation we can find: they bring power to those who control them — they continue because they work.

Conclusion

Survivors of ritual abuse have the kind of intimate knowledge of death that is normally reserved for medics and funeral directors. Like occupants of those professions, they must select from many such contacts with death those which are of personal significance.

I am reminded again of my mother, who was a fever nurse in an isolation hospital in the 1930s. She nursed dozens of children who died of diphtheria, scarlet and rheumatic fevers, whooping cough and smallpox, but the story she returns to regularly is that of a little boy who died on Christmas Eve, having refused to have his presents early because he didn't want Santa to have to make a special trip. This death was the occasion of one of my mother's, not infrequent, fallings out with God, but it also stands for all the other deaths she witnessed as a young woman. Through this story she expresses her own helplessness and rage at the pre-antibiotics world, a world of dirt, disease and poverty I have never known. The survivors who shared their life stories with me were also trying to find stories that might enable me to glimpse the alien world they had inhabited. □

Note

1 'Sinead' is Sara Scott's now adult foster daughter, who was included among the women interviewed at her own request.

Material girls

Ruth Pearson talks to Debbie Cameron and Joan Scanlon about women and the politics of money. She is an unusual feminist academic in that she not only has an understanding of international economics, but is also an activist in her own community. In this discussion, she talks about creative strategies for how women can financially support one another and our own organisations.

Debbie Cameron: Let's begin with the issue of feminist attitudes to money: Should feminists be outside of the cash nexus, and rightfully suspicious of money, or should women be less reluctant to seize the power that money embodies?

Ruth Pearson: There's a number of issues in there that we need to unravel. A lot of feminist discussion about women and money has focused on the fact that women don't have it — that they are excluded from income generation or inheritance or assets... But I think there are a lot of other issues about women and money that we have only just begun to think about. One issue, which runs parallel to the discussion about feminist ethics, is whether services should be

exchanged for love rather than money, and whether that would make our society different, and I think there is a radical, if not essentialist, position on that.

Debbie: Do you mean a position which holds that women are too nice and caring to sully their hands with money?

Ruth: It's like the debates about globalisation — as if you have got a choice! We live in a monetarised economy and the issue for women is how to make that work for women, and how you relate to money and understand money, rather than stopping the world and getting off. I think we have to engage with money on a number of levels. That's why I would disagree with the view that it's not feminist to dirty ourselves by

dealing with money. We live, as Madonna puts it, in a 'material world'.

Taking responsibility for money

Debbie: What about this theory that even women who perhaps aren't feminist and aren't motivated by a thought-out (however essentialist) ethic are somehow afraid of money. You mentioned a book called *The Money Tree* by Colette Dowling...

Ruth: She has this thesis which is quite interesting which is that women are not adult about money and they don't take full responsibility for their relationship with money. She argues that either they leave it to other people, often male family members or male business partners, to control; or they don't feel it is fully theirs — whether they inherit it or earn a high salary. They somehow feel they don't merit it. Even when they earn money, they don't think it's for them; it's always for something or for someone else. There is an interesting discussion here about women and philanthropy, because in order to be able to give money away you need to feel it's yours in the first place and that you have the right to dispose of it.

Debbie: That's slightly reminding me of what some Tory politician said — I've forgotten which one — that the Good Samaritan could only be a good Samaritan because he had a successful small business and made a little nest egg and so on. Whereas a feminist question would surely be: should there be a need for philanthropy at all?

Ruth: Well, maybe there shouldn't, but there is. Women's philanthropy could give women's organisations and groups the resources for organising. Whether you get those resources from the state, from foundations or from individual donors, money is a claim on resources and you need those resources for political work. Maybe the Tory said it, but he said it from a different position.

Joan Scanlon: I have some difficulty with this psychologising of women; with women being perceived as 'infantile' in relation to money, especially when they have so little opportunity to make decisions about money, and when a huge percentage are skillfully managing criminally low household budgets.

Ruth: If you look at the context in which we relate to money — it's a very recent phenomenon in the West that women have had independent access to money incomes; it's a 19th and

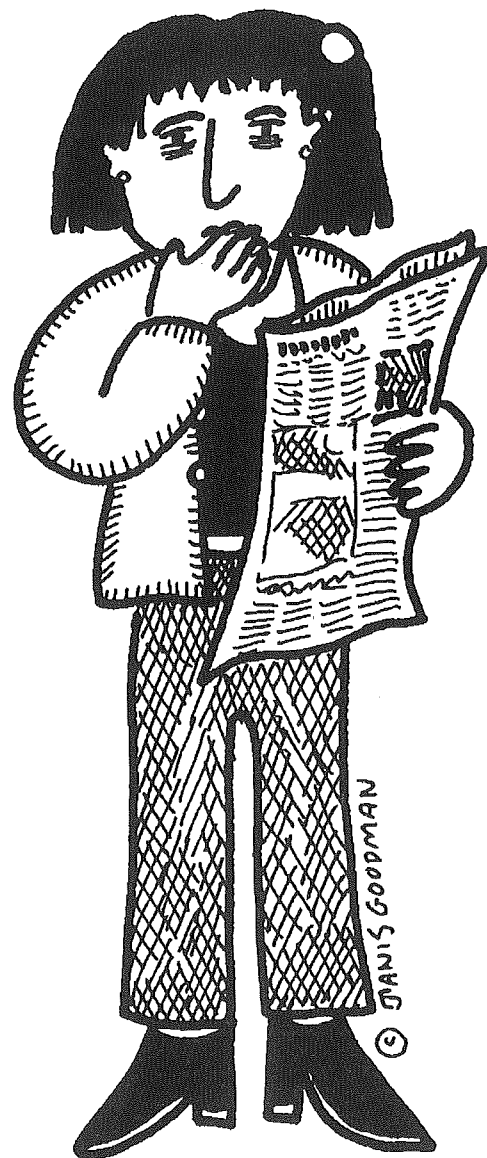
20th century phenomenon, but the whole of the way in which welfare and social policy has been organised is as though women are not primary income earners. For a long time (I think it's changing and that's complicated too) there was an assumption that women could have a money dependency either on men or on the state. It's very ingrained in our thinking, so I don't think it is just a psychological thesis that women are not 'adult' about money; it's social and historical as well.

Debbie: Colette Dowling is also the author of *The Cinderella Complex*, so she does have this self-help approach to the subject. Moreover, she is sort of writing about herself, since she made a lot of money, went bankrupt and so on. I think I recognise something of what she is talking about in terms of my own attitude towards money, which I don't think is very adult. It's something to do with not being raised to expect to have any, both on class and gender grounds. I'm good on the housekeeping, and my accounts are always in order — but I realise now that I'm in charge of a department and a budget (paltry as it is) I feel as though I was managing it like one of those housewives in those 50s books, thinking 'How can we have cheaper stationery?' and idiotic things like that. It can't be culturally universal, although I'm thinking of that man who set up the Grameen Bank [Mohammed Yunis] for women; he says you get a safer return on your money from women.

Ruth: There are two points there. The first one is where you say you are good at household accounts but not at long term strategic management. That mirrors the fact that women's expectations have not necessarily been that they should provide for themselves over their life cycle; certainly not that they should have financial assets to provide for dependents. A lot of women's reluctance to think about pensions is not only that they tend not to think of themselves, or about sustaining themselves in later life, but also that they do not think of themselves being financially responsible for a household even after employment ends. It's not the way we have been raised and socialised. As a lot of second wave feminists are now approaching pensionable age we are only just beginning to think about the issue.

Joan: There is also a gender issue about the whole idea of retirement. Most women I know assume they are going to carry on working

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indefinitely, in terms of paid work — and they will probably need to, since if they do have pensions at all they are pretty pathetic.

Ruth: My perception is, that there are different trends. Many women seem to be taking strangely premature retirement from waged work. That doesn't necessarily mean that they stop working altogether; I think that women can slip into portfolios of work more easily, because that is what they have always done, either as paid workers or as volunteers. But to get back to the Grameen Bank, what's interesting is that it was set up to provide working capital to very poor households, to increase the productivity of their labour, their income potential. It turned out that women were the most appropriate and effective borrowers in that they were more reliable in making repayments. So it wasn't set up for women, although it ended up with a majority of women borrowers.

Debbie: But that suggests that women are rather good managers of money.

Management vs control

Ruth: We need to make a distinction here between managing money and controlling money. I agree that women have always managed scarce resources in order to look after their households, including monetary resources. But that doesn't mean that they have the decision making power or the responsibility; certain individual women may, but culturally women don't have the responsibility for accessing those resources and distributing them. One of the great debates about this micro-credit phenomenon in South Asia is what happens to the money that women borrow. People have argued that women may manage it and take responsibility for repaying it, but a lot of the money is then used in male enterprises. Personally I think it's a bit of an odd argument since we are talking about joint budget households where it makes no sense to separate out a woman's livelihood strategies from the men in that household. You are talking about very low levels of income where the labour is pooled and the income is pooled anyway. Nonetheless a lot of the money that women borrow doesn't go into women's autonomous businesses.

Debbie: So women repay the money they borrowed, and they subsist, but they are not actually reaping any larger benefit.

Ruth: What I think is that there is an increasing monetarisation of household subsistence all over

the world, and that's why I say we have to face it, we can't just ignore it.

Debbie: You mean it's more and more based on the consumption of goods and services produced by others, for money, rather than being self-sufficient.

Ruth: Firstly that you have to purchase in the marketplace goods and services which you may previously have self-provisioned or to some extent bartered; secondly, that many public services are only accessible through money. There are user charges on primary health in many cases; or public services are so bad you would rather go to a quack doctor in the private sector rather than go to the government health alternative. You are having to pay, if not for school fees, then at least for books and uniforms... So a lot of the things that we thought of as public services are only accessed with money and that is one of the main legacies of the 1980s structural adjustment neoliberal policies. It has had this effect of monetarising household survival. And so women have had to manage.

Debbie: You say that it doesn't make sense to separate out household income along gender lines in most cases, but surely it *does* make sense to look at who has the decision making power and who gets to benefit.

Ruth: Well yes, but I think that is rather a simplistic way of looking at it. There are other ways of approaching those kinds of issues from a gender perspective which I find more helpful. There is for instance a model of cooperative conflict which looks at the way in which women and men have joint interests in the household, and also are in conflict, and recognises that women's sense of well-being is very much tied in with the sense of well-being of the whole household. The notion of individual welfare is actually quite problematic in lots of contexts, including ours. And I would see gender as a social relation rather than an individual attribute. So if you are looking at a poor household in which there are forms of subordination and power within the household, one of the things that matters is: up to what point will women accept the negative aspects in order to trade their own survival, the survival of their children and so on? and at what point will they exit that situation? Having financial resources independently of that situation is likely to make a difference, whatever culture we are talking about. I think that bringing money into the household, and particularly into

the hands of women, can create the possibility for women to participate directly in the market rather than having to go through men and non-marketised forms of exchange. So potentially it can be very empowering.

Joan: Can we go back to what you were saying about women being very good at managing money but not at controlling it. What exactly do you mean by 'controlling' it?

Ruth: What I mean is deciding what happens to household income and household investment — whether your money is going towards a holiday or a DIY tool or to take the kids out for a day, or to pay off your debts. Research indicates that, certainly in heterosexual households, regardless of women's financial contributions, it is predominantly men who make the decisions about how it will be used. But you can break the management of money down into enormous numbers of subtasks: checking the bank statements, paying the household bills, organising repayments... There's a whole series of financial activities that women clearly manage perfectly well, but it doesn't mean that they have ultimate control of the household budget, and they usually don't expect to.

Feminists and money

Debbie: The question I wanted to bring up is: What should feminists do with their money in a society like ours? I think there is a tremendous embarrassment and confusion amongst middle class professional feminists about how to handle having any amount of money.

Ruth: It's interesting that when I was in the Netherlands I met a group called Women of Inherited Wealth...

[uproarious laughter]

Debbie: You'd never find a group called that here!

Ruth: There's also an organisation called MamaCash, which was founded in the 70s by a woman who had inherited a lot of money. She founded this organisation, and invested the income to support women's projects in the Netherlands, and, interestingly, credit projects in third world countries — and in the 1980s stock market crash that kind of income just disappeared, so they then had to refinance it and she brought in a lot of other relatively wealthy women as donors at that point. There are some women who are seriously rich through inherit-

ance; if you look at the property market in Britain for instance, quite a lot of our generation, or younger women, are potentially going to acquire considerable financial assets.

In order to think about what feminists could do with their money, we have to begin by accepting that we have money. The second thing is that we have to have a life-cycle approach to money, and be much more intelligent about how we use the financial industry and the diversification of financial products. There's a proposal I have been touting around to various community finance or social bankers — which is that we should have a women's unit trust or bond — I've called it a GONAD as a working title — in which women could invest, and like a social investment, or an ethical investment, you would receive a fixed rate of interest which would be sub market rate. You would put your money in a safe investment which would accumulate for the future, but the differential could be used to reinvest in women's projects and women's organisations. Because I think money is tremendously powerful, and that's how I think we should look at it, rather than thinking that as feminists we should have nothing to do with it. We are in a monetarised world; there are women who do have access to money; let's think what we can do with it collectively.

Joan: There seem to be fewer and fewer independent social investment schemes that are not part of some larger, grossly unethical banking conglomerate. And of those that do exist, I haven't come across any that invest directly in women's projects.

Ruth: Independence doesn't necessarily guarantee that a company or product is ethical. Social banking is growing, and it's interesting how it differs from ethical investment. NatWest have just launched a community bond which operates on much the same principle as my GONAD bond; they found it difficult to market — they tried to sell it to the ethical investor, who wants to know that they are not exploiting child labour, and they weren't interested, so they had to relaunch it. I thought it was interesting what they had to say about it which was that ethical investment is for people who don't want to do any harm, and social investment is for people who want to do some good.

Debbie: If you get GONAD off the ground, let me know. I think there would be a number of women interested in investing in such a scheme.

It's a great idea, though not a particularly pleasant name.

Ruth: I would be happy to consider alternatives! The point was to begin to think about what we can do with money. A lot of charities operate through wills; they get a lot of their income from legacies. And clearly for women's trusts that's a possible source of funding. In the US there are hundreds of women's trusts, and in Britain I think there is one, in the North of England; it's not something we have thought about really. As funding and resources for women's organisations have dried up we ought to be thinking about what we can do with money politically, individually and collectively. Why not a Women's Lottery Fund? Professional women have professional salaries, and may well have professional pensions — but how are most women going to support themselves through an active older age? Women of our mother's generation no doubt sat with their disagreeable husbands and waited for life to end — but there wasn't a sense of positively planning one's post-retirement life. Secondly, I know lots of women who don't expect to rely on their children or relatives for financial support, and so need actively to plan for their financial security in older life.

Joan: As for middle class women of our mother's generation — most of them long outlived their disagreeable husbands, and found themselves managing, and controlling, money in a way they had never done in their lives before. And where women of our generation are concerned, I don't think it's women on professional salaries who are generally embarrassed by it, least of all women from working class backgrounds; it tends to be women of inherited wealth. In fact, the state of your salary seems to be a measure of how well you have resisted being exploited by whatever institution or organisation you are employed by, and a measure of how far you value your own skills and persuade others to recognise them. According to which I don't appear to have fared too well!

Microcredit

Ruth: I worked in Norwich for this microcredit group for low income women, which was an adaptation of the Grameen Bank...

Debbie: Why is it called microcredit, apart from the fact that micro just means very small?

Ruth: That's precisely why, because they

HAVE I
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OR AM I
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started with loans of £500, which for a business is absolutely tiny. It's micro also in the sense that it functions at a level of credit that the mainstream financial institutions just won't touch, because they think the transaction costs are too great. A lot of the women we were dealing with had such limited access to income, being dependent on benefits or social security, that the risk of losing that, even if you can get working capital to set up your own business, jeopardising not only your own but your children's livelihood, it's an enormous big step. We worked hard then, and are still negotiating with the Treasury, to try to get a welfare bridge so that you don't have to risk everything at once. Working through the business training programme, so many women said it was the first time they had understood how their household accounts worked, so that they could make active choices, and they found it empowering. In the classic

Grameen style, they were organised into borrowing groups. One of the reasons they lent to women, in these Asian microcredit groups, was because they were such good repayers, and they were good at managing the funds etc., but partly it was the group collateral, you organised the group so that it put social pressure on the group members to repay, and it was felt that women were much more susceptible to that kind of peer pressure.

Debbie: Can you tell us something about WEETU [Women's Employment, Enterprise and Training Training Unit]?

Ruth: This was an organisation that we set up in the mid-80s, around issues of women's employment and so on. We've had an advocacy role, and also run a guidance service for women about training, and we had quite an interesting project on the accreditation of prior learning through unpaid work so that you could get a

BUT WILL YOU STILL LIKE ME IF I'M A MILLIONAIRE ?



RING A FRIEND

management qualification from home management or community work. And we wanted to do something about money, and initially I wanted to have a crisis bank but then the new director, who had experience of development studies, was keen to see if we could replicate the microcredit experience, and there had been some interesting work done in North America (in Chicago) on community finance. It took about 18 months to put together a package of funding from the National Lottery and the European Union; it predated the current interest of this government in community finance and regeneration. And we are now at the end of a 3 year cycle of funding and we have to refinance the project, and the Government just announced a Phoenix Fund in which it promised 30 million pounds for such initiatives. So far it is more words than action, but there has been some interest by the present Government in supporting community based microfinance projects.

Debbie: Do they generate the means of their own regeneration?

Ruth: The idea is that the loan fund itself will service itself; it will be a revolving fund. We have been lent the capital for the loan fund by the social bankers, the Community Aid Foundation, the NatWest... But there is an issue in discussion about microcredit: people talk about financial sustainability — that it will pay for itself; it may well pay for the administration of the loan fund but it doesn't pay for all the complementary training and support that women need in order to move into a position where they can make a living by developing front-room businesses. And our experience is that, partly because of women's problematic relationship to money and business, the kind of support that is needed is quite

extensive. You need to build up the lending circles, and the kind of support that women give each other is crucial in giving women the confidence to take out a loan and start a business.

Joan: You've talked about the fact that women have only just had money, but women have only recently had access to other things — professional jobs for instance — and property, as well as opportunities for independent decision making about a range of issues. So why is money such a sticking point? And if it is, how do we address it?

Debbie: I don't think money is the only problematic thing. It may be the most important one, but success, for instance is another problem for women, and of course they go together. Also I don't know how much of this is about women. What I'm talking about is more to do with a feminist, or a socialist, ethic of equality; what bothers me is the inequality of money.

Ruth: There are two separate issues here: the issue of embarrassment about having enough, or a surplus, of money; and what I am talking about now, low income households where women's access to money has been very dependent on men or on very low income jobs or on the State. Now I'm talking about a project which says to women: Borrow some money, start your business, and make a living. And they don't think they have those resources; they are very unconfident about making a go of it. Many of the business pundits will tell us that all they need is the money, and what I am saying is that it is not just the money, it's the feeling that you have the skills, that you know how to manage the money, that you can sell your product, that you can change your view of yourself — and your kids' and neighbours' view of you — instead of being somebody who just scrapes by, you are someone who is going to get out there and make it work for you. So it's not just about the money; and yet that's one of the difficulties of discussing this as a policy issue, because what people grasp is the need for money. And another problem is the way that income support has developed in our kind of society; we used to have the deserving and the undeserving poor, and now it's the honest claimant versus the dishonest claimant. So if there's any hint of entrepreneurial activity, the reaction is that you don't deserve your income, rather than seeing that as the first stage towards independence from the State.

Debbie: Is there a problem with women

thinking that they will be alienated from their peer group if they go for such initiatives, and prove successful?

Ruth: Well, probably, except that you are creating peer groups with these lending circles... in a way you are creating alternative or 'virtual' communities

Debbie: Which is of course precisely why that would be so effective.. as with the analogy of professional success. Because, for example, when you have staff and you encourage someone to go for promotion, they don't want to have to deal with the resentment and hostility of their colleagues; they may resist because solidarity is also a pull, sometimes stronger than money.

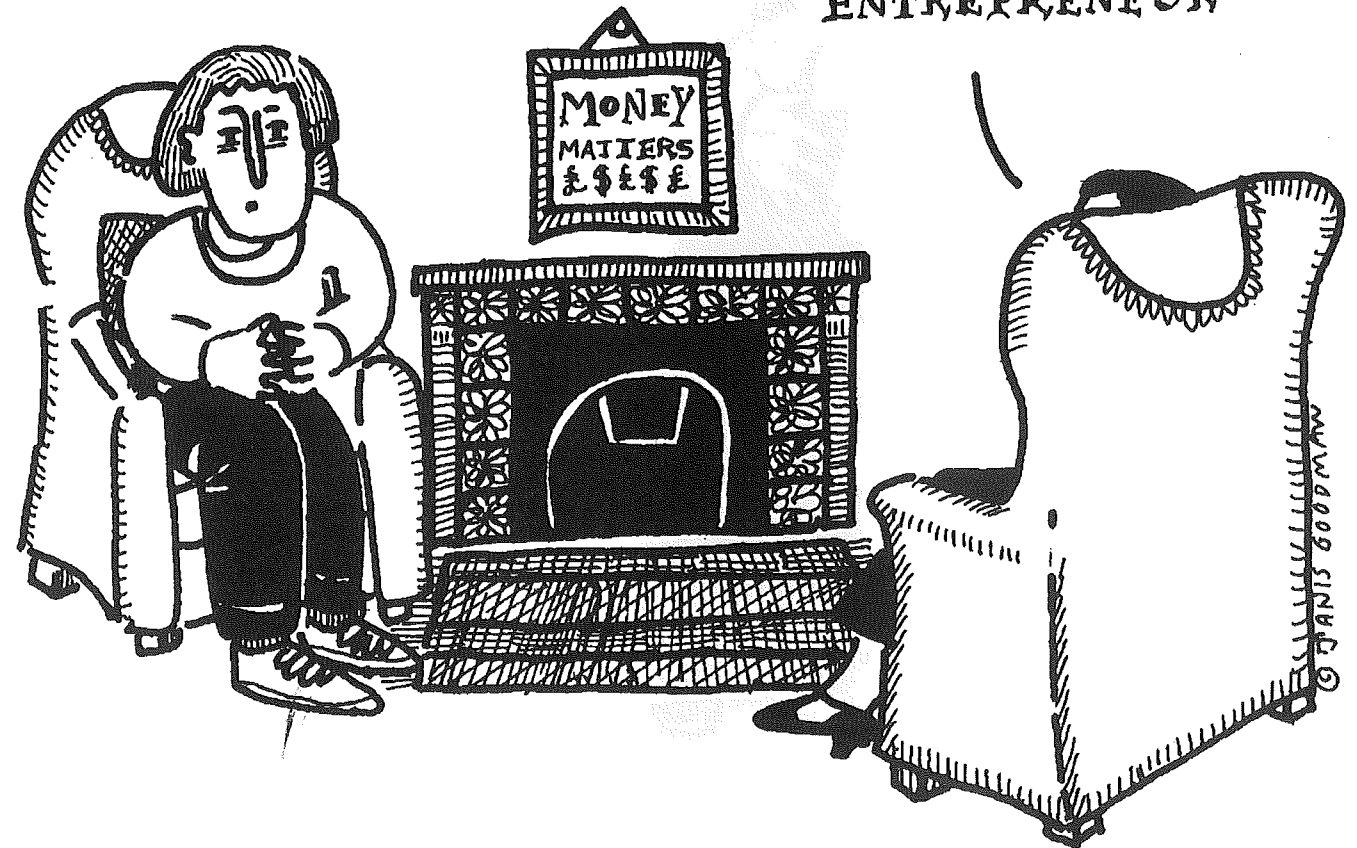
Ruth: That's true, but also sometimes the monetary increments are so small that the extra money isn't worth having a miserable life. Also there is something — I don't know if it's cultural or circumstantial — but there is this fear of putting yourself forward, a fear of failure...

Debbie: I think it's fear of people being horrible to you. If I put myself forward and it doesn't work that's one thing, but if I find myself with no friends as a result that's something else.

Joan: This may be a sweeping generalisation but I still find it astonishing the number of hugely competent women who feel fraudulent in some way, that they don't merit the success they have had, and are afraid that they will be 'found out' and found wanting. Whereas men who are spectacularly incompetent in positions of responsibility have no difficulty in perceiving themselves as eminently well suited to jobs they are transparently not doing very well.

Ruth: There was an article in the THES [Times Higher Educational Supplement] some years ago which proposed that women would have equality in the academy when they are 50% of professors,

TRY AND FIND YOUR INNER ENTREPRENEUR





50% chairs of key committees, and when 50% of them are incompetent.

But to get back to your point, I think we need to distinguish between issues around money in excess, and when it's too scarce. And what I am interested in is how as feminists we can address that cross-class issue of women and money; that's why it's important to look at how we can mobilise the financial resources of those who have money in order to forward political organisation.

Joan: Philanthropy suggests that money is not someone's right, it's within someone else's gift. Whereas if resources are treated as a matter of solidarity, and as a principled way of using money to benefit the larger group, then it removes it from the sphere of guilt, embarrassment, and all those useless emotions which go with political apathy.

Alternative currencies

Ruth: I was talking to Debbie earlier about alternative currencies. And I do think that there are ways of using alternative currencies as a form of cross-class solidarity that is probably worth thinking about. There is a group in New York called WomanPower which operates through a time currency and exchanges hours of work like a time bank — anything from ringing someone up to remind them to take their medicine, to therapy, to going shopping. You could combine the feminist ethics of care and solidarity with organising an alternative market, and thinking about money helps you think about alternative means of exchange.

Joan: But how do you regulate alternative means of exchange, like time banks?

Ruth: I think it has to be self-regulating, in that you have to trust people to participate in it under the rules that have been agreed ... In WomanPower in New York they have restricted the size of the group in order to be able to control it. But how do you control other forms of exchange anyway? Even when there's a whole regulatory framework, you still have fraud. I guess things work by having 'cells' where people have actually committed to the rules.

I think there are real issues here; the present government and social services are quite keen on time banks for various kinds of community support and there are real issues about regulation.

Debbie: I suppose that's about getting the

unemployed to do all the social work the government doesn't want to pay for.

Ruth: Yes, there's that, but I think one also has to see the positive side of giving people a stake in their neighbourhoods and giving people a sense that their skills are valued even if they don't have a market value. On the other hand, particularly when you are talking about domiciliary care, who vets the people who comes into your house? There are real issues of regulation that need to be looked at here.

Debbie: Many of these schemes in Britain at the present time are run by ex-hippies in small communal settings...

Ruth: The example I saw in Argentina was in one of the old textile mills which had shut down, in a working class neighbourhood, and it was like a big Sunday market with an alternative currency — with a picture of a tree on it — and people were buying with this currency — clothes and meat and vegetables, and there was a tarot reader and a doctor and a lawyer and so on — and there were about 800 people there on a Sunday morning. And they reckon, according to their own figures, that households have increased their consumption by \$600-800 a month, which is considerable in that economy. It's the only example I know on that scale, and which is also across class. There are examples in New York State — Ithaca Hours is I think the nearest model — where it's not so much a physical market, but one where people exchange the currencies for goods and services, and mainstream businesses also accept them as payment for services.

Joan: Isn't it largely women who have done work which traditionally has no market value, and which is either not seen as work, or at best as work done for love, or out of some kind of biological imperative, and does that matter?

Ruth: I think it depends very much on the economic context in which it happens; certainly in New York State, and in the province of Buenos Aires, this is a reaction to economic recession there are a lot of people who are unemployed and can't access money income and in that kind of situation all kinds of goods and services are exchanged. In the context of contemporary Britain, where it is very much aimed at the so called 'socially excluded'. I think it is very

likely to be quite gendered in terms of what is exchanged. But on the other hand that very system of exchange could also challenge traditional divisions.

Debbie: How did people decide on the cost of things paid for by the currency with a tree on it?

Ruth: They set their own prices...

Debbie: So it does work like a real market...

Ruth: And there are rules about setting fair prices, and to guarantee the quality of your products — and I did ask what would happen if people ignored these rules, and they simply said that no-one would buy their products. So it is a real market in that sense too.

Joan: But in that case, won't this market also be gendered in the value that is set on particular goods and services, with a lower value being attached to particular skills?

Debbie: If you're right, Joan, presumably it would be things that were scarce that would be valued most highly. Then if demand outstripped supply — say for caring, it would force the price up, whereas the man with the blowtorch wouldn't be in such great demand. I do think, however, that tarot readers and people like that should only be allowed to charge in alternative currencies!

Joan: Is an hour always an hour, whatever the work? You couldn't for instance exchange two hours of cleaning for one hour of decorating because the latter is assumed to have a higher value?

Ruth: No. The principle of time banks is that an hour is a fixed time unit, regardless of the market value of the activity. So that does alter the terms of trade and exchange. But from what I know about time banks in Britain, very often people donate time but they don't buy with it; whereas in Argentina you have to be a producer and a consumer in order to make the thing work. But I think it has worked there because it is such a recessionary situation that people are happy to participate in alternative markets — it's not an act of good neighbourliness; it's an act of survival. But I think it shows the potential of alternative currencies.

Joan: There is so much more to be said; and this is just the beginning of the discussion. □

Gendering the genitals

The first pronouncement made on the birth of a baby is usually 'It's a girl' or 'it's a boy'. What happens when a baby is not easily classifiable into one of these either/or categories? Stevi Jackson reviews two recent books on intersexuality and discusses their implications for feminism.

There has been a great deal of discussion in recent years about the bending, blending, blurring and transgression of gender boundaries. The old-style transsexual who simply wanted to *be* a member of 'the other sex' has given way to a new style 'gender outlaw' who lays claim to a liminal, transgendered status (see Debbie Cameron in this issue). Much is made of the supposedly destabilising potential of such gender transgression. Far less is heard about those who are born neither clearly female nor clearly male but who are quite literally forced, without their consent and often with the aid of invasive and damaging surgical techniques, into one category or the other. These are the intersexed or, as they are increasingly calling themselves, intersexuals. This hidden population has, in the last few years, begun to organise politically against a medical establishment that mutilates their bodies and against a social order that makes living as a hermaphrodite impossible. Two recent books

have taken up their cause and put the issue firmly back on the feminist agenda: Suzanne Kessler's *Lessons from the Intersexed* and Anne Fausto-Sterling's *Sexing the Body*.

Sex differences and intersex

Both Susanne Kessler and Anne Fausto-Sterling start from the assumption that biological sex differences cannot themselves be taken for granted, but they approach the problem from somewhat different angles. Anne Fausto-Sterling is a feminist biologist who has, for many years, been challenging the scientific orthodoxy on sex and gender, notably in *Myths of Gender*. She can usually be counted on to expose the faulty methodology underlying the latest scientific fads (such as ideas about 'gay brains' and 'gay genes'). One point she has consistently made is that research of this kind is inevitably biased by scientists' presuppositions. In particular, it is assumed in advance that there are two distinct

groups, female and male (or gay/lesbian and straight) and that differences between them can be found in everything from hormones, through brain function to particular aptitudes. Since scientists set out to look for differences rather than similarities, and since they design their studies in terms of dichotomies rather than continua, they simply find what they were looking for — which then further confirms the 'rightness' of the presuppositions they started with.

This argument also underpins *Sexing the Body* — some of which deals simply with research on sex differences *per se* — although it is the focus on intersex, the main subject of the book, which I will discuss here. Fausto-Sterling shows how scientific assumptions about the 'naturalness' and normality of sexual duality underpin the medical management of those whose bodies contradict these assumptions: these bodies are literally forced to fit in with what is deemed 'natural'. She charts the history of scientific ideas about intersex and provides copious (and sometimes gruesome) details on modern medical interventions. For anyone interested in such details, *Sexing the Body* is a useful source of information. Where Fausto-Sterling's analysis is less convincing, however, is in her discussion of the consequences of intersex for the ways in which we theorise sex and gender. Indeed her conceptualisation of sex, gender and sexuality is sometimes extremely blurry and confusing, especially in her first chapter.

Lessons from the Intersexed is a shorter and much more satisfying book. It is focused more exclusively on the social construction of intersex and is based upon interviews with the doctors who diagnose and treat intersexed children, parents of intersexed children and adult intersexual activists. Unlike Anne-Fausto-Sterling, Suzanne Kessler underpins her argument with a consistent and explicit theory of gender. This derives from her earlier collaboration with Wendy McKenna. In *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach*, published in 1978, Kessler and McKenna developed one of the earliest critiques of the sex-gender distinction, arguing that there is no sex, only socially constructed gender. Since ethnomethodology is not now fashionable, and may well be unfamiliar to many T&S readers, I will briefly explain its basic premises.

Ethnomethodologists investigate how social order is made possible at the level of everyday social practices, how a shared sense of social

reality is daily constructed and reconstructed through the interpretative work that members of society routinely engage in. They look closely at the unquestioned assumptions underpinning this everyday practical reasoning, revealing that they are social products rather than part of some natural order. One such assumption, of course, is that the world is 'naturally' divided into two sexes or genders. Ethnomethodologists see gender as a practical accomplishment rather than a natural fact. It is the product of gendered performances and the assumptions we bring to reading those performances, thus attributing gender to others. This may sound rather similar to some later postmodern feminist arguments, such as those of Judith Butler. There are some similarities, but ethnomethodology is far more sociologically grounded, focused far more concretely on the mundane, everyday social contexts and practices that are largely absent from the work of Butler and her ilk.

Kessler and McKenna stress the primacy of gender attribution over all other aspects of gender: it is only because we make a gender distinction in the first place that we are able to perceive and talk about differences between women and men. Since the existence of a gendered social reality depends upon the distinction of gender, we cannot get rid of gender inequalities without ridding ourselves of gender itself. Kessler and McKenna use the term 'gender' even when referring to differences assumed to be biological. Hence they refer to 'gender' chromosomes and 'gender hormones' not because they don't understand the sex-gender distinction (see Debbie Cameron in this issue), but because they wish to challenge it. They refuse to accept that gender is founded on a fixed pre-social reality. They suggest that the recognition of all gender differences (including so-called 'biological sex') is always a social act. They develop the idea of 'cultural genitals' — the genitals someone is assumed to have or 'ought' to have (a concept originally suggested by the founder of this perspective, Harold Garfinkel). It is these cultural genitals, rather than biological genitals, that serve as insignia of femaleness or maleness in everyday life.

This, then, is the perspective that informs Kessler's analysis of intersexuality. Despite her insistence on the term 'gender', she continues to use the words 'intersex' or 'intersexed' (to describe the condition) and intersexuals (to describe those with the condition), apparently

Cartoons by
Grizelda Grizlingham

Anne Fausto-Sterling *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (Basic Books, 2000)

Suzanne J. Kessler *Lessons From the Intersexed* (Rutgers University Press, 1998)

because this is the terminology currently used. There is, currently, no widely accepted alternative vocabulary other than that deriving from the older 'hermaphrodite', a word which denoted someone who was perceived as being a combination of male and female. The term 'intersex' does at least have the virtue of differentiating intersexuals from transsexual and transgendered people, those who choose to change or modify their gender. Some of those embracing the supposed radicalism of being a 'gender outlaw' would rather we saw intersex as part of the same phenomenon — this, for instance, is the position taken by Pat Califia (the well-known S/M activist) in her recent book *Sex Changes*. From a feminist perspective I would prefer to maintain the distinction. For the record, I think that an intersexed woman who is made female in infancy and has lived her whole life as female is a fully social woman in a way that a transsexual or transgendered 'woman' can never be.

I have no idea whether Suzanne Kessler would agree with the point of view I have just outlined, but I find the direction of her argument compelling. She makes it clear that the medical practice of 'correcting' intersex in infancy is shaped by, and serves to reinforce, the taken-for-granted assumptions underpinning our gendered social reality. Thus supporting intersexual activists campaigns against early and non-consensual 'correction' is not only a human rights issue, but also furthers the feminist goal of eradicating gender — or at least reducing its significance. She makes this argument, however, from a perspective that differs from my own, materialist feminist, position. Whereas Kessler, as an ethnomethodologist, asks *how* gender is sustained as a meaningful social distinction, a more structural materialist position asks *why* it exists at all — and answers that why in terms of patriarchal, hierarchical social arrangements. Both, however, are social explanations and there may be room for the insights each offers — although I would always want to retain an emphasis on the power structure underpinning gender as something fundamental to a radical feminist perspective.

Intersex as a feminist issue

It is perhaps strange that feminists have so easily forgotten the intersexed. When, in the 1970s, we began to argue for a concept of socially constructed gender distinct from biological sex, studies of the intersexed were widely cited to

demonstrate that gender and biological sex did not necessarily coincide (see, for example, Ann Oakley's *Sex, Gender and Society*). While biological sex was often taken for granted as a natural fact, even at this stage it was noted that it was not strictly dichotomous, that while most individuals fell into the normal distribution of male and female, a few had a mix of male and female genetic and hormonal markers. Now that it is more widely acknowledged that biological 'sex' is as much a social construction as gender, it is time we looked again at intersex.

There can be no more compelling evidence for the social origins of gender than the management of intersex. The ways in which the medical profession decide which category an intersexed child should be placed in reveals much about our taken for granted assumptions about the interrelationship between sex, gender and sexuality and dramatises the fact that the assignment of sex is always a social act. But this is not the only reason for considering intersex to be a feminist issue. The violence done to the bodies of very young children in the name of making them 'normal' can be seen as involving both genital mutilation and sexual abuse. Feminist perspectives obviously have something to offer here, but feminists may also have something to learn from the experience of the intersexed.

These two issues — social construction of sex and gender and abuse of children's bodies — intersect. The medical management of intersex is evidence of the lengths our society, through its socially appointed medical experts, is willing to go to shore up 'normality' of gender divide. Moreover, the forcible gendering of intersexed bodies serves to conceal those whose bodies might challenge our taken-for-granted assumption that everyone is naturally one or the other: their difference from gendered norms is made to disappear with the aid of the surgeon's scalpel and the endocrinologist's hormones. And because of the secrecy that surrounds this disappearing of hermaphrodite bodies, most of us don't know they ever existed, exacerbating the isolation felt by intersexuals themselves. *Hermaphrodites With Attitude*, the newsletter of the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA) called for breaking the vicious circle in which shame about variant genitals 'produces silence, silence condones surgery and surgery produces more shame (which produces more silence)' (Quoted by Suzanne Kessler pp. 79-80.)

Making intersex (in)visible

So how common is it? Anne Fausto-Sterling comes up with a figure of 1.7% of all births, based on a list of common intersexed conditions for which frequency data is available. This does not include all intersexed conditions, not even all relatively common ones; conversely not all of those she includes necessarily produce obvious gender ambiguities at birth — sometimes incongruous gender markers only become evident at puberty. Some of those who are technically intersexed never become statistics at all; it is possible for a woman who has never been suspected of being anything else to have 'male' chromosomes. She may live out her life without ever knowing she is technically a genetic male — unless she is an athlete, when she might suddenly discover that she does not qualify as a woman. According to the evidence cited by Mariah Burton Nelson (see *T&S* 29/30) about twelve women athletes a year are found to have a Y chromosome — but most agree to retire gracefully and quietly without making their condition publicly known.

Intersex, then, is probably far more common than most of us think. Fausto-Sterling compares it with Albinism, which occurs in only 1 in 20,000 births — yet most of us know about it. Intersex, however, remains invisible and almost unheard of. While conditions which produce obvious genital variance at birth account for only a small proportion of the total intersexed population, they still occur with measurable frequency and often enough for those who work in midwifery and obstetrics to encounter several cases during their careers. Recently a midwife told me that she had delivered two babies with clear gender ambiguity and that most maternity units could expect to see at least one such birth each year.

The existence of hermaphrodites has been recorded throughout Western history, from the time of early Greek and Roman civilization onwards. According to Anne Fausto-Sterling, hermaphrodites have always been regarded as anomalous, but have been treated with varying degrees of tolerance or intolerance at different historical periods and in different countries. Prior to the rise of modern medical management, their fate was largely a legal matter, but in the 19th century, science and medicine began to exert more influence. It was then,



Fausto-Sterling points out, that hermaphrodites began to be made to disappear. A distinction emerged between the 'true' hermaphrodite and the spurious or pseudo-hermaphrodite. By the late 19th century what defined the 'true' hermaphrodite was having the gonads of both sexes — i.e. one ovary and one testis or hybrid ovo-testes. Those who had testes, a vagina and breasts or those with ovaries and a penis were pseudo-hermaphrodites. This

distinction is still with us, with the addition of chromosomal markers. So someone with a vagina, clitoris and breasts but XY chromosomes is a male pseudo-hermaphrodite and someone with XX chromosomes and a penis and typically male body shape is a female pseudo-hermaphrodite. 'True' hermaphroditism on this definition is very rare, occurring about once in 100,000 births.

With twentieth century advances in surgery and endocrinology, it became increasingly possible to make hermaphrodites disappear in a more fundamental way: to transform them physically so that they were placed firmly on one side or the other of the gender divide. The medical histories Fausto-Sterling cites from the 1920s and 1930s mostly concern adults and adolescents, who do not seem to have been coerced into transforming their bodies. Those who opted for medical intervention has a choice, not only about whether to undergo surgery, but about which direction they wanted to go in — and most chose maleness.

Fixing babies

Now most intersexuals have no choice and most are made female. What changed was that, in the second half of the twentieth century, it became easier to locate intersexed individuals as birth and surgically 'correct' them in infancy and childhood. Intersex was constructed as a tragic error of nature, which doctors had a duty to put right. The decisions doctors now take on how to 'put it right', despite being ostensibly based on ideas about the child's 'true sex', are in fact governed by what is technically feasible and by cultural assumptions about 'acceptable' gendered genitals. Hence a genetic female with reproductive potential will almost always be assigned as female even if her genitals look like those of a boy, but a genetic male without an 'adequate' penis may also be assigned to the female category — in part because surgery cannot effectively construct or enlarge penises and also because it is assumed that a secure male identity is unsustainable without a 'proper' penis. So girls are constructed from both genetic girls and genetic boys.

Current medical practice aims to keep this 'problem' invisible by 'normalising' disruptively gendered bodies as fast as possible with as few non-medical personnel as possible knowing about it. Fausto-Sterling describes how doctors react when a child with variant genitals is born in a Western hospital.

They declare a state of medical emergency... there is no time to waste in quiet reflection or open-ended consultations with the parents. No time for the new parents to consult those who have previously given birth to mixed-sex babies or to talk with adult intersexuals. Before twenty-four hours pass, the child must leave the hospital 'as a sex' and the parents must feel certain of the decision. (p.45).

Kessler found, however, that decisions were not always taken this quickly; sometimes more extended testing is undertaken — especially if the child has a Y chromosome and a microphallus that looks like it may have the potential to become a penis. An extended period of gender ambiguity is, however, seen as problematic by medics and a situation that needs to be resolved as fast as possible.

Whether they come to a speedy decision or not, doctors are careful to avoid directly confronting parents with the notion that their child is intersexed. They are told that their child's genitals are ambiguous, not its gender, that the genitals are poorly developed or unfinished, but that the doctors will discover the 'true' gender of the child, correct this 'minor defect' and all will be well. Obviously this medical fiction becomes more difficult to sustain if the doctors can't make up their minds quickly — while the parents have to fend off friends and relatives wanting to know whether they have a boy or a girl. Parents then have to be persuaded to collude with maintaining the silence, to evade others' questions (and are offered various strategies for achieving this). Thus, Kessler says, 'parents are asked to sidestep the question of the infant's gender rather than admit that the gender is unknown, thereby collaborating in a web of white lies, ellipses and mystifications' (p.22).

Rarely are parents given the opportunity for truly informed consent to any of the medical procedures, since they are generally prevented or dissuaded from seeking alternative perspectives. Kessler's letters from and interviews with parents reveal that most, in any case, seem to accept the medical view without questioning it. This she sees as unsurprising: the doctors are perceived as the experts, no other perspectives are available to them and they want their children to look 'normal'.

Parents are presented with a comprehensive treatment plan involving medication and surgery that is presented as imperative and non-negotiable. The medical view is the authoritative view and parents adopt it. (*Lessons from the Intersexed* p. 97)

Challenging the orthodoxy

The sense of medical emergency and doctors' evasiveness about gender ambiguity are based on certain presuppositions: that a secure gender identity must be established as early in life as possible; that to accomplish this, parents must have no doubt about the underlying sex of their infant; that the genitals must be made to match the gender assigned as soon as possible, followed by appropriate hormone treatment at puberty. Neither the child nor the parents should be given reason to question the gender assigned; they must accept that it is 'real' even if it does not conform to the usual biological markers.

These ideas derive from a theory of gender identity developed by John Money, and from his guidelines for medical practice. In particular Money argued that genitals were important not because they directly determined gender, but because they were fundamental to a child's developing sense of herself or himself as a boy or a girl. This has, in the last few decades become the medical orthodoxy, so that the doctors interviewed by Kessler never considered any alternative possibilities or gave credence to any evidence that contradicted the efficacy of Money's regime (see pp.14-16). Money does have a few critics within medicine, but these seem intent on reinforcing gender dualism by accusing Money of paying insufficient attention to the 'true' biological sex of children in making decisions on genital surgery. Anne Fausto-Sterling surveys this work and strangely seems to endorse it, without noticing the reactionary implications of the critique offered (see pp. 66-71). This is peculiar to say the least given that she also cites Kessler's critique approvingly — and Kessler attacks Money from the opposite direction.

It is something of an irony — and one noted by Kessler — that Money's work, which demonstrated the plasticity of gender and the primacy of social over biological factors in shaping it, serves the brutal enforcement of gender dimorphism. Indeed it is precisely the premise that the gender in which we are reared matters more than our underlying biological sex that justifies current medical practice. Kessler argues that earlier theorists of gender, herself included, were so impressed by his scientific 'proof' that gendered identities were socially constructed, that they failed to notice some 'unexamined and deeply conservative assump-

tions embedded in Money's argument.' (p.7)

These she outlines as follows:

Genitals are naturally dimorphic; there is nothing socially constructed about the two categories.

Those genitals that blur the dimorphism belonging to the occasional intersexed person can and should be successfully altered by surgery

Gender is necessarily dichotomous (even if socially constructed) because genitals are naturally dimorphic.

Dimorphic genitals are the essential markers of dichotomous gender.

Physicians and psychologists have legitimate authority to define the relationship between gender and genitals.

(*Lessons from the Intersexed*, p.7)

All of these could be said to boil down to one single assumption — that even if specific gendered identities are constructed, gender itself is somehow natural and inevitable. As Suzanne Kessler says, we need to ask why genitals are considered so important in and of themselves. We also need to ask why the gender division itself has to be sustained at all cost.

Radical intersexual activists are also beginning to ask some similar questions — why, for example, should surgery not be postponed until children are capable of choosing for themselves whether they want to undergo painful surgery and aftercare and why should everyone's bodies be made to fit the narrow criteria of gendered normality? They are not suggesting that such children be made to live without a gender, but that a gender assignment could be made without surgical intervention, allowing for greater choice and flexibility later in life. Since the more radical of these activists are arguing for forms of social change that would make it possible to live with gender ambiguity, it is not surprising that they are not accorded much credibility by the medical profession. Doctors are more willing to enter into dialogue with those who confine themselves to asking for 'improved' forms of treatment. If medics were to take radical intersexuals seriously, they would have to face the possibility that their practices might not be in the interests of their patients, but might serve quite other interests. As Kessler puts it:

Accepting genital ambiguity as a natural option would require that physicians also acknowledge that genital ambiguity is 'corrected' not because it threatens the infant's life, but because it threatens the infant's culture. (p. 32)



When is a micropenis a 'masculinised' clitoris?

There is one obvious conclusion, as Kessler notes, that doctors fail to draw from their work with intersexed children: that gender is always a construction and could be otherwise. They see themselves as merely 'correcting' or 'reconstructing' genitals — never as actively constructing them. Yet they are engaged in the social construction of gender in a very literal sense, in that gender is being made by human intervention

informed by cultural assumptions about what gender ought to be. Here infants' genitals are surgically re-made in the image of cultural genitals — the genitals that doctors decide they ought to have. And what is culturally acceptable is defined in very specific ways, underpinned by gendered and profoundly heterosexist assumptions.

In the vast majority of cases the attribution of gender to a child at birth, although a social act, seems to happen without reflection or delibera-

tion. As Kessler says, those delivering babies do not usually stand with a ruler in their hands measuring the genitals up before they pronounce judgement. But rulers become vitally important once it is decided that the genitals are ambiguous. What we are dealing with here are genitals that disrupt our normal criteria for deciding what male and female genitals are. There are two anatomical structures in question — one is an organ considered too big to be a clitoris or too small to be a penis, the other is something that can be perceived either as fused labia or as a scrotal sac. Such variance can't simply be seen as just that, a variation on human possibilities, but must be redefined in terms of two mutually exclusive categories, female and male. Hence for example, a large clitoris and fused labia are read as masculinisation.

This is where rulers come in and this is where it becomes clear that genitals are only allowed to vary within small limits. To be medically acceptable a baby's clitoris must be under 0.9cm in length and an infant penis (flaccid, but stretched) must be over 2.5cm in length. Both Kessler (on p. 43) and Fausto-Sterling (p. 59) represent this graphically, as markers on a ruler. There is, therefore, a range between 1cm and 2.4cm representing an organ that is unacceptable for either a boy or a girl. The fate of this organ which fails to measure up or down is usually surgical — as is also the case for those labelled clitorises that might technically measure up as penises: Kessler cites one medical study of clitoral reduction involving clitorises that had originally ranged up to 3.5cm in length.

So how are these decisions taken? One factor already mentioned is that genetic females with the potential to bear children will almost always be designated female. This is the case for example, with those suffering from congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH). CAH is one of the few intersexed conditions that may actually require medical intervention since some forms are associated with a potentially life-threatening inability to metabolise salt — though, of course, this does not necessitate genital surgery. Some CAH babies can have genitals that look much like those considered appropriate for a boy, but because their other medical problems are likely to be discovered, they are reassigned as girls and consigned to the operating table.

We also need to consider what it takes to be defined as a boy: a big enough penis and the ability to pee standing up. A 'proper' penis not

only has to be long enough and thick enough, it also has to have a urethra running through it and emerging at the tip of the glans. If the urethra emerges somewhere else — markedly off-centre, halfway along the penis or at its base, the condition is known as hypospadias. Whereas small size can only be altered, if at all, by hormone therapy, hypospadias is dealt with surgically — although severe hypospadias plus small penis usually equals female. Some micropenises will respond to testosterone treatment. This is usually only tried if the organ is considered not too severely undersized — and it takes time to see if it will work. If it doesn't work, the micropenis becomes redefined as a large clitoris, the boy reassigned as a girl and, again, is consigned to the operating table.

If the micropenis grows, don't assume that the boy — for boy he will now be — has a rosy future. In the first place, testosterone treatment simply hastens the penile growth that would normally happen in adolescence. Hence the boy might acquire a penis similar in size to those of his primary school classmates — but it will stay that size. As an adult man he will still have a little boy's penis. Second, he hasn't escaped the surgeon's scalpel — remember he must also be able to pee standing up and the chances are that the micropenis is also hypospadiac. It may require many bouts of surgery to construct a urethral opening in the right place for a proper male — sometimes as many as three operations in the first two years of life, with more later. The numbers of operations undergone by some boys runs into double figures; often further operations are needed to put right mistakes that have been made in earlier ones. A diagnosis of hypospadias is only made, of course, if it has been decided that the child is male. It should also be noted that hypospadias, with all its attendant problems, occurs in boys who are not otherwise considered intersexed. However, hypospadias itself is sometimes considered a form of intersex; it is certainly a form of genital variation and the efforts made to remedy it indicate that it is also considered a deviation from acceptable standards of maleness.

Because it is difficult to enlarge penises surgically, most intersexed children end up as girls. So what happens to them once that gender assignment is made? A word of warning — this is where it gets truly gruesome, so the squeamish may wish to skip the next section.

Constructing girls

The first step in the surgical fix is to 'do something' about the clitoris. Why? Kessler's reading of the medical literature reveals that a large clitoris is considered 'disfiguring', 'deformed', 'offensive', 'offending', 'ungainly', 'unsightly' and, above all 'unfeminine' or 'masculine'. It therefore 'requires' or 'demands' 'corrective surgery', it 'must' be reduced; this is 'necessary' — apparently to produce proper psychological adjustment (see pp.35-38). The main reasons appear to be cosmetic, to make the baby look like a 'proper little girl' so that her parents will accept her as such and rear her as such. Such aesthetic judgements are very clearly based on value judgements, but the medical profession persistently disguises these as 'objective' clinical evaluations.

On the basis of this, drastic action is taken. Up until the 1960s the most popular remedy was simply to excise this offensive and offending organ altogether, to perform a clitoridectomy. When it began to dawn on the medical profession that the clitoris might have something to do with sexual pleasure and orgasmic potential, they tried other methods. Yet they still seemed to be more concerned about how the finished 'corrected' version looked rather than whether it was sexually functional. The two main techniques used are clitoral reduction and clitoral recession. As described by Anne Fausto-Sterling, in clitoral reduction 'the surgeon cuts the shaft ... and sews the glans plus preserved nerves back onto the stump'; in clitoral recession, 'the surgeon hides the clitoral shaft under a fold of skin' (the diagram shows how it is sutured into place) 'so that only the glans remains visible' (p. 61, with diagrams on pages 62 and 63). The initial operation is done as soon after birth as possible, but sometimes further operations are done in order to improve the 'cosmetic effect'. More modern techniques do not necessarily preserve orgasmic function and many adult intersexuals report pain and or hypersensitivity in the clitoris or clitoral stump.

This is not the end of it. Many intersexed girls also have fused or otherwise unusual labia and either very small or non-existent vaginas. Vaginoplasty (the general term for enlarging, creating or modifying a vagina) is considered medically 'necessary' to produce a proper female. Doctors have differing views on when this operation is done: some favour early surgery in the hope that full femaleness will be estab-

lished early and the child may forget about it; some favour leaving it until later given its possible complications. Almost all, however, prefer it to be accomplished before puberty and there seems to be a definite preference for getting it over with before the child is old enough to understand what is being done to her or why. The 'why', of course, is to produce a vagina large enough to accommodate the average erect adult penis.

One surgeon, used to dealing with reconstructive surgery on adult women with vaginal cancers, told Suzanne Kessler that the construction of a vagina in intersexed children is simple by comparison:

So you create a vagina which is no big deal. You create a cavity, line it with some skin which you can take from the buttocks or the thigh and you have a functional vagina. (*Lessons from the Intersexed* p. 60)

No big deal? This is an operation, performed on adult transsexuals as well as child intersexuals, which has a very high failure and complication rate. There is a good chance of post-operative and sometimes continuing infection and growth of painful scar tissue. Other complications can include hair growth at the entrance to the vagina and urinary tract problems. The most common problem, and one affecting almost all those who have the operation in infancy, is stenosis, a narrowing of the vaginal canal 'requiring' (i.e. according to the surgeons) further operations. The new or enlarged vagina has to be kept open with the daily use of a dilator and often, despite all efforts, closes up again — resulting in repeated surgery, more infection, more scarring and so on. For example, Anne Fausto-Sterling reports one review of vaginoplasties on 28 girls carried out at John Hopkins University Hospital between 1970 and 1990. 22 of these girls required further surgery; of these, 17 had already had two surgeries and five had already had three. Kessler cites a number of studies indicating a similar pattern. The human suffering behind such statistics must be immense.

Even adult transsexuals sometimes give up in the face of the problems this operation causes — and they made a choice to begin with and were usually fully informed about the dangers and pain involved. Children are not — they must simply endure butchery of their genitals without even understanding why it is happening. The evidence provided by both Suzanne Kessler and Anne Fausto-Sterling is that children suffer genital mutilation combined with follow-up

treatment that is tantamount to sexual abuse.

At the very least intersexed children often undergo repeated medical procedures on and examinations of their genitals. Adult intersexuals often recall that repeated examinations, often conducted in front of a retinue of medical students, were a constant cause of embarrassment and humiliation in their childhoods. Even simple medical examinations can be abusive. One intersexed man told Anne Fausto-Sterling of the experience of being masturbated by doctors in his childhood in order to measure penile growth and function — apparently a not uncommon practice. Probably the worst form of abuse, though, is the effect of repeated vaginal dilation of intersexed girls. One mother interviewed by Kessler hoped that the doctors would delay vaginoplasty on her daughter until later. She expressed a fear that children might experience it as abuse, citing the case of another woman whose 18 month old daughter had been pulling out her eyelashes and biting her nails in response to the dilation. Kessler asks: 'Do physicians suppose that a young child understands that a painful, humiliating procedure done for "appropriate medical purposes" is not sexual abuse?' (p. 63).

Given that creating a vagina can take several operations this procedure can dominate much of a child's life. Older, adolescent, girls are supposed to take responsibility for dilating themselves. While doctors admit that this imposes a psychological burden on them, they nonetheless see a patient's refusal to comply as a sign of immaturity or inadequate counselling. They take the same attitude to those who refuse further surgery, whether to enlarge the vagina or further reduce the clitoris — rarely do they question the supposed 'need' for repeated surgery. Large numbers of intersexed patients are recorded as 'lost to follow-up', but medics see this as a failure in their patients rather than in the treatment on offer.

Keeping children in their gendered place

The management of intersexed children does not end in infancy. Not only does it often entail further surgery and hormone therapy, but it also means giving children some sort of comprehensible account of what is happening to them. Such accounts are, however, rarely honest since it is assumed that it might be psychologically damaging for them to know the truth. They are therefore consistently deceived and misled about

the real reasons for the 'treatment' they are receiving. Often they are not told the whole truth even when they reach adulthood.

One particularly dramatic case recounted by Anne-Fausto Sterling is that of ISNA activist Alice Moreno. In 1985, at the age of twelve, her clitoris grew to 1.5 inches in length. She was unperturbed by this, but her mother noticed and took her to a doctor. She was told she had cancer and needed a hysterectomy:

When she awoke from surgery, however, her clitoris was gone. Not until she was twenty-three did she find out she was XY and had testes, not ovaries. She never had cancer. (*Sexing the Body* p. 84)

Less cruel forms of deception can also be damaging. In an anonymous letter sent to the *BMJ* in 1994, one woman told how she had never been given any information about her condition — she had pieced together bits and pieces from casual remarks by doctors and nurses and then, in adolescence, gone to a medical library to find out for herself. Far from being comforted by the evasiveness of the medical profession, she felt betrayed — and called for more openness and honesty in the treatment of intersexed children (see *Sexing the Body* p. 84).

Adult intersexuals are now actively campaigning for greater honesty, but they face an uphill struggle. One problem with changing medical practice is that doctors, as we all know, do not have the same ideas about honesty and openness as the rest of us. They are used to giving patients sketchy and partial accounts of their medical conditions, practiced at evading questions and silencing patients who want to know too much. Consider how much worse the situation is where there is a medical rationale for denying the truth. Kessler's data suggests that doctors are sometimes not even aware of being dishonest. An endocrinologist gave Kessler an account of what he had said to a fourteen year old girl with XY chromosomes. He told her that 'her ovaries weren't normal and had been removed' — this is why she needed hormone pills. He went on:

I wanted to convince her of her femininity. Then I told her she could marry and have normal sexual relations...[Her] uterus won't develop but [she] could adopt children. (*Lessons from the Intersexed* p. 29)

Kessler ran this explanation past other doctors in her sample, none of whom thought it was problematic. One said 'He's stating the truth, and if you don't state the truth...you're in



trouble later.' Given that this young woman had been born with testes rather than ovaries and had no uterus at all, this is, as Kessler says, a 'strange version of "the truth"' (p. 29). Apparently this is a common explanation given to women with XY chromosomes, despite the fact that they might at some stage discover this. Kessler suggests that today's increasingly litigious

climate may force doctors to change — and some are beginning tentatively to suggest that greater honesty might be possible with older patients. Few, however, advocate total honesty at any stage.

FGM & IGM

Lied to, mutilated and abused, it is hardly surprising that intersexuals are becoming militant. Nor is it surprising that they should look for political allies. One parallel which could be drawn is with FGM, female genital mutilation. In 1997 the ISNA started to refer to intersex surgery as IGM, in order to make the comparison clear. They also hoped that that legislation to outlaw genital mutilation in the USA could be used to prevent surgery on intersexed children.

While the ISNA hoped to make common cause with those campaigning against FGM, they received no support from that quarter. Suzanne Kessler reports that none of the major campaigners around FGM in the USA has been willing to consider genital mutilation of the intersexed as a related issue. Fran Hosken, author of *The Hosken Report: Genital and Sexual Mutilation of Females* wrote as follows to Cheryl Chase, founder of ISNA:

I am really dealing with quite a different topic from what you are interested in — that is, we are not concerned with biological exceptions, but rather with the excuses that are used to mutilate female infants that are both colorful and imaginative. (Quoted by Kessler, pp. 80-81).

To say this to a woman who has suffered complete excision of her clitoris must at least rank as insensitive. Kessler sees the distinction Hosken makes as spurious and there are certainly grounds for questioning it. Of course FGM and IGM take place in different contexts, have different meanings and consequences. There is a difference between societies where all girls are potential candidates for genital mutilation and those, like our own, where only those with unusual genitals suffer this fate. However, there

are also commonalities beyond the mere facts of painful and damaging genital mutilation and lack of informed consent.

Both FGM and IGM are about constructing culturally appropriate genitals and acceptably gendered individuals. Most IGM entails making females and hence it could be argued that both FGM and IGM entail the control of women's bodies, that both are underpinned by the assumption that female sexuality exists to service men. In both cases it could be argued that the genital mutilation is part of the apparatus of compulsory heterosexuality. Drawing a distinction between the two sets of practices might be a means of recognising cultural difference and specificity — but this can be double-edged. It can serve to render 'exotic' and 'barbaric' the mutilation of 'other' women, 'elsewhere' in the world without exposing the equally brutal mutilation performed under the cloak of clinical 'necessity' closer to home. For decades Black feminists have been warning us against pathologising practices such as FGM while failing to look critically at our own damaging cultural practices. Drawing out the similarities between IGM and FGM might be a way of avoiding this.

Gender and heterosexuality

Medical practice assumes, in Anne Fausto-Sterling's words that 'a healthy intersexual is a straight intersexual' (p. 71). Surgical intervention to create femaleness clearly takes for granted women 'need' a 'functional' vagina — one large enough to be penetrated by the average penis — while treating a functional clitoris as an optional extra. Conversely a male must have a penis large enough for penetration — and doctors are clear that they mean vaginal penetration. Moreover, doctors evaluate psychological adjustment in adulthood in terms of heterosexual orientation — if an intersexed woman turns out to be a lesbian, they have failed. Clearly, where intersex is concerned — as elsewhere — gender and sexuality are closely intertwined.

Anne Fausto-Sterling goes further than this in suggesting that it is because of the social and political impulse to regulate sexuality that there is so much concern about keeping us within the boundaries of a binary gender system. This is certainly one reason why gender is so rigidly

controlled, but I am wary of attributing the existence of a gendered social order entirely to the maintenance of heterosexuality. Suzanne Kessler suggests that the relationship may work the other way around: that certain genitals are defined as necessary markers of gender and that gender is then further validated by using those genitals heterosexually. However we theorise the link between gender and heterosexuality, though, it is clear that the problems faced by intersexed children are unlikely to be solved while we still have a rigid gender division.

Some see the problem here as one of the binary divide — suggesting that if we permitted more genders or more fluid gender boundaries there would be a place for all those who do not fit easily either as men or as women. This argument is commonly stated by Queer theorists and those interested in transgender as a form of gender outlawism. It is also the position Anne Fausto-Sterling took in earlier articles on intersexuality, arguing for up to five genders reflecting the variability of genitals. In *Sexing the Body*, however, she concedes ground to Kessler's critique of this position, noting that it still gives genitals in and of themselves too much importance. Kessler goes further and suggests that if we focus on 'cultural' genitals we can begin to see that genitals have importance only because of their social significance, and they are socially significant because they provide a bodily grounding for gender oppression. It makes no sense to her (or to me) that we multiply gender categories. Instead, she says, we 'must use whatever means we have to give up on gender' (p. 132).

Kessler arrives at this conclusion, as I indicated at the outset, from a perspective that differs from my own. She focuses on gender as an interactional accomplishment, whereas I tend to see it primarily as a structural hierarchy. In a sense, though, it is both of these things. The point I would make is that we can't challenge a hierarchical system by creating more positions or ranks within it. Where Kessler and I agree is that in the absence of gender intersexuality would finally *really* disappear: variant genitals would no longer matter socially and there would be no grounds for their compulsory surgical mutilation. □

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Uncomfortable truths

During the Second World War, large numbers of women, most of them Korean, were forced into prostitution by the Japanese military. A combination of official denial by the Japanese and shame on the part of many survivors and their communities kept the issue from being raised publicly for 50 years. Here Yonson Ahn explains how the silence was broken, describes the grassroots campaigns that were set up by women activists in the 1990s, and explores the continuing tensions between feminist and nationalist perspectives.

The Japanese soldiers euphemistically called them 'Comfort Women'. The women's ages ranged from 12 to the 20s. They were forced, kidnapped, lured, deceived, or sold to service the sexual needs of the Japanese military in their occupied regions and fields of war before and during World War II.

It seems that from the beginning of the 1930s 'comfort stations', mainly private, were set up in Manchuria, China. The first military comfort stations were set up in Shanghai in 1932, according to a written document. An extensive deployment of comfort stations for the exclusive use of the military started in 1937 after the Nanjing Massacre, where 115,000 Chinese civilians were killed. The precise number of women forced to engage in the 'Comfort Women' system is not easy to estimate because substantial military documents containing this informa-

tion were destroyed or not released. Japanese soldiers referred to the comfort station as *nigyuuchi* ('29 to 1'), a reference to the number of men each woman was expected to service each day; this may also be a reference to the ratio of the number of 'Comfort Women' needed relative to the number of Japanese soldiers. Based on this, the total number of 'Comfort Women' is estimated at between 80,000 and 200,000.

According to a 1944 report by the U.S. Office of War Information, the 'comfort girls' were found wherever it was necessary for the Japanese Army to fight. So far, evidence of comfort stations has been confirmed in China, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, British-colonised Borneo, Indonesia, Thailand, Burma, New Guinea, Okinawa, Korea, Vietnam, and the southern Pacific islands. 'Comfort Women' came from Japan and from

Japanese colonies in Korea and Taiwan, as well as from Japanese occupied territories toward the end of the war, such as China, the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Burma. Dutch women were also used as 'Comfort Women' in Indonesia.

It is generally accepted that Korean women comprised 80 to 90 percent of the total number of 'Comfort Women'. The reason that the vast majority of these women came from Japanese colonies like Korea is because of the International Convention for the Suppression of Traffic in Women and Children, which Japan ratified in 1925. The Convention excluded women in a country's colonies from its provisions.

Responses of the Japanese Government

When the issue began to receive public attention in South Korea and Japan in 1990, the first response of a Japanese official was that the 'Comfort Women' did not exist in the Japanese military. This angered the Korean women's movement and gave it further impetus for activism. It enraged a former 'Comfort Woman', Kim Haksun, who first challenged the politics of forgetting in August 1991 in Korea:

How can the Japanese government deny its role in the comfort station system, as here I am as a living witness. I have lived so far burying my horrible past in the deepest bottom of my heart, but I cannot stand any more that Koreans forget the past.¹

The Japanese government declared in 1990 that there was no evidence of the forced drafting of Koreans as 'Comfort Women', and thus that there could be no question of any apology, memorial or disclosures by the Japanese government. The Japanese government also claimed that the system was the work of neither the Japanese government nor the military, but rather that of private entrepreneurs. However, a Japanese historian, Yoshimi Yoshiyaki, a professor at Chuo University in Japan, has subsequently obtained wartime correspondence which unequivocally shows the direct role of the Japanese military in the 'Comfort Women' system. The former Japanese Prime Minister, Miyajawa, admitted for the first time that the Japanese Imperial Army was in some way involved in the running of 'Comfort Women' facilities in 1992.

However, the Japanese government still claimed that compensation was out of the question, since the reparations treaty was sealed

in 1965. There was a comprehensive agreement between the Japanese and the South Korean government that 'normalised' diplomatic relations, and this included economic agreements providing substantial aid to South Korea. But the issue of 'Comfort Women' was not addressed.²

The 'Asian Peace and Friendship Fund for Women' which had been launched in Japan in 1995 is based on donations from Japanese civilians. Korean women's activists have been showing strong objections against the scheme and demanded that 'reparation should be made by the Japanese government directly to the individual victims with an official apology'.

Silence

The issue of 'Comfort Women' was not heard of until fifty years after World War II. This issue has been dealt with by neither the Western Allies nor post-war Japanese and Korean governments. The Western Allies were well aware of the magnitude of the Japanese use of 'Comfort Women' throughout Asia.³ In 1948, thirteen Japanese soldiers were punished by the Batavia Court for forcing about 35 Dutch women to become 'Comfort Women' in Indonesia during the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies. At the same time, the local Indonesian women, who had also been raped by the Japanese soldiers, were ignored. No charge was ever brought to the Tokyo War Crimes Trials, formally called the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (1946-1948), for the sexual enslavement of Asian women.

Why has the silence lasted so long? There has been a politics of not talking about and forgetting the past, especially by former pro-Japan military governments in South Korea before 1990. Issues of Japanese colonial history and the war—including the issue of 'Comfort Women'—have often been deemed 'matters of the past' which implies that it would not be sensible to raise them again in the present.

Another reason can be found in the sexual representation of power. Chungmoo Choi argues that the reason the issue has been suppressed for so long has to do with the relationship between Korean women and the men who possess the legal and social power to 'represent' them. For example, among questions relating to the war which were raised in post-war Korea, the issues of male war dead and former forced labourers were prioritised: these issues were raised by members of the Fraternity of Pacific War

Victims' Families of Korea (*Hanguk tepyongyang yujokhoe*) while the issue of the 'Comfort Women' was dropped. The particular past of 'Comfort Women' was excluded from history in post-war Korea.

Research related to the Japanese colonial regime has focused on independent movements. A leading South Korean historian, Kang Man-gil, admitted that 'Korean historiography made slow progress in researching the history of victims like 'Comfort Women', since conducting research and educating the issue of independent movement were more urgent'. Focusing on the history of resistance may be aimed at reclaiming masculine power and Korean national identity which was stripped away by the colonial power. This enables Korean men to recover from 'emasculatation', by showing the existence of struggle and resistance of Koreans against the colonial power.

In this masculinist and nationalist rhetoric, the issue of the violation of the bodies of the 'Comfort Women', especially by Japanese soldiers, is read as a matter of 'national pride'. The issue is repressed, replaced by a national heroic narrative of independent struggle against the colonial power. I will return later to the effects of this nationalist narrative on the politics of former 'Comfort Women' themselves.

Forgetting has been one of the survival strategies for women. After the war, on returning to Korea, silence and forgetting seemed self-protective in the face of the return to ideologies and practices of 'respectability' and chaste womanhood which were imposed on the women. The prevailing concept of the respectable female body engendered shame at their own 'defiled' bodies. Even when indignation and anger were stronger than their sense of shame, when their own families and community also viewed them with shame, it was extremely difficult to defy strong pressures from those closest to them to keep silent.

Voice: the 'Comfort Women' Campaign

Grassroots organisations have been of crucial importance in drawing attention to and handling the issue of 'Comfort Women'. For example, the Korean Research Institute for *chongsindae* (*Hanguk chongsindae yonkuhoe*) was set up in July 1990, and the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Sexual Slavery by Japan (*Hanguk chongsindae munje taechek hyopuihoe*) in November 1990 in Korea. Before 1990,

pioneering work was done by Yun Chong-ok, a former Korean professor who is a contemporary of the 'Comfort Women': she made investigative trips to Japan, Thailand, Papua New Guinea and China where there were comfort stations during WWII, and has made presentations at public forums since 1988. Accordingly, younger generations have learned more about the issue.

There is no sharp division between theory and activism on the issue of 'Comfort Women'. Substantial numbers of the authors who wrote about the issue in the 1990s have been involved in the campaign. To some extent, research topics have reflected current debates, issues or questions in the process of the campaigns. On the other hand, research has influenced and fuelled the campaign, for example, finding historical facts on the 'Comfort Women' programme and looking for legal grounds to obtain compensation/reparation for the victims in accordance with international laws.

After hotlines were set up by grassroots organisations in South Korea and Japan in 1991 and 1992, numerous former 'Comfort Women' and witnesses to what happened in comfort stations reported their experiences⁴. The first lawsuit by former 'Comfort Women' was launched in the Tokyo District Court in 1991. Rallies have been held on a weekly basis by the surviving 'Comfort Women' and their supporters since January in 1992 against the Japanese government, in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul, Korea. Increasing awareness of sexual violence was a consequence of the women's movement in Korea and in Japan, and the issue of 'Comfort Women' was highlighted.

The 'Comfort Women' campaign was galvanised in South Korea and Japan and later spread to the Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand, North Korea, and other parts of the Asia/Pacific region. Activist groups include *Hanguk chongsindae munje taechek hyopuihoe* (the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Sexual Slavery by Japan) (1990), *Jugunianfu Mondai Uri Yosong* Network (Military 'Comfort Women' Issue Network of We, Japanese Korean Women) (1991), The Task Force on Filipino Comfort Women (1992), *Lila-Pilipina* (1994), Washington Coalition for 'Comfort Women' Issues (1992), and Taipei Women's Rescue Foundation. These grassroots organisations in these various countries have worked together closely and promoted solidarity. Links and alliances across national boundaries on the issue



(transnational feminist practices) have been built up. Public pressure to clear the issue has increased in these countries and the UN. The 'Comfort Women' issue has been raised at the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (1992, 1993), the UN Working Group on Contemporary Forms of Slavery (1992, 1993), the UN Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities (1992, 1993), and the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995).

A number of former Korean 'Comfort Women' found the courage to break their 'collaborative silence'. Making their story public turned them from individual survivors into collectives of resistance: giving solidarity with other Asian women, and between South and North Korean women. North and South Korean 'Comfort Women' met together for the first time at the annual forum on the issue in 1992.

What is quite remarkable in this new period of resistance was that this time the former 'Comfort Women' fought against their own, the Korean society, and not just against their Japanese tormentors at the comfort stations. Refusing to be silenced is a form of resistance against the social stigmatisation and national dishonour attached to 'Comfort Women'. The women resisted the silence which both colonial oppressors and male Korean nationalists had

preferred.

The former 'Comfort Women' made an important challenge to their exclusion from the ranks of those who had been war victims, out of a sense that their ordeal was a source of shame, in their request to be buried in *Manghwyang-uidongsan* (The Hill of Missing Home) where people who died for the nation are buried. Consequently, some former 'Comfort Women' who died recently were buried there, for example, Kim Haksun, and Chun Kumwha. This gesture has had great significance in challenging the stigma of national dishonour. Being buried at the national monumental graveyard transforms the 'defiled prostitute' into a 'national heroine'.

However, there appears a dilemma in speaking out. The process of breaking the long silence to give testimony concerning their appalling treatment is a deeply painful process, since it involves re-living that suffering, re-experiencing bitterness, anger, pain and humiliation. When the women are asked for interviews from the media or to give testimony in public, their pain and anger are revived. Therefore, silence is a survival strategy, a choice women make in order to forget and minimise their ordeal. It could be a form of agency available to women in conditions of oppression where room for manoeuvre, choices and options are severely constrained.

Nationalism and feminism

Parallels could be drawn between the 'Comfort Women' campaign and Korean nationalism. For example, the Korean 'Comfort Women' activists pointed out the genocidal aspect of the comfort station project, a point also emphasised by the nationalist Koreans. Nationalists argue that Japanese colonial policies in Korea were basically genocidal, using as examples the drafting of Korean men as soldiers for the Japanese army or as labour for ammunition factories, and the use of Korean women as 'Comfort Women'.

Another aspect of the discussion of the 'Comfort Women' system in the Korean nationalist approach is the representation of the violated Korean woman's body as a symbol of the violation of the nation. Women's bodies are figured as national property and a symbol of national identity in this context. The fact that the women who were taken to the comfort stations were virgins, not prostitutes, is seen as a particularly reprehensible aspect of the 'Comfort Women' project. The patriarchal sexual ideology of chastity is embedded in nationalist criticism of the 'extortion of Korean women's chastity by Japanese Imperialism'.

The 'Comfort Women' campaign risks echoing Korean nationalism in terms of its positioning of women. In her essay 'Gender and Nation', Nira Yuval-Davis argues that 'women often come to symbolize the national collectivity, its roots, its spirit, its national project. Moreover, women often symbolize national and collective 'honour'' (p.627). This theme is also revealed in a letter to the Foreign Minister of South Korea, dated 29th June, 1993, by the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Sexual Slavery by Japan (*Hanguk chongsindae munje taechek hyopuihoe*), which says that 'the humiliating diplomatic relationship to Japan could not be ended and national pride could not be retrieved, without the resolution of the issue of "Comfort Women".'

In addition, taking responsibility for supporting the former 'Comfort Women' is seen to preserve 'national dignity' by keeping them from receiving money from the Asian Women's Fund from Japan. Accepting the scheme of the Fund is interpreted as leaving the circle of national unity: former 'Comfort Women' who have accepted the Fund were excluded from receiving financial support from the Korean side. This has caused tension between some survivors

and activists.

There has been a double structure in the 'Comfort Women' campaign: internally it has emphasised 'nationalism' and internationally, 'feminism'. In Korea there has been some continuity between 'Comfort Women' activism and nationalist rhetoric, where the violation of the bodies of the 'Comfort Women' is read as 'a matter of our national pride'. This shows women's symbolic entrapment within the nation. Furthermore, the symbolic use of women as markers of the boundaries of national belonging was superimposed on the familiar split between those women who were regarded as 'honourable', and those who were 'shameful' to their nation. The depiction of the homeland as a female body—a metaphor of the nation-as-woman—depends on a particular image of woman as chaste, dutiful, daughterly or maternal.

A substantial number of the 'Comfort Women', in fact, chose not to return home to Korea after the war. Even though many did return, their use as 'Comfort Women' was not publicised, for fear of sullyng Korean national honour. The conceptualisation of 'chastity' and 'virtuous' female sexuality in relation to national purity permitted the silencing of the women for 50 years.

When the 'Comfort Women' campaign took up its stance against the Japanese government, the connection between the 'Comfort Women' system and exploitative Japanese colonial policies towards Koreans was further explored, while less attention was given to making connections with the existing patriarchal structure in Korean society. With the emergence of the high-profile public actions of the 'Comfort Women' campaign, activism could have been more focused on the possibility of constructing a new femininity, different from the traditional concept of the 'good' Korean woman. The campaign could have offered space to challenge the culturally acceptable image of women as chaste, dutiful, daughterly or maternal. Instead, it has been a political campaign dealing with the Japanese government and the UN. The campaign has made substantial progress in bringing the issue of the 'Comfort Women' to both national and international attention. But there is more to be done in addressing the needs of the former 'Comfort Women' as survivors of long-term sexual violence. □

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Notes

1 I interviewed Kim Haksun in 1992 and she died in 1997.

2 In 1965, the South Korean government signed the Diplomatic Normalisation Treaty with Japan, the first official diplomatic contract between political leaders of the two nations in the post-war era. Included in the bilateral treaty was Japan's compensation for colonialism in monetary terms. However, the 'Comfort Women' issue was not even included in the negotiation agenda. Neither the Japanese nor the Korean government raised the issue during the drafting of the 1965 treaty. The Park Chung-hee regime in Korea then launched an ambitious industrialisation plan, and the normalisation of diplomatic relations with Japan was an important tool for financing the industrialisation projects.

3 Numerous US military documents from 1944 also deal with 'Japanese Army Brothels' and 'Korean comfort girls'.

4 By February 1993, 103 women in South Korea had identified themselves as former 'Comfort Women'. It is reported that 123 former 'Comfort Women' are also alive in North Korea.

Missing
from
history:
The other
prisoners of war

The American-Viet Nam war has been more mythologised than almost any other conflict of the 20th century. But in all the books, films and television documentaries about Viet Nam, little has been heard of the experiences of Vietnamese women, least of all their experiences of organised sexual violence. 25 years on, Madi Gilkes went to Viet Nam to find out about this hidden history from the women who lived it.

In 1975, Susan Brownmiller published the first extensive feminist analysis of war sexual abuse in her chapter on conflict in *Against Our Will*. Out of necessity and in the light of the recent conflicts in the Former Yugoslavia, feminist literature on the issue of war rape has expanded dramatically. Three themes dominate: why men rape in war; the nature of war sexual abuse and its consequences; and justice and the prosecution of war rape within international law. In this article, I wish to look at the second theme, the nature of war sexual abuse, in the context of the American-Viet Nam conflict.

Although some Western texts do exist on Vietnamese women's roles during this conflict, the more I looked into this conflict the more

apparent it became how gender-based violence from the women's perspectives had been ignored. I wanted to rectify this gap by recreating their testimonies through my research. To do this, I spent eight months in 1998 in Viet Nam, predominantly in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon). With the help of two Vietnamese women academics and the permission of the Vietnamese Women's Union I was able to visit six provinces/areas in southern Viet Nam to carry out 'official' interviews i.e. ones where my academic contacts and women's union representatives were present. I chose these six areas for a number of reasons: according to Vietnamese primary sources, high levels of incidents had been reported in these provinces; secondly, the

provinces had been key sites for Vietnamese resistance to the Southern Vietnamese Government and US soldiers — for example, in 1960, there were a number of women-led uprisings in Ben Tre province — or the areas had witnessed heavy fighting — for example, Cu Chi which is famous for its secret Viet Cong tunnels; and thirdly, as I had to cover all the costs for myself and my two academic contacts and as bureaucratic problems would arise if I, as a foreigner, wanted to stay over on a visit, the sites had to be within a day's drive from Ho Chi Minh City.

When I first went out to Viet Nam I had a somewhat romanticised and simple notion of what my research field trip would be like. When the research finally took off however, I soon realised I would always have an interview entourage of at least three people — sometimes as many as seventeen. No one interview scenario typified my interviewing experiences whether in terms of the amount of control I had over the interview (for example, in most of the interviews we used a questionnaire, but in one set, the women had prepared speeches and we were unable to direct the meeting or its focus); the type of interviewee (for example, her background or war experiences); or the interview setting itself (for example, its location or the number of people present). In addition, I soon realised that my date line for the conflict differed to those of my interviewees, who used the chronology of 1954 to 1975 (as opposed to the dates I originally started out with of 1965 to 1973). Obviously, there were and still are a number of problems inherent within my research methodology. For example, the language barrier meant that I was unable to carry out the interviews myself or even understand what was being said by the interviewee. Due to the politically 'sensitive' nature of interviews, it has further proven difficult to find someone willing to translate and transcribe the interviews. There are also the issues raised in relation to the use of oral testimonies, the impact of my foreigner status upon the interviewees, as well as the potential bias in my research sample due to the involvement of such a political organisation as the Women's Union and the subsequent impact the very 'public' nature of the meetings had upon my interviewees. The list is endless.

Despite these problems, I did succeed in collecting my interviews. In total, I spoke with forty-two women. The interviewees ranged in age from their forties to their late eighties, although

the majority fell within the mid-fifties to seventy age group. Some had received higher levels of education, but as the Women's Union draws its members from the poorer sections of Vietnamese society, the majority of the interviewees had only had access to basic levels of education. Three of the women had been involved in the peace movement; three were heroic mothers — the title given by the government to women who had lost their husbands and/or children in either the French or American conflicts — and one woman had not participated in the war in any capacity. However, the vast majority of my interviewees had been involved in pro-Revolutionary activities i.e. they were connected to the National Liberation Front (NLF), otherwise known as the Viet Cong. The majority of these women had been involved in the 'political struggle,' through the Women's Liberation Associations or Youth Leagues which actively sought to mobilise support for the NLF through the dissemination of leaflets and through agitation and demonstrations against the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) and the US soldiers. Some of the women had also served as document and supplies couriers and as spies, nurses or teachers. Other interviewees were more directly involved in the 'armed struggle' and had either been involved in the militia or in the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF). As a result of their revolutionary activities, many of the women had undergone some form of arrest and imprisonment whether for interrogation purposes or as actual political or military prisoners.

Due to problems which have arisen in relation to the transcription of my interviews, this article draws upon the testimonies of six women. However, even with such a small number, it is still evident that women were vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation in four key situations. These situations were: prostitution; forced marriage; military raids; and interrogation and imprisonment.

Prostitution and the trafficking of women

Looking at prostitution first, it is widely recognised that the military and prostitution have a long history together, fuelled by the notion that making women's bodies available keeps soldiers happy. In a mild form, military prostitution may lead to a proliferation of brothels and bars around military bases; in its most extreme, it can lead to forced sexual slavery, as seen in WW2 when an

estimated 200,000 Chinese, Indonesian, Malaysian, Dutch, Filipina and Korean women were enslaved into forced prostitution in a network of brothels for Japanese soldiers (see also Yonson Ahn's piece in this issue). More recently, this has been witnessed in the rape camps in Bosnia.

Prostitution was rife in South Viet Nam during the conflict period — by the end of the war in 1975, it was estimated that there were 500,000 prostituted women. At the beginning of American involvement, servicemen had entered into private arrangements for sex with their hooch maids. However, by 1966, the US Army had established official military brothels within their base camp perimeters at An Khe, Lai Khe and Pleiku with the intention of preventing servicemen from visiting potential security-risk brothels, and from contracting venereal diseases. The US military regulated the health and security features of the brothels but left the procurement of women and pricing arrangements up to the Vietnamese.

Officially, the South Vietnamese Government declared prostitution illegal and moves could be made against it, for example, as reported in the *New York Times* in 1967, the director of the Social Welfare Office in Nha Trang arrested more than 300 girls and 50 pimps in a programme to scare the prostitutes away from the province. Unofficially however, prostitution was a lucrative form of finance for the government who allegedly took 30% of the proceeds from prostitution in the closed, off-limits prostitution zones which developed outside of the military brothels and bases. Officers of the South Vietnamese Army and lesser government officials were also found guilty of extorting money from prostitutes. It was even alleged that nurses in the Chi Hoa prison infirmary would prostitute themselves to the richest prisoners, with the prison administration taking a cut of the nurses' payment. Thus, you can understand why one Saigon government official referred to prostitution as 'an inexhaustible source of US dollars for the State'.

Prostitution itself took many forms. US involvement effectively divided prostitutes into those who worked in legal, US approved bars and brothels — often with a madam — and those who worked in off-limit areas or on the street. The most prevalent types were the bar girl, masseur or prostitute. Working conditions in the brothels were difficult. At 'Sin City' at Pleiku, women 'worked' in a tent with fifteen to twenty

Interviewees' biographies

Diem

Diem is fifty-four years old. As a student, she worked as an intelligence agent and was a member of the Women's Association for the Liberation of the South. She experienced an attempted rape during an American raid and was arrested a handful of times. She was also imprisoned for seven years, in 1968, in the notorious Con Dao prison where she was kept in a tiger cage.

Yen

Yen is seventy years old. She first became involved in revolutionary activities in 1954 as a liaison contact, conveying letters and documents to and from different units in the Cu Chi area. She was arrested twice and jailed for several years, finally being released in 1972.

Lanh

Lanh was born in 1921 and joined the revolution in 1954. Between 1954 and 1968, she was involved in the collection of intelligence and the establishment of a women's organisation within her hamlet. In 1968, she was arrested by American soldiers and detained in a detention centre within a US compound for half a month where she was interrogated and tortured. In 1969, her revolutionary activities were discovered and she was forced to flee the hamlet. Lanh was raped on at least two different occasions by soldiers (although it is not clear from the transcripts whether by American or Southern Vietnamese soldiers).

Em

Em was born in 1945. In 1963/64, she dropped out of school to become more active in the revolution. She was the secretary of the Youth League until 1966 when she officially joined the revolutionary army. Her revolutionary activities involved mobilising support amongst villagers in order to create support bases for revolutionary army soldiers amongst the people.

Muoi

Muoi is forty-eight years old. In 1966, she was arrested despite not being involved as yet in revolutionary activities. Upon her release, she decided to drop out of school and participate in the revolution, joining the special task force. Between 1967 and 1969, she participated in eight battles. She was arrested a further four times. Her third arrest in 1969 resulted in imprisonment in Thu Duc prison for a year. On her fourth arrest, Muoi was brought to an ARVN security office for interrogation. There, on the fourth day, after being beaten and given electric shock, she was raped.

Anh

Anh was born in 1929 and was active, as a teenager, in anti-French activities. In 1956, she was arrested for six days, during which she suffered numerous forms of torture during interrogation, including attempted rape. A week after her release, she was taken to the district prison and held for eight months. In 1958, she was caught a second time and jailed for another eight months.

beds; at Phu Loi, the brothel was only able to operate during the daytime as the NLF was active in the surrounding area at night. One of my interviewees described the conditions:

The women were selected through test and trials, then were recruited by the Americans to serve in US Army camps. They worked daily shifts. Everyday, they were transported to military bases to have sex with American soldiers. They received monthly incomes based on the number of soldiers and the hours they served. Usually a woman 'worked' in a room, which was divided into two parts: the outside where there were drinks and a receipt book to record the number of hours that she had worked, and the inside, where there was a bed. (Diem)

An alternative to working in a bar or brothel was to become a 'key woman'. Through this arrangement, a woman lived with a serviceman for a period of time — from one week to the length of his tour of duty — during which he would pay her rent and living costs.

Women came to prostitution for a number of reasons. The forced relocation of rural populations through the strategic hamlets programme, defoliation (which rendered farm land untenable) and 'free fire zones' resulted in the mass displacement of millions of peasants, many of whom fled to the capital, the cities and the areas surrounding the military bases. Some prostitutes were war widows or had been abandoned by their husbands. As a single woman was an economic burden upon her family, the city offered employment, even if it was as a prostitute, through which she could earn money to send back home. This was confirmed by my interviewees. Similarly, in her autobiography, Le Ly Hayslip described how the \$400 she was offered, if she slept with two servicemen about to return home was a means to an end. As she says:

I stared at the cash the way a thirsty prisoner stares at water. Four hundred dollars would support my mother, me and Hung for over a year — a year I could use finding a better job and making connections or, as a last resort greasing palms for a paid escape. And to make it, I wouldn't even have to work up a sweat or risk going to jail or getting blown up by a mine or blown away in an ambush. I just lie down and let these two American boys be men. What could they do to me that hadn't been done already?

Some women however turned to prostitution after becoming victims of rape. In traditional Vietnamese society, the shame and dishonour of rape compromised the victims' eligibility for

marriage and forced women to take the only economic option open to them. As Le Ly Hayslip remarked: '[m]any of these girls ... were rape victims like me who despaired of a proper marriage' (p293).

Other women were trafficked into prostitution. In 1965, a UN survey on slavery noted a considerable rise in the traffic of women, with procurement spreading from South Viet Nam and Thailand to Laos. Inside South Viet Nam, the trafficking of rural Vietnamese women also increased. Young female refugees would arrive in Saigon looking for employment. A woman would meet the refugee bus offering work as a housekeeper or nanny but once brought to the household, as Le Ly Hayslip remarks, 'it wasn't long, however, before the real purpose of her job was made clear.' If the girl escaped, she risked being tracked down by the pimp's guards and possibly put up for sale again (p292-3). Diem, one of my interviewees, also told a similar story, of a young housemaid accused of stealing a radio cassette from her employers' household. The girl was arrested but released by a policeman, who on her release asked her to marry him. As she was afraid of being returned to jail, she consented but after spending one night with her, the man then sold her on into prostitution.

Not surprisingly, prostituted women were at risk of contracting venereal diseases or of violence from their clients. To protect themselves from the latter, they would sometimes take their boyfriends or male relatives with them as pretend policemen to the base, whilst the madam of a brothel could enjoy police protection if well-connected enough. As for the 'key' women, although this relationship was an improvement upon working in a bar or brothel, it was a hazardous arrangement with some women being subjected to violence, abuse and alcohol or drug-related problems, and obviously the financial support only lasted for as long as the relationship did. There was also the shame of being a prostitute and the risk of being rejected by your family. One of my interviewees remarked upon this to me:

Prostitution was a practice that was open and normal to American soldiers, but it was the Vietnamese women who were subject to social judgement, prejudice of the people. Because prostitution was a way of making money that goes against the Vietnamese traditional values. Hence those girls/women were subject to a lot of popular contempt ... At the time, all women seen in association with the Americans or who got married to Americans

were very badly looked down upon. I think nationalism was then a very important virtue among the people (Diem).

Forced Marriages

The second way in which women may be sexually abused in war is through 'forced marriage'. This form of violence is a particularly subtle form of abuse as women may be accused of inviting, colluding or agreeing to the relationship. In Rwanda, this type of abuse has taken the form of women being forced to cohabit with men, 'agreeing' to sexual favours with guards if their husbands are in jail, or women being obliged to hand themselves over to soldiers so as not to be accused of collaboration with the deposed regime. Women were forced into similar relationships with Southern Vietnamese soldiers during the Viet Nam conflict. In 1954, under one of the terms of the Geneva Accords, troops of the Viet Minh were obliged to regroup to the north of the 17th parallel (which had been designated as a temporary line of division of the country) while French Union Troops were to withdraw south of the line. Following the regrouping, women whose husbands had gone to the North were forced to sign papers divorcing their husbands and made to remarry within a set period of time to prove their 'allegiance' to the South Vietnamese Government. This happened to Le Ly Hayslip's sister Ba. After Ba's husband was sent to the North, she started to receive advances from her husband's cousin, a member of the local police force. After initially resisting his advances and intervention by her father, Ba and her father were arrested and taken to a temporary interrogation compound. Her release depended upon renouncing her marriage vows and marrying her husband's cousin; if she refused to do this, they would be handed over to the army as Viet Cong spies. One of my interviewees also spoke of such 'forced marriages'. She said:

Women living in the strategic hamlets had to contend with various difficulties ... They were lonely, away from their loved ones, as most men were either taking part in the revolution or went to the army. Soldiers of the South Vietnamese Army were then encouraged to be with women of the strategic hamlet. There was even a prize of 50,000 dong for any soldier who managed to marry a woman there. Only those tough women could put up with the loneliness to resist the soldiers. Encouraging the Southern Army soldiers to marry local women, that was a unique multi-purpose way by the Americans to use women. First, it was to satisfy sex for the soldiers.

Second, they could use women to be spies for them. Moreover, they could make sure that the women would not support the Communists (Yen).

This comment can be seen as resembling the confused attitudes directed at similar forced marriages in Rwanda. On the one hand, such women were seen as collaborating in the relationships to avoid loneliness, but on the other, the interviewee did recognise such relationships as manipulative and exploitative.

Military raids

The third form of sexual abuse is that which takes place during military operations and it is probably this form of sexual violence which has been the focus of most of the recent literature on war rape. As has been witnessed in Bosnia and more recently in Kosovo, mass war rape is an effective tool of genocide or 'ethnic cleansing'. Rape victims may die from their injuries or be killed afterwards; they may be rendered infertile following the transmission of venereal disease or through forced impregnation be compelled to give birth to a child of 'the enemy'. The reality or threat of rape also serves as an effective means of forcing communities to flee their homes.

There has been much debate as to whether or not American military policy in Viet Nam amounted to the genocide of Vietnamese people. Whilst there is evidence that the United States committed war crimes and crimes against humanity in Viet Nam, it has yet to be clearly proven that the extermination of the Vietnamese people was the sole objective of the military policy.

This is not to say, however, that rape was a rare occurrence. According to the testimonies, rape was extensive, every interviewee had at least known someone who had been victimised and it was clear that women were at risk from attack from *all* enemy soldiers, not just American servicemen but also South Vietnamese and Korean soldiers. Diem told how she had almost been raped during a raid on a village outside Saigon. A group of American soldiers had entered the house of a woman who had recently given birth. After threatening the mother, they turned to my interviewee, who was then only a student, and threatened her. It was only by two children jumping onto her, crying and screaming, and the sound of gunfire signalling the soldiers to withdraw from the village that the young student was able to avoid attack. Lanh described how she had been abused twice:

Chronology

- 1945 Ho Chi Minh declares Viet Nam independent and founds Democratic Republic of Viet Nam (DRV)
- 1946 Ho Chi Minh calls for resistance to France and the French Viet Nam war begins
- 1950 US being direct economic and military aid grants to French in Indochina
- 1954 Battle of Dien Bien Phu ends in French defeat and ensures French withdrawal from Indochina
Geneva Conference on Indochina provides for the cessation of hostilities, provisional demarcation line at the 17th parallel with political settlement to be achieved through nationwide elections
Ngo Dinh Diem is appointed premier
- 1955 US Aid to Diem's government begins, including training of the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN)
Ngo Dinh Diem refuses to participate in nationwide elections; declares the 'Republic of Viet Nam' (RVN) with himself as president, October 26.
- 1956 Ordinance 6 issued in RVN permitting arrest and detention of any deemed dangerous to security
- 1959 Law 10/59 is passed creating special tribunals for prison and execution of those endangering security
- 1960 The National Liberation Front of South Viet Nam is established; build up US military personnel in Viet Nam
- 1961 US expands military aid and advisers in RVN
- 1962 US advisory group reorganised as 'Military Assistance Command, Viet Nam'; strategic hamlet programme begun.
- 1963 Martial Law proclaimed in RVN; military coup kills Diem and his brother; continued build up of US military personnel
- 1964 Series of military coups
- 1965 US begins bombing of DRV; March, the first American combat troops arrive in Da Nang; June, regime led by Nguyen Cao Ky emerges; by the end of December, US military personnel numbers 184,300;
- 1966 Buddhist and student protests in Hue and Dan Nang begin; US military personnel reaches 385,300
- 1967 September, Nguyen Van Thieu and Nguyen Cao Ky take over RVN presidency and vice-presidency
- 1968 January: Tet Offensive begins; March, My Lai Massacre; May, Paris Peace Conference begins; US halts bombing of DRV
- 1969 US military personnel in South Viet Nam peaks at 542,400; first withdrawal of US troops; Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) formed by the NLF and others; massive anti-war demonstrations throughout the US;
- 1970 US resumes bombing of DRV; hundreds of university anti-war protests throughout the US; US military personnel down to 335,800 by the end of the year
- 1971 Thieu 'reelected' as head of RVN in uncontested presidency race; US personnel in South Viet Nam down to 184,000
- 1972 US authorises bombing of Hanoi-Haiphong area; bombing halted and US announces resumption of peace negotiations
- 1973 Initial peace agreement signed; Ceasefire Agreement formally signed in Paris. 27 January: last US troops leave South Viet Nam
- 1975 30 April, last Americans leave Saigon as the city falls to the People's Army of Viet Nam.
- Taken from: Gabriel Kolko *Anatomy of a War* (New Press, 1994) and Stanley Karnow *Vietnam: A History* (Penguin Books, 1984).

During the wartime with the Americans, I was in my 40s but I myself couldn't avoid being raped. Sometimes, they were raiding the village, and they called me to come and they came very near you, and they had some money in their hand, and then suddenly, there you go, they thrust again and again and you are raped. Another time, a nephew of mine, a 12 year old, was taken away, so I had to go after them to get my nephew back, and on that time, I was raped again. That one time, because I saw they took my nephew, I didn't think and just went after him and was raped.

It was not clear from the interview transcripts the nationality of the soldiers to which Lanh was referring. However, one significant element of Lanh's remark was how she believed her age would protect her from abuse. This belief was repeated in other testimonies, for example, in those of women who had been imprisoned and who commented that they particularly feared rape because of their youth or good looks. With age obviously no barrier to violation, my interviewees also described other different strategies they employed to try and protect themselves. One was to purposely make themselves unattractive:

For the Vietnamese women, those things were most insulting and most hurtful. Because we had a lot of morals and traditional values to respect, so we were so scared of being raped. A lot of us were often dressed down and made ourselves look very ugly and very old so that they would leave us alone. Many women may not be scared of going to the battlefield but they would dread the prospect of being raped (Diem).

Another strategy women used was to group together for protection. Diem recalled that 'each time when the Americans were around, women were always out and about in the street. They wouldn't stay at home. Only old people and children would stay at home ... if you were unlucky enough to stay home alone, and your husband and children were away, they might do something to you.' Em told how: 'when the Americans came, all the women were very fearful. Usually, they were so scared that you would find five or six women living together in one house so that they could be together and protect each other.' But such strategies could not guarantee safety, with interviewees commenting that regardless of what they did, the soldiers wouldn't leave women alone, or that women were raped all the time 'no matter whether it was a woman or a teenage girl, whether they were in a group together or alone' (Em).

Interrogation and Imprisonment

The fourth situation in which women are vulnerable to sexual abuse is during interrogation and imprisonment. In this situation, sexual violence becomes a means of torture through which an agent of the State — a public official, a soldier, a policeman — attempts to extract information or mete out punishment either because of a woman's own actions or because of those of a family member.

All of my interviewees who had been interrogated, whether by South Vietnamese or American soldiers or Southern Vietnamese police officials, had experienced a sexualised form of torture. Women suffered the same torture methods as inflicted upon men, but in addition, the methods took on an explicitly sexual form. For example, the women were given electric shocks with the electrodes attached to the woman's nipples or genitals, or cigarette butts would be stubbed out on these areas of their bodies; sticks, bottles and knives would be forced into a woman's vagina; and as the experiences of Anh and Muoi showed, if women refused to cooperate, they would be subjected to rape or attempted rape.

Yet, violent methods were used not only for the extraction of information from a specific individual. The maltreatment of detained suspects would also be used to intimidate others to comply. Anh commented that after she had been interrogated:

I was unconscious, but they made me regain consciousness. They called in other women detainees. That was common practice: when they tortured one person, they would call in other detainees to watch the scene, in order to scare the women who hadn't been tortured. After torturing, they ordered the other women to dress me again.

Furthermore, as has been recognised, a woman's female roles as wife/girlfriend and mother are often manipulated during torture to maximum effect. As a wife or girlfriend, a woman was abused either as punishment because of her connection to a particular 'enemy' male, or in order to extract information from him. One such example of the latter abuse was reported in the *Congressional Record* (8 June, 1970: 18820) of the United States. In this particular instance, a high school philosophy teacher was not only completely undressed and beaten in front of several whisky-drinking policemen, but this also took place in front of her fiancé in an attempt to force him to sign confession papers.

Mothers found their parental ties manipulated. The separation of a mother from her child upon arrest was problematic. If the mother was arrested quickly, she would not be able to find someone to care for her child, but if she was unable to find a carer, the child would be imprisoned with its mother. From my interviews, it was clear that some regarded motherhood as a possible means through which women could protect themselves. For example, in 1956, Anh was detained as the Diem government followed a policy of the arrest and detention of all known ex-revolutionaries, anti-government activists and Viet Cong. Anh's son at this time was only one year old:

There were also two reasons for me to take my son with me. Firstly, that it helped to protect against being raped; and secondly, it would make me look like I wasn't active in the revolution because usually common sense would have it that with a small child, you wouldn't be involved in all these activities.

However, as was also clear from the testimonies, women's mothering roles were also used against them. As Anh commented on her first detention: 'Each time I was tortured, they kept my son separate, leaving him in the yard, to beat me up. But one time I struggled to keep my son in my arms and they had wires in my ears, and they switched the current on and it went through my son.' She also remembered how:

... [t]hey knew they couldn't extract anything from me, so they started to maintain this regular beating. They kept me in the cell but everyday they took me out to beat me. At this time, my son was thirteen months old and could start to cry 'mama'. So every time he saw me being beaten, he would cry for me. And later on, they started beating my son, banging his head. Also, they put my son into a fire ants' nest so that he would be bitten. ... They were trying to make me feel bad and sorry and make me state the fact that I was the secretary of the communist party cell in the district.

From the testimonies, it was evident that similar treatment awaited those women sent to prison, often without trial.

The least we can do is remember

Vietnamese women's war experiences, let alone their experiences of gender-based violence are still little known of, either in Viet Nam itself or in the West. Both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City have Women's Museums, but whilst the displays there are extensive, the experiences recorded often tend to be those of the 'heroines'. The War

Remnants Museum (formerly the War Crimes Museum) in Ho Chi Minh City meanwhile, whilst exhibiting artefacts and photographs from the conflict, fails, in many respects to 'gender' its displays. In this way, the war stories of 'ordinary' individual women can so easily be lost and it becomes possible to understand why so many of my interviewees perceived both myself and my research as a means of both documenting and publicising their experiences outside of Viet Nam.

In some respects, it may be questioned what value can be gained by researching 'historical' incidents of war sexual abuse when the consequences of violence for women caught up in contemporary conflicts need addressing so urgently. One remark by one of my interviewees illustrates, for me, why research into women's experiences of violence in more 'historical' conflicts still needs to be done. In this particular conflict, legal redress was left to the military's own judicial systems; as Viet Nam now tries to move on from its conflict-ridden past, other routes through which the women's experiences may be acknowledged are limited. This only becomes more so as time passes on and the women become older. Diem said:

Sometimes, I still have nightmares of the time I was kept in prison and still have flashbacks at what happened to me at the time. Also, it affected my emotions in a way that each time I hear about war, I feel terrible and scared ... I just hope that there won't be any more war. There is so much suffering during war, not only physical but also psychological suffering. When I think back now, I still wonder how could we as women survive all that, and could go through all that.

As this comment shows, even when a conflict ended twenty-five years ago, the consequences of the violence inflicted are still very much felt today. The least we can do now is record these experiences. □

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A tragic performance

Hilary Swank won an Oscar for her portrayal of a woman passing as a man in small-town America. Boys Don't Cry is a complex, thought-provoking film, according to Liz Kelly.

Boys Don't Cry is the most powerful and challenging film I have seen in a very long time, and it is all the more remarkable for the fact that it has been a minor box office hit, and that Hilary Swank got the best actress Oscar for her performance. The film was written and directed by Kimberley Pierce and it tells the story of a real woman, Teena Brandon, who grew up and lived in Lincoln Nebraska (US) for most of her life, and fatefully ended up in Falls City in 1993.

The themes of gender, sexuality, misogyny and homophobia thread through the film, which offers a glimpse into the 'small mindedness' of parts of the US which are decidedly unglamorous, and where the term 'dead end' best describes the employment and relationship possibilities for women unlucky enough to live there. The absence of opportunities to construct a life with meaning and content, let alone the 'American dream' is starkly portrayed, and how this plays out in the lives of men and women interestingly explored. All the central characters could be described as poor 'white trash', all escape through alcohol and drugs. The women, however, all seem to have some form of employment and

several are depicted as having dreams of something better. The central male characters on the other hand are petty criminals, who get their kicks from dangerous and pointless risk taking, with the occasional bar fight for light relief.

Into this bleak (literally) landscape enters Teena Brandon, a troubled young woman, who herself is in trouble with the police for stealing cars, who we are told has in the past been 'locked up' in some kind of institution at her mother's request. Teena does not want to be female, and the film opens with her (gay) cousin cutting her hair short and Teena exploring the possibility of passing as a young man. The cousin warns her about the dangers, and makes a remark which suggests that one of the problems for Teena and her family has been her relationships with women. They argue and in exasperation he urges her to either accept that she is a lesbian or have a sex change. It is Teena's rejection of a lesbian identity — 'I am not a dyke' — alongside her attraction to women which sets in train events which lead to her murder.

The scene in which the key characters are brought together sets the tone of the ways in

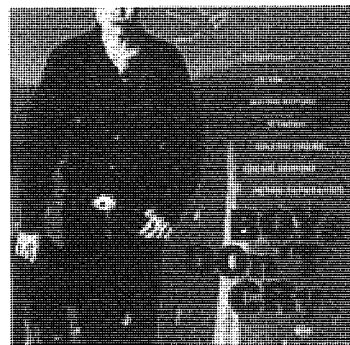
which the film explores the conjunctions of gender and sexuality. Having been thrown out by her cousin Teena Brandon is in a bar, and in defending a young woman from sexual harassment gets involved in a bar fight. Both the young woman and the two men who join in are part of the group with whom she will spend the last weeks of her life living as her male persona — Brandon Teena.

Passing on film

Boys Don't Cry is different from the previously feted 'cross dressing' films — since is based on real life in which a woman did, on some levels and for a short period, pass as a man. The woman playing a man has, therefore, to be convincing. Hilary Swank's performance is powerful and subtle, including moments of self-confidence and pleasure and scenes where gawkiness and unease are prominent. She has said that she observed her younger brothers and the men at the gym she worked out in when preparing for the role. As viewer you always watch knowing that this is a performance, but the characterisation is neither the stereotypes of Dustin Hoffman and Robyn William's contributions, nor the semi-acceptable privileged cross-dressing playfulness of Victor Victoria or La Cage Aux Folles. This is a context where the credibility of the performance matters — as representation, since the viewer has to find the passing believable, and in the life that is being represented, since to be discovered would (and does) have high costs. Passing here is not an opportunity for cheap humour, but rather an opportunity to observe the possibilities and limitations of traditional gender identities. For example, there are moments where the freedom of being male bestowing particular pleasures and excitements is evident; but this is no simple celebration of 'claiming power' since the links between this form of masculinity and misogyny at worst, and disrespect for women at best, are also depicted. The most celebratory and joyful scene in the film involves three young women and Teena Brandon, in her male persona, driving in car, laughing, relaxed, enjoying each others company. It is virtually the only scene which has no tension in it; the absence of both men and the requirement to play particular gender roles provides a different kind of freedom.

Taking a position

The film is a undoubted challenge to homophobia — but remains agnostic and even slippery with



respect to gender and sexuality. It is this which I found challenging and interesting — the absence of an editorial 'line' on how to locate the central character requires the viewer to take a position, and the position I took was not the same as that of other women I saw the film with. One of the areas of disagreement was whether to refer to Teena Brandon as 'she' or 'he'. At the time, and now, 'she' fits better for me, but a friend argued strongly that 'she' had chosen an identity as a 'he'. Within the film different ways of understanding Teena Brandon are presented — often by the character herself. She talks of being a hermaphrodite — 'part boy part girl', of having a 'sexual identity crisis' drawing on expert literature, and towards the end of the film as having been a 'girl girl' then becoming a 'boy girl' and more recently being 'just a jerk'. Whether this slippage between biological and social constructions was intentional, or reflects sloppiness of thought and perspective is in some ways irrelevant, since the confusion rings true in terms of the characterisation. She is depicted as both attracted to and repelled by aspects of small town masculinity, and her desirability to several of the young women is — at least in part — constructed around the fact that she is different from the other men.

The film is revealing in the commentary it offers on gender in this particular context. On one level it depicts how easy it is to be male, so long as you have no desire to be top dog, and how arduous and confining to be female. But it is also impossible for Teena Brandon to assume a male role with all its complexity, routine misogyny and bizarreness. The film represents the ordinariness of brutality and male control of women with an explicitness which is both intriguing and repellent. None of the central male characters are sympathetic, but they are not caricatures either. The central male character — John Lotter — has a kind of charm, but he is inconsistent and controlling, has to be managed rather than challenged. The other key male character, Tom, is revealed as the more dangerous but only as the film progresses.

The women are depicted as both strong and defeated, they have crap jobs, crap men who they watch 'do things' — such as race trucks in circles with one standing in the back holding onto a rope. Most are resigned to a kind of fatalism, and escape through drink and drugs. The exception is Lana, played wonderfully by Chloe Sevigny, the young woman Brandon Teena falls

in love with. She has something extra, a 'spark', a sense that maybe there is something better/different. She fights back — sometimes — and I found myself asking if it was love, a fascination with someone 'different' or a desire to escape the confines of small town misogynist US that motivated Lana.

Within the film Teena/Brandon is depicted as occupying a space 'in-between' — rejecting the confines of small town femininity, aspiring to be 'one of the boys' and enjoying the moments when she is, but nonetheless unable to embrace the casual violence and nihilism of a masculinity based on hard drinking, petty crime, living on the edge and abusing women. She defends women several times from intrusions by men, wanting to be male but not 'act' like them in relation to women. When Lana questions why Brandon joins in the pointless boys games the response is: 'I just thought that's what guys do round here'.

There are several subtle and powerful scenes in which we watch Teena switch between the fantasy persona she wants for herself and whose life she is trying to create in living it, and moments of clarity about what this means, its costs and on some level its unattainability. In a telephone conversation with her cousin Lonnie, Brandon says 'it is so good down there', the voice of reality responds 'Yeah, they hang faggots'. Refusing to let go of her fantasy Brandon tells Lonnie that she intends to ask Lana to marry her, to which he replies 'is that before or after you tell her you are a girl?'.

S/he asked for it

It is biological difference that undoes Teena/Brandon. She attempts to hide her menstruation, but Candice, the young woman she stays with, discovers the hidden tampons, and is distressed and shocked. She ends up telling John and Tom who are then determined to discover and 'expose' the truth; which they do with fury and cruelty. Lana attempts to protect Teena/Brandon, insisting that she will 'look' and then tell everyone; she vouches for Brandon, who is then forcibly undressed and Lana is made to look at Teena's naked lower body.

What follows is one of the most distressing representations of rape I have ever seen — despite the fact that I did not actually 'see' it, I could not bear to watch at certain points, but the dialogue was harrowing enough. The two men take Teena/Brandon, who they have already beaten and humiliated, away in a car and both

brutally rape her: one says 'you know you brought this on yourself'. The fusion of violence, power and pleasure is palpable in the performance, and it is this which makes the scene so wrenching. Having re-established appropriate gender relations, the two men shift back into friendliness calling Teena/Brandon 'buddy' and insisting that she must 'keep our little secret and we will stay friends', followed by threatening that they will silence her permanently if she tells anyone. All Teena/Brandon says is 'Yes I know this is all my fault'. The inter-cutting of the assault with the later humiliation of making a statement to a male police officer adds to the power of this section of the film.

It is not clear whether Teena/Brandon chose to make a report to the police, or whether this was an unintended consequence of Lana and her mother — to whose house she eventually escapes — taking her to the hospital to have her injuries dealt with. The tears of the title appear during the insensitive police interview, which is contrasted to a scene involving a woman doctor who 'knows' about sexual assault, and treats Teena/Brandon with care and respect.

The police report creates a crisis in the social group, when Lana's mother finds strength to confront John and Tom, John's defence is denial through a revealing statement: 'If I wanted to rape someone I've got Mallory' — the mother of his child, who he appears to be estranged from. It is the fact that they are soon to be charged with rape which prompts John and Tom's lethal violence, interrupting Lana and Teena/Brandon's plans to escape. The brutality of the murder is underscored by both the killing of Candice simply because she was there and got in the way, and the fact that Lana — in her last desperate attempt to rescue the situation, witnesses both killings.

Knowing and not knowing

One theme the film explores throughout is that of knowing and not knowing 'who' Teena/Brandon is. Both female and male characters comment on her 'difference' — her small hands, lack of fighting skills, that she is 'good with children'. This commentary on gender becomes more marked within the love story between Lana and Teena/Brandon, since here bodies rather than performing a role are involved. A number of





scenes suggest that Lana 'knows' on some level — she appears to notice a breast when they first kiss, but either chooses to not register or mention this. Lana's role in the film seems to be to come to know and accept that Brandon is Teena, but even here ambivalence remains. In the middle of the film when Brandon/Teena's identities have been discovered by the police, because of a failure to appear in court for stealing cars and she is in jail, there is an explicit conversation between the two. Lana's response 'I don't care what you are I am getting you out' is followed by a scene in which they joyfully run out of police station hand in hand. Later, however, when John and Tom publicly remove Teena/Brandon's jeans and make Lana look, she screams 'leave him alone'. But the final scene between the lovers implies a kind of resolution — a meeting in which knowing they are both women is shared. Lana says to Teena 'you are so pretty' in contrast to her use of 'handsome' earlier in the film; and even though they have already become lovers Lana says 'I don't know if I know how to do this', to which the response is 'I am sure you will figure it out'. It is impossible to know whether this scene is a form of poetic licence, but within the story the film tells the scene suggest the possibility of alternatives for Teena and Lana in which they could both be women differently than their experience had allowed to date.

And in the end

We are told at the end of the film that John Lotter was convicted of murder, but is currently appealing from death row; Tom was also convicted, but sentenced to two life sentences since he turned states evidence. We are also informed that Lana Tisdell left Falls City for some years, returning to bring up her baby daughter.

That *Boys Don't Cry* depicts a real life, makes its meaning and challenges all the more powerful and poignant. For several days I pondered on whether it really is easier and safer to be lesbian, to reject conventional femininity without paying an extremely heavy price — since this was not a story based in the 1950s but the 1990s. In the end I decided that there is more space for many of us, but this relative safety depends on location — both where you live and what opportunities there are to explore a sense of self and coherence with others asking similar questions. Making sense of Teena/Brandon's life

has to begin with her location in small town USA where the possibilities with respect to gender and sexuality for women were restrictive and narrow. When asked in interview why the character she played did not just go to San Francisco, Hilary Swank responded that for Teena Brandon it would be 'wrong' to be a lesbian, yet she was attracted to women; the only solution she could envisage was, therefore, to be a male heterosexual. This may oversimplify this particular young woman's struggles, but it does illustrate the extent to which masculinity and femininity continue to be constructed in opposition to one another, and the feminist ambition to loosen — let alone abandon — gender roles and expectations has had limited impact in some quarters. We are told that she had never left the town she grew up in before ending up in Falls City and her vision of the future for herself and Lana is to stay there and run a trailer park. It is tempting in these days of globalisation and the Internet to think everyone has access to information and alternatives, but even in one of the most advanced countries in the world there are huge disparities, there is a poverty of possibilities which is often connected, but not limited, to poverty in terms of material resources.

Apparently Brandon Teena has become a heroic figure within the trans/gender community in the US (and no doubt elsewhere too). Her murder is understood as a classic 'hate crime'. But this definition is achieved by ignoring the sexual violence which was both the punishment for usurping male privilege and the issue at the root of the choice to kill her. It is more than a little ironic to label her death as a 'hate crime' when violence against women was excluded from the legislation which defined this in the US, and where groups focussed on sexuality chose not to link with women's groups campaigning for its inclusion, since this might prevent the legislation being passed.

The two strongest impressions the film left me with were the dangers of being 'out' and the impossibility of being proud if one lives in a conservative small town, and that being poor and seeing no alternatives impoverishes women's lives and options such that they have less resources to challenge men's intrusions on, and control of, their lives. For feminists the challenge is how to create new possibilities not just for women like Teena Brandon but also those like Lana Tisdell and her daughter. □

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