

# Trouble

The radical feminist magazine

# & Strife

## *Domestic Goddesses*



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

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## Housewives' Choice?

**As popular culture returns to worship at the altar of the domestic goddess, Delilah Campbell re-reads Betty Friedan's 1963 classic, *The Feminine Mystique***

*The Feminine Mystique* has one of the most memorable openings in feminist nonfiction:

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night, she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question: 'is this all?' (p.13).

The first chapter, of which this is the first paragraph, is called 'The problem that has no name'. In a work that, to judge by the preface, was begun as early as 1957, and published six years later, Betty Friedan analysed the oppressive emptiness of the life led by educated, affluent suburban housewives. These women might have everything they were told a woman

could want — husbands, children, luxurious homes, labour saving gadgets — but they were unhappy and unfulfilled. The problem, essentially, was the stifling of women's personalities and aspirations by domesticity.

In a few more years, a new social movement — the Women's Liberation Movement — would announce itself as a solution. The economic dependence, spatial confinement, social isolation and mind-numbing triviality of the housewife's role became one of the central targets of feminist criticism, along with the unfair division of domestic labour that went along with it. For middle class women particularly, escaping from this role was often an important part of the struggle they engaged in when they took on board the feminist slogan, 'the personal is political'.

Women never did manage to shrug off their disproportionate responsibility for housework, but 'doing housework' is not quite the same as

'being a housewife'. The problem Betty Friedan saw was not simply that women were saddled with doing domestic work, it was that they were restricted to the domestic sphere and defined exclusively in terms of domesticity, which was presented as equivalent to femininity itself. Undoubtedly, the WLM — and other contemporaneous social forces — did change this. Today, for any woman under the age of about 60 to announce, as the 30-something wife of a colleague once did to me, that she is 'a housewife', sounds more like a conscious anti-feminist challenge than the innocent and neutral statement of fact it was for, say, my mother. The apologetic 'just a housewife' — equally excruciating to a radical feminist — also seems to have declined into obsolescence. Women who do not work outside the home are more likely, in my own experience, to describe themselves as 'full-time mothers' than as 'housewives'. The presumption that women 'stay at home' to pursue domesticity as a calling, and that this calling is central to womanhood in general, has been consigned, at least among the western middle classes, to the dustbin of history.

But while the lid of history's dustbin may have closed forever on the housewife, a new and suspiciously similar phenomenon has recently emerged from that vast recycling bin known as postmodern culture. Welcome — or not — to the 'domestic goddess'.

### *From housewife to goddess: the new domesticity*

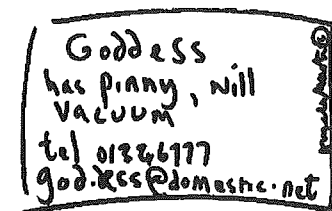
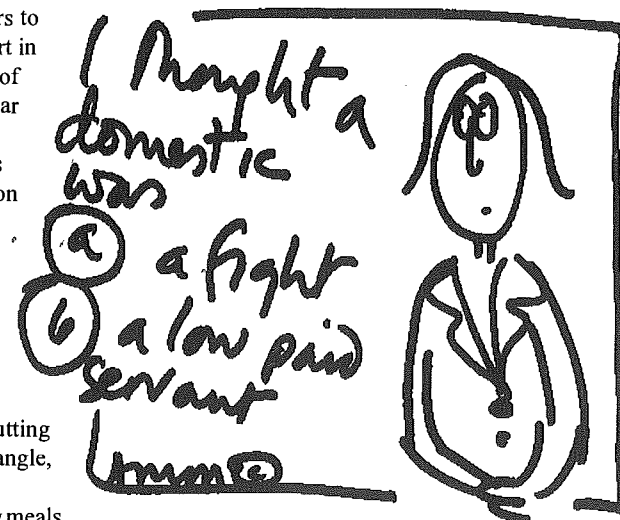
I take the phrase 'domestic goddess' from the title of Nigella Lawson's much-hyped book *How to be a Domestic Goddess*. Let me acknowledge at once that this is slightly unfair, because it's clear this title is (like many postmodern products) intentionally ironic. The book itself is basically just a collection of cake recipes. Nevertheless, the title works as irony because it alludes to a recognisable phenomenon, which also has some much less ironic recent manifestations.

For example, among the surprise publishing successes of the year 2000 in the US were several 'how-to' books about housework — about starching linen, cleaning windows, scrubbing floors, and generally rediscovering, as one of them put it explicitly, the things your grandmother knew about how to keep a clean and well-ordered house. Another unexpected seller was a new edition of the bible of Victorian domesticity, [Mrs] Isabella Beeton's *Household Management*.

Nostalgia appears to play a significant part in the new idealisation of domesticity. Last year and this, British television brought us documentary series on *The 1900 House* and then *The 1940s House*, in each of which a modern family returned to the domestic arrangements of the relevant period — putting washing through a mangle, growing their own vegetables, preparing meals without modern convenience foods or labour-saving equipment. For the women of the families, domesticity was visibly a full time job. And what was notable was the enthusiasm they expressed for at least some aspects of it. The 1940s House's Mrs Hymer was forthright about the exhaustion it caused, but she also emphasised the satisfaction it provided, and extolled the power of traditional domestic arrangements to bring families together around what really mattered. After the experiment was over, she reported that she continued to shop and cook in the 1940s manner, saving huge amounts on her weekly grocery bills.

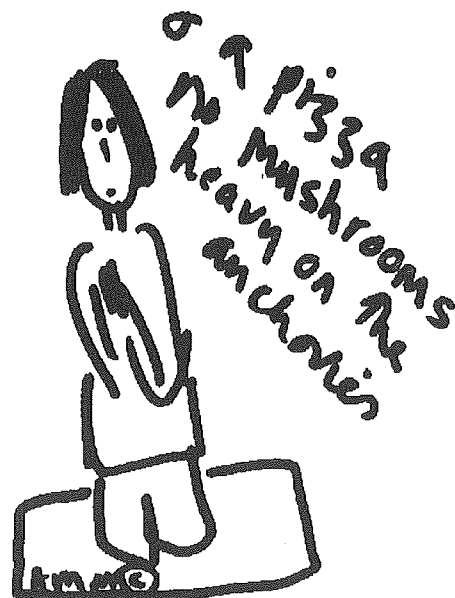
In upmarket women's magazines, too, the joys of domesticity have been a popular theme of late. One title, *Red*, recently ran a fairly serious feature which critically analysed the media's current enthusiasm for all things domestic, but went on to argue that the new domesticity is not just a media creation. Increasing numbers of real women, the writer claimed, are resigning from their high-powered jobs after concluding that they and their families would be happier if they used their time and talents in the home. The women who were interviewed for the piece were, if not radical feminists, then certainly not doormats. They were self-aware, articulate, persuasive about the decisions they had made and their reasons for making them.

We all know that in the world of magazine journalism, two of the writer's acquaintances can be presented as a social trend: how many women are really giving up paid work for unpaid domestic work — or seriously wishing they could afford to do so — is difficult to say. But





Oh goddesses  
send me skills  
space & a place



even if the answer is 'virtually none', it does not seem insignificant to me that there is apparently so much interest in reading about it. The popularity of books on how to keep house like your granny did, of Mrs Beeton and Nigella Lawson and the 1940s House, suggests to me that there may be, to paraphrase Betty Friedan's words of 40 years ago, 'a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffer

at the beginning of the 21st century'. But what women are apparently yearning for now is not an alternative to domesticity. It is more like a return to it.

#### Old fashioned virtues?

I use the word 'return' advisedly, for even when it is not an explicit recreation of a bygone age, the new domesticity is strikingly old-fashioned. You can see this by comparing it to the sort of domestic regime that was championed by popular writers during the 1970s and 80s. Shirley Conran's *Superwoman*, for instance, remembered for its author's bracing remark that 'life's too short to stuff a mushroom', was all about making domestic activities take less time and effort while still producing an acceptable result. It was realistic about the fact that domesticity was women's work, but it assumed their more important sources of satisfaction lay elsewhere. Today's domestic ideal, by contrast, is almost perversely time consuming. Not only are there no short-cuts, you are meant to derive pleasure from what is by most contemporary standards an extraordinary excess of effort — ironing the duvet cover, taking rugs outside and beating them, cleaning windows with vinegar rather than a proprietary spray.

Betty Friedan makes exactly the same point about the 1950s, observing of American suburban housewives after World War II that

They baked their own bread, sewed their own and their children's clothes, kept their new washing machines and dryers running all day. They changed the sheets twice a week instead of once, took the rug-hooking class at adult education, and pitied their poor frustrated mothers, who had dreamt of having a career (p.16).

Unlike the British women whose domestic lives were recreated in *The 1940s House*, these American housewives were not obliged by rationing and shortages to do their own sewing and bread making and rug hooking. As with the gurus and goddesses of the present, doing more than they really had to do was a display of commitment to a particular domestic ideal: 'they gloried in their role as women, and wrote proudly on the census blank: "occupation: housewife"'.

Contemporary domestic goddesses, or goddess wannabes, would not describe themselves, 'proudly' or otherwise, as 'housewives': but their project is very much about making domestic work an *occupation* again, rather than just a collection of tedious low-level chores to be fitted in when you are not otherwise occupied. It

seems to me telling, for instance, that TV goddesses like Nigella Lawson and Delia Smith are filmed entirely in what is either their actual home or a studio simulation meant to be taken as their home (Nigella forages for leftovers in the fridge; Delia's cat is glimpsed in the well-tended garden outside her kitchen window). Not only does this televisual convention confine them, literally, to the home, it also draws attention to the whole domestic package they represent — cooking is in the foreground, but the backdrop is family life, with these women at the centre of it. The younger and trendier of the two, Nigella Lawson, is also the one whose family life is more explicitly presented — we regularly see her children, for instance.

In case anyone thinks I am accusing the women to whom this idyllic vision appeals of being brainless fembot twerps, let me confess that one reason I started thinking about this subject is that I am not untouched myself by the kind of desire for domesticity I am describing. I was gripped by *The 1940s House*; I have taken to baking cakes when I'm particularly stressed, and have flipped through Nigella Lawson's book in shops to see if I might want to buy it when it comes out in paperback. Worst of all, I quite often fantasise about giving up the rat race for a spell of fulltime domestic bliss. I imagine myself in a clean and aesthetically pleasing house, cooking wholesome and delicious food, surrounded by other people who I choose to be with and who appreciate my efforts (though I do draw the line at putting a husband into this picture). A few years ago, such a scenario would never have entered my mind, even as a passing fantasy. Why am I apparently so susceptible to it now?

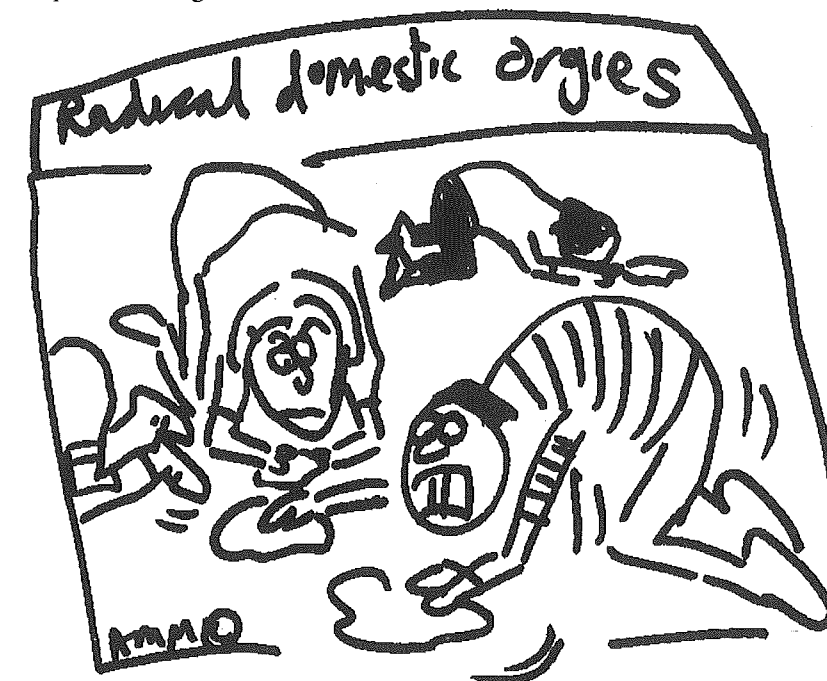
That was the question that sent me back to Betty Friedan. Forty odd years ago she wrote about 'the problem that has no name'. She and other feminists gave it a name, indeed several of them, but according to contemporary popular culture it is no longer a problem. Is the first decade of the 21st century turning into a sort of re-run of the 1950s? And are feminist insights from the mid-20th century worth applying to the conditions of the 21st?

#### The feminine mystique revisited

Today Betty Friedan is not exactly celebrated as a radical feminist hero. When the WLM arrived, she became associated with the most mainstream and liberal of US feminist organisations, NOW (the National Organization of Women), and she is

also unfondly remembered for her hostility to lesbians in the movement (the 'lavender menace'). But while *The Feminine Mystique* is a liberal text — 'liberal' in the manner of the 19th century woman suffragists whose story is told sympathetically in one chapter — you could not call it wishy-washy. It contains, for instance, an entire chapter denouncing Freud and his latter-day followers for their ridiculous patriarchal doctrine of 'penis envy', and two more dripping contempt for functionalist social scientists and those who applied their teachings in programmes of domestic education for girls. All of this would become the common sense of the WLM, and the fact that she was expressing it so trenchantly in the early 60s makes Betty Friedan sound a lot more radical than many later (and 'hipper') feminist theorists with their revisionist views on psychoanalysis, motherhood and sex.

Another 'radical' feature of *The Feminine Mystique* is its sustained critique of the media, which anticipates a good deal of later feminist scholarship and theory. Betty Friedan herself had given up postgraduate work in psychology to become a suburban housewife and mother, and had later taken up writing for women's magazines. It was the extreme dissonance between the picture of domestic paradise writers like her were obliged to paint and what she heard women telling her when she interviewed them that inspired her to begin work on the book.



In a chapter called 'the Happy Housewife Heroine', she shows systematically how between about 1949 and 1956, women's magazines became progressively more and more domesticated. Whereas the *Ladies Home Journal* and its ilk during the 1930s and 40s had featured stories about 'new women' with careers, pilots' licenses and egalitarian relationships, as well as non-fictional reports on international politics and scientific discoveries, by the mid-1950s their pages were full of nothing but stories about housewives (or aspiring housewives intent on finding a husband) and endless articles on domestic pursuits. Women whose contributions to magazine journalism had been valued because of their distinguished reputations in other fields were now forced to reinvent themselves as 'ordinary' wives and mothers:

...women writers began to write about themselves as if they were 'just housewives', revelling in a comic world of children's pranks and eccentric washing machines and parents' nights at the PTA. 'After making the bed of a twelve-year old boy week after week, climbing Mount Everest would seem a laughable anti-climax', writes Shirley Jackson (*McCall's*, April 1956)... They are good craftsmen [*sic*], the best of these Housewife Writers. And some of their work is funny. But there is something about Housewife Writers that isn't funny — like Uncle Tom, or Amos and Andy. 'Laugh', the Housewife Writers tell the real housewife, 'if you are feeling desperate, empty, bored, trapped in the bedmaking, chauffeuring and dishwashing details. Isn't it funny? We're all in the same trap.' Do real housewives then dissipate in laughter their dreams and their sense of desperation? Do they think their frustrated abilities and their limited lives are a joke? Shirley Jackson makes the beds, loves and laughs at her son — and writes another book. Jean Kerr's plays are produced on Broadway. The joke is not on *them* (p.50-1).

This struck me as uncomfortably close to some present-day realities. In the past few years, glossy women's magazines, including for instance *Cosmopolitan* and *She*, have abandoned their previous image as reading matter for intelligent 'career women' and cultivated an altogether fluffier image — articles about work and politics have been replaced by celebrity trivia and sex tips. When this sea-change took place, industry commentators related it unequivocally to market forces: this was what the target audience wanted. Even the watered-down, 'having it all' feminism of the 1980s/early 1990s woman's magazine was a turn-off for women now in their twenties.



An even more striking change has taken place in journalism not intended exclusively for a female audience. Newspapers are now awash in 'lifestyle' features, many of which bear an eerily strong resemblance to the work of the 1950s Housewife Writers described by Betty Friedan. Columnists once again get paid to chronicle the ups and downs of life at home — the breakdown of domestic appliances, the amusing dramas of getting three children ready for a family outing, the horror that is a teenage boy's bedroom.

But if there are echoes of the 1950s and early 60s in contemporary popular culture, there are also some important things that differentiate our time from the time Betty Friedan wrote about. (Perhaps the most important is the breaking of the link between domesticity and femininity — readers familiar with the new lifestyle journalism will know, for instance, that a lot of it is produced by men rather than women, a point I'll return to below.) What we have now is not a resurgence of the 1950s 'feminine mystique', but a mystique of domesticity itself. I think this is a response to conditions which affect both women and men; but that does not imply it is of no concern to feminists. Later I'll come back to the gender dimension of the new domesticity. First, though, I want to explore how it differs from the phenomenon analysed in *The Feminine Mystique*.

#### *At home by choice: equal opportunity domesticity*

An obvious difference between the 1950s and now is that contemporary women who embrace

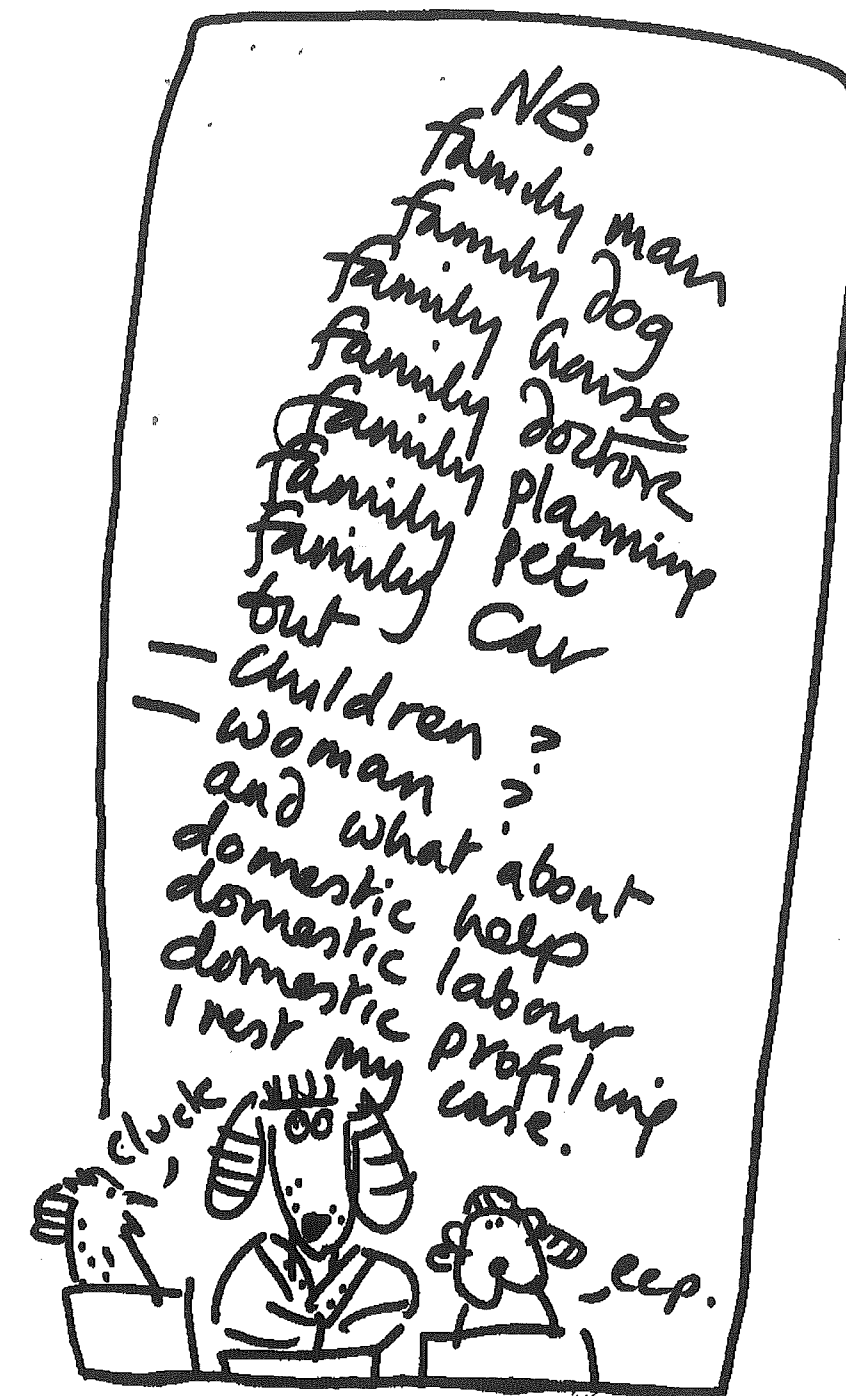
domesticity do so by choice rather than compulsion. Though Betty Friedan does emphasise the voluntarism of post-war women's surrender to the domestic ideal, she also gives plenty of evidence that educated middle class women in the 50s did not have the alternative options available to their counterparts today. On the other hand they did face relentless pressure towards domesticity from all kinds of 'experts', from the media and from their peers. Today, by contrast, it is the decision *not* to take up a profession, or to leave it permanently when she marries or has children, that educated women have to justify. The expectation, however unrealistic, is that an educated middle class woman can and should 'have it all', meaning a fulfilling family life and an equally fulfilling career (which also implies a measure of economic independence, even if women still tend to earn less than the men they set up households with). The equation of femininity and full-time domesticity that Betty Friedan identifies as so oppressive and destructive no longer has the force it did forty years ago, if indeed it can be said to exist at all.

This leads to the second difference between then and now: the new domesticity is not, or at least is never presented as, an exclusively female preserve. The idea that domesticity is a choice tends to go along with the idea that it is an equal opportunity activity, which simply happens to be chosen by more women than men. One argument against this is economic: since men usually earn more, if one member of a couple is going to give up paid work it will often make financial sense for it to be the woman. This 'choice' is obviously conditioned by a persistent structural inequality between the sexes.

On the other hand, as I have already mentioned, it is notable that some prominent media representatives of the new domesticity are gods rather than goddesses. Nigella (Lawson) is paralleled by Nigel (Slater), who is also filmed in cooking in his own home, and like Nigella (but unlike most men who prepare food on TV) is a food writer and domestic cook rather than a professional restaurant chef. Among the many irritating newspaper columns now devoted to chronicling the mundane details of domestic life, one of the most prominent, in *The Observer*, is written by a man, Phil Hogan. BBC Radio 4's popular *Home Truths* programme, a cosy compilation on the theme of home and family, is presented by another man, John Peel.

Hogan and Peel (though not Slater, who is

gay) have created personas as enthusiastic and committed family men, husbands and fathers whose home life essentially *is* their life. I say these are personas, because obviously these domestic gods (like the Housewife Writers of the 1950s) have a professional and indeed very



public life, for which their domestic life happens to provide the material. The domesticity they present to others as a calling is for them a business, from which they earn their living. But clearly it has become possible, now, for this rather contradictory position (public champion of private domesticity) to be inhabited quite convincingly by men as well as women. Indeed, I suspect that men may have come to be favoured over women as chroniclers of domestic life —



ubiquitous as they now are, their insights no longer have much novelty value, but they do represent a symbolic break with the old equation of domesticity and triviality ('if a man writes about it, it must be important').

The existence of the 'domestic god' who does not just pontificate on domesticity (as male experts have done for two centuries) but is also seen to embrace it fully and enthusiastically, suggests to me, not that domesticity itself has become genderless, but that the contemporary desire for domesticity has some purchase on people of both sexes. It can't be explained, that

is, as a simple desire to return to traditional, 1950s-style gender roles or as a reaction against feminism. (After all, men doing domesticity is very much in the spirit of a certain sort of feminism.)

My own explanation of the new domesticity actually has little to do with gender. I think it is an expression of the same impulse that prompts some people to embrace new age spiritual beliefs or become avid consumers of self-improvement literature. It is part of a search for meaning in contemporary life. And this brings me to the other two respects in which I think our own world is significantly different from the world of *The Feminine Mystique*: there is a different relationship between home and work, and a more complex, love-hate relationship with consumerism.

#### Getting a life: the problem of work

Throughout *The Feminine Mystique*, it is noticeable that Betty Friedan repeatedly opposes the domestic confinement of the hapless suburban housewife to the freedom of the woman allowed to pursue a profession. The career her mother longed for is presented as the most obvious antidote to the housewife's malaise and lack of fulfilment. The mainstream liberal feminism with which Betty Friedan became associated has always maintained something similar to this position: the keystone of women's equality is access to the world of work, especially to the middle class professions, and the key feminist issues are therefore things like sex discrimination in employment, sexual harassment in the workplace, equal pay, and the 'glass ceiling'.

Indisputably, if regrettably, these issues remain relevant; but the celebration of waged work as inherently liberating for women, and inherently less oppressive than domesticity, seems increasingly out of touch with the experience of many middle class 'career women'. In the accounts of those who have 'downshifted' to part time jobs or full time motherhood, there is, on the contrary, a consistent focus on the all-consuming, but at the same time unsatisfying nature of much contemporary work. And when paid work is experienced as oppressive rather than fulfilling, the domestic sphere, popularly conceived as 'the opposite' of work, starts to look less like a cage and more like the refuge whose idealisation Betty Friedan and other feminists of her era deplored.

Perhaps the greatest problem with work in the 21st century is the demands it makes on workers' time. It has been calculated that workers today spend more hours working than any group of people in recorded human history except factory hands in the early, unregulated phase of the industrial revolution. The 'speed up' of work, which is a consequence of the processes known in shorthand as globalisation, affects women particularly adversely, precisely because they continue to be responsible for most of the domestic labour that is needed to maintain their households, and for the care of their children. Women with jobs have to come home and work a 'second shift'. This is exhausting enough when your 'first shift' working hours are reasonable; as the hours spent on the first shift increase, exhaustion becomes desperation. Add to this the fact that many professional women are in working environments which are particularly stressful for various reasons — women are, for instance, over-represented in public sector occupations like nursing, education and social work where they must constantly try to compensate for a chronic lack of resources — and it becomes easy to see the attraction of jacking in the day-job.

For most women, however, giving up paid work altogether is a fantasy. For working class women the 'choice' to work for wages or not was always restricted by economic realities; now the same thing is true for middle class women, for the lifestyle of the average middle class family can rarely be maintained on a single income. There used to be a socialist/feminist slogan about marriage: 'the union of a slave and a wage-slave'. But we are (almost) all wage-slaves now, and the conditions under which we labour for wages are getting ever more demanding — involving longer hours, more responsibility and less long-term security at all levels of the occupational hierarchy. This is what gives resonance to contemporary buzzphrases like 'the work-life balance', or its colloquial relation 'get a life'. 'A life' here means 'a life outside work'. Primarily, it means family and domesticity. The message is a new variation on the old theme that one is forced to choose — home or work, family or career. But since women who choose 'career' do not thereby escape from domesticity, they may well be tempted by the idea of escaping into it.

In most cases, as I have said already, the 'escape' does not take the form of actually giving up paid work. Instead women selectively

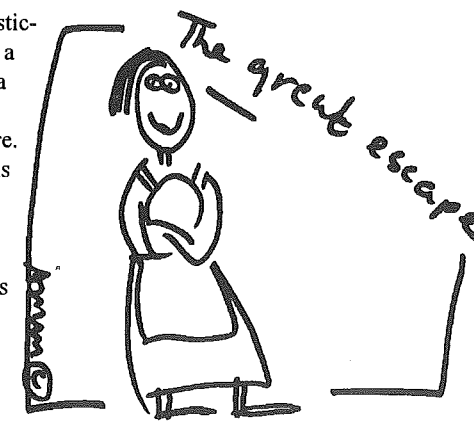
redefine their relationship to domesticity, so that instead of being merely a 'second shift' at work, it becomes a quasi-leisure activity, a creative hobby from which they get pleasure. Of course, not all domestic labour is treated in this way: few people relax by scrubbing toilets. But the deliberate nostalgic revival of old and laborious domestic crafts seems to me to be bound up, however paradoxically, with an equally deliberate attempt to distance domestic activities from the regimentation, tight deadlines and general stress of the modern workplace. It is the contrast that makes this form of domesticity pleasurable — and of course, the knowledge that it is neither unavoidable (the microwave is there if you want it) nor in fact your full-time occupation. Because it is not her whole life (whereas it was her grandmother's, and still is many less privileged women's), the domestic goddess can treat some aspects of domesticity as play rather than work, and use them to achieve a better 'work/life balance'.

#### Saving our souls

Apart from being a response to the excessive stress and alienation of paid work, the new domesticity may also be an expression of a peculiar love-hate relation with the advanced consumer capitalism which defines so much of life in contemporary affluent societies.

One of the things that struck me, re-reading *The Feminine Mystique*, was the emergence of 'the problem that has no name' at a very particular historical juncture: essentially the beginning of the great western post-war consumer boom. This is relevant to what could be seen as a major shortcoming of the book, its focus on white middle class suburban US women. In fact, though, part of Betty Friedan's point is that 'the problem' affected these privileged women most severely. They were the beneficiaries of the new affluence and the new labour-saving products which reduced the drudgery of housework. But that in itself contributed to the problem, since it meant that the full-time occupation to which their gender consigned them no longer occupied the time they had to spend on it, nor demanded any real skill.

From the interviews Betty Friedan quotes, it is evident that many women's malaise —





continual sleepiness, inability to concentrate, depression — had its origins in a kind of pathological boredom engendered by the sheer lack of stimulation that characterised their endlessly repeated daily routine. Old-style domestic work, which was both physically demanding and in some respects dependent on knowing one's craft, was composed of repetitive and often menial tasks, but it did not leave the housewife with so many empty hours or so much surplus physical and mental energy.

What was supposed to fill the time freed up by the end of domestic drudgery? According to a fairly standard sociological-historical account, which Betty Friedan also draws on, the real job of the post-war housewife was to *consume* — to buy things, especially non-essential or luxury items. The post-war period marked a new and decisive stage in the long-term process whereby the household shifted from being the key site of production in the pre-industrial era, to being a site almost exclusively of consumption, while productive labour moved elsewhere. This historical account provided the basis for a socialist or marxist (and socialist or marxist

feminist) critique of the modern housewife's role. The housewife was performing a vital service to capitalism: as well as reproducing her husband's labour power (by feeding, clothing and nurturing him so he was physically and mentally ready to work), she was redistributing his earnings back into the capitalist's coffers by buying things she did not really need, but was induced to want by consumerist culture, as represented for instance in women's magazines.

The classic marxist view of domestic consumerism has been criticised on many grounds — as patronisingly sexist (it portrays women as dupes of capitalism), as puritanical (it does not acknowledge the pleasure of consumption) and as insufficiently attentive to the gendered power relations inside households, rather than between them and other social locations. However, it seems pointless to digress into this argument, because in 2001, the special stigma that marxists used to attach to the housewife as a person whose life and identity revolved around consumption has long since disappeared. Just as we are almost all wage-workers now, so we are also all defined, to a greater or lesser extent, by our habits and practices of consumption. We are what we buy. For members of modern societies, of all classes and generations, and of both genders, buying goods and services is both a dominant leisure activity and a major means by which we express ourselves. With so many products available and so much effort put into promoting rival brands, our choices of food, clothing, home décor, books, films, even toothpaste and toilet paper, become deliberate and calculated statements about who we think we are. Few of us are so poor that we have no choices at all. And even fewer of us have the time or the skills to produce our own food, clothing and entertainment rather than buying it for money.

On one hand, then, consumerism is a way of life for all of us; it is no longer marked as 'feminine' or prototypically associated with housewives. On the other hand, though, the extent to which we are caught up in it has generated a backlash. The radical end of this is the anti-corporate, 'No Logo' movement, which has a political analysis, if not a very coherent programme. The more mainstream expression of it is what is sometimes called 'lifestyle politics', a diffuse anxiety that today's consumer culture is mindless, soulless and manipulative, which prompts various reactions against the perceived



excesses of consumerism. Ironically, those reactions in most cases involve alternative consumption practices rather than alternatives to consumption — ethical investment, buying organic food from small producers, choosing 'green' household appliances, boycotting companies whose trading practices you disapprove of. This form of politics accepts the general premise that consuming is a meaningful rather than merely utilitarian act, and uses consumption to express alternative meanings, such as 'I care about ending the arms trade/saving the planet/improving life for workers in the third world'.

It seems to me that the new domesticity is very much part of this trend. Among the meanings it expresses are 'I do not think it is more important to make money for my employer than to make life pleasant for my family'; 'in the past people had less money but a better sense of values' (recall Mrs Hymer's remark on how the 1940s House experience reaffirmed for her 'what really mattered'); and 'tasks such as shopping, cleaning and cooking are more meaningful and satisfying when they take time and effort and skill' (hence the apparently perverse nostalgia for black-leading and starching and making your own bread). But once again, the new domesticity is not so much a retreat from consumerism as a different form of it. The fact that more of your own unpaid labour goes into domestic goddess-style baking does not make it necessarily less expensive than simply buying a cake in a shop. 'Good' fresh ingredients and cooking equipment cost money; the glossy 'how-to' books don't come cheap either. But this kind of domesticity is not embraced to save either time or money. It has more to do with saving our souls, by replacing a meaningless consumption ritual like ordering a pizza with the more meaningful and creative process of making one from scratch.

#### Is this all?

The suburban housewife Betty Friedan conjures up in the first paragraph of *The Feminine Mystique* has a vague, unspoken question: 'is this all?' I think many women today, and quite a few men, are asking a very similar question; but the experience prompting us to ask it is not an experience of being confined to, and defined by, a domestic role within the home. Rather it is the experience of living in a culture where paid work absorbs more and more of our time, while our leisure is largely taken up by consuming all kinds

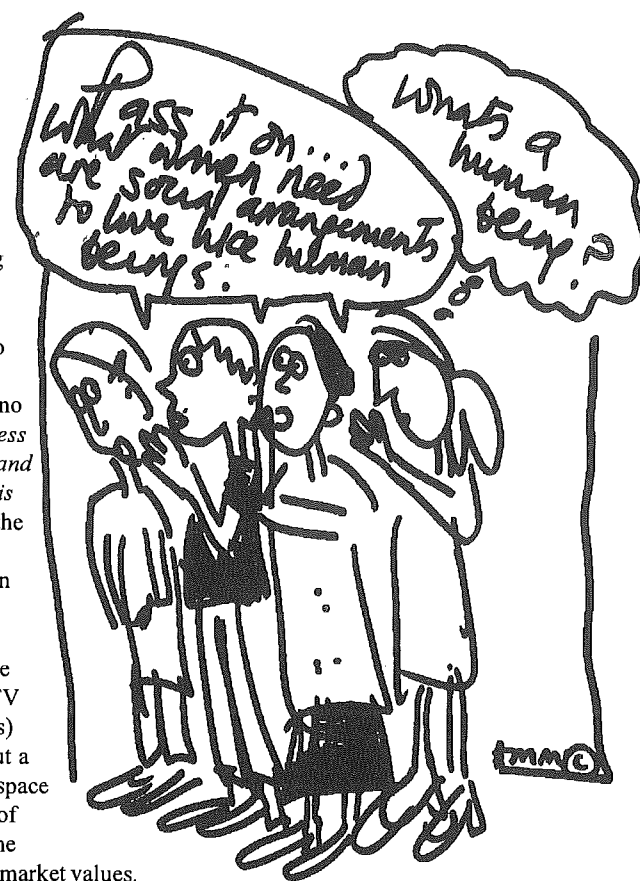
of mass-produced commodities.

For many people, the relentlessness of both activities — working and consuming — has prompted a feeling of dissatisfaction which one might, indeed, compare to Betty Friedan's 'problem that has no name'. *Is this endless round of working and spending all there is to life?* For some, the new domesticity (whether engaged in actively or just vicariously, by reading its literature and watching the TV gods and goddesses) appears to mark out a sort of alternative space for the expression of individuality and the affirmation of non-market values.

Where, you might ask, is the harm in that? If domestic goddesses no longer have to be financially dependent on or subservient to their husbands, if domesticity is not a calling but just a hobby, then why not just let people (women, and a few men) indulge their taste for ironing sheets and baking sponges, in the same way others might cultivate an interest in tennis or the tuba?

On reflection, though, it is difficult to see domesticity as a hobby like any other, particularly for women. As I pointed out before, most women are obliged to practise domesticity in some form or other; aspiring to the status of a domestic goddess is making a virtue out of a necessity. Until housework really is shared equally between women and men, until women do not have to work a 'second shift', it will be hard to see domestic goddess-hood as an uncoerced choice.

Another problem with the new domesticity is the idealisation of *family* life that goes with it. Domestic goddesses are propagandists for the idea of the family as the only real haven in a



heartless world. You no longer have to be either female or straight to buy into this (though it helps), but you do have to gloss over some of the less pleasant aspects of family life (the abuse of women and children that goes on behind closed doors). You also have to be willing to abandon three decades of feminist effort to create meaningful relationships outside the family, and community beyond the home.

A feminist approach to the 'work-life balance' would not just be about having enough time to spend with your family, but would also take account of women's need and desire for friendship, for educational and cultural activities, for involvement in community groups and — not least — for political activism. These things too provide a space for the affirmation of non-market values; they benefit both the people who engage in them and society at large.

Finally, there is (still) the problem of domesticity itself — what it actually consists of. For 150 years, people (usually people who didn't have to do it themselves) have tried to invest the job of running a home with meaning, status and glamour. They have made it into a science, eulogised it as an art, represented it as a career and now they are selling it as a fulfilling leisure pursuit. The patronising futility of these attempts to dignify domestic work is aptly illustrated in one of Betty Friedan's examples:

One of the ways that the housewife raises her own prestige as a cleaner of her home is through the use of specialized products for specialized tasks. ...when she uses one product for washing clothes, a second for dishes, a third for walls, a fourth for floors, a fifth for venetian blinds, etc., rather than an all-purpose cleaner, she feels less like an unskilled labourer, more like an engineer, an expert (p.183).

Several decades on, the only possible response to this is incredulous laughter. Several decades from now, no doubt, readers will react with similar incredulity to the pronouncements of today's domestic goddesses on the importance of using fresh

coriander and starching your linen. The unchanging reality of domestic labour is that it is boring, thankless, and as a full-time occupation, soul-destroying. No attempt to disguise that reality has ever succeeded for long.

*The Feminine Mystique* belongs to the tradition of American liberal feminism, a tradition that had a simple but compelling political message: women are human beings, with the same aspirations to autonomy and fulfilment as all other human beings (i.e., men). With the emergence of a radical movement, the WLM, this message came to seem rather staidly conservative (cf 'women who want to be equal to men lack ambition'), but in our own 'post-feminist' time, the basic point will bear repetition. The housewife, the 'career woman', the domestic goddess — these are all dehumanising, one-dimensional stereotypes. Now as in the past, what women need are social arrangements that allow them to live like human beings. □



#### References

Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (Pelican, 1973)

# WORLD TRADE ORGANISATION

*The new buzz word in economic and social analysis is globalisation, but few commentators have bothered to address it in relation to the sex industry. Here Liz Kelly looks at the ways trafficking in women has become a global issue, and at what we know about it in relation to the UK.*

Trafficking of human beings, and of women for sexual exploitation in particular, has become a major international issue in the last few years. Every week another international meeting/conference/seminar takes place or a new report is published. Much of this material restates what has previously been said, calls for action and locates trafficking within both an organised crime and human rights framework. Very little explores

the sex industry or looks at the issues it raises with respect to policies on prostitution more generally. In fact, there is a studied reluctance to do this — everyone can agree that trafficking for sexual exploitation is a bad thing, especially if it is defined as a 'contemporary form of slavery', but no-one agrees about prostitution and the sex industry or 'economic migration'. This last term is rather mysterious to me, once I think about it



— hasn't migration (leaving aside movements of individuals and groups because of political repression) always been about economics to some extent — from nomadic peoples who move between climates and seasons to ensure their own survival to movements between poorer and richer countries? The terrain on which debates about trafficking in women now take place internationally is increasingly ground where the fissures about prostitution narrow the exchange and limit curiosity.

For a radical feminist this can seem like being in hall of mirrors, where the realities of women's lives are distorted and contorted to fit into acceptable international frameworks where at one point people will acknowledge the range of ways women are recruited and exploited, and at another insist that we must talk in terms of 'force' and 'slavery'. There is consensus that traffickers are adept at reading local, regional and international politics, targeting women whose lives and possibilities have been disrupted and diminished by economic, political and social dislocation.

What there is far less recognition of is that women are trafficked *into* countries that have existing sex industries which can absorb them, and are often, but not always, trafficked *from* countries where there is an indigenous sex industry: that the sexual exploitation by and through prostitution is minimised, even ignored.

To operate in this field one is yet again confronted with the dilemma of deciding whether to work within the distortions and make some small progress or to try to shatter the mirrors and risk losing either a place in the discussion or the limited commitment to action from those with the power to do something on a significant scale. This piece, however, does not attempt to answer this perennial tension for feminists, but raises some questions that are seldom, if ever, explored in policy debates on trafficking in women, and summarises the little we know about the UK.

#### *Defining terms — what's in a name?*

The place where these debates become most obvious — and protracted — is in how to define trafficking in women. More time is devoted to this issue in most international meetings than is ever spent exploring what should be done. As someone who has emphasised the importance of definitions for many years, I was surprised to discover a sense of frustration and irritation with this process (which seems to occur across a range of issues at the international level). The more I

witnessed or read about these endless circular discussions, the more I began to suspect that this was not just about ideological differences. The longer prevarication and disagreement prevails the longer states and organisations can put off doing anything. And the deep rifts between feminist global coalitions working on trafficking (especially, but not only the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women [CATW] and the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women [GAATW]) have, unintentionally, fed into this excuse for inaction. Repeatedly in policy documents, the incomparability of definitions between states, between institutions within states, and across research studies is cited as a serious barrier to progress.

As an exercise for a study Linda Regan and I conducted for the Home Office (see later), we looked at a number of definitions (including those used by CATW and GAATW) from the perspective of what they concurred on. The short versions of the two feminist definitions were:

All acts involved in the recruitment and/or transportation of a woman within and across national borders for work or services by means of violence or threats of violence, abuse of authority or dominant position, debt bondage, deception or other forms of coercion (GAATW, 1999).

Sex trafficking; the recruitment, transportation within or across borders, purchase, sale, transfer, receipt or harbouring of a person for the purpose of prostitution or exploiting the marriage or such a person (CATW, 1999).

- They agree on a number of key dimensions:
- ♦ Neither rely on force, but include a range of control strategies and coercive contexts which vitiate consent.
  - ♦ Both include traffic *within* and across borders.
  - ♦ Both attempt to capture all those who facilitate trafficking.

The only significant differences were that CATW highlight sexual exploitation of/through marriage (which both the UN and Council of Europe now include in their discussions of trafficking) and include anyone who profits from/exploits a trafficked woman. These agreements and commonalities reflect the increasing knowledge about trafficking in women and the new forms that it is taking. In this context — where coercion, debt bondage, abuse of authority and threats and deception are recognised as forms of exploitation and human rights abuses — one might expect that this would have clarified

problems with the simplistic distinction between 'forced' and 'free' prostitution that has dominated the international debate in recent years (see T&S 38). But no, it returns again and again, resulting in policy papers and research that are internally inconsistent — where the language of 'force' and 'slavery' sits alongside evidence of multiple forms of power and control. The connections with, and implications for, other forms of violence against women are never addressed — probably because most do not really see trafficking as 'gender violence'.

Feminists have spent decades arguing for wider understandings and definitions of domestic violence, rape and sexual assault, sexual harassment — to move us away from narrow legal definitions which only recognise physical force and physical injury. Drawing on women and children's accounts, we have documented a continuum of forms of power and control, and, at least with respect to domestic violence, have been successful in establishing this as the generally accepted perspective and definition. To do the opposite with respect to trafficking seems strange to say the least. The only justification can be to avoid the unresolved and difficult debates on prostitution, or at a more prosaic level, to defend 'turf' and position in the increasingly competitive world of international lobbying by NGOs.

Some have argued strongly that trafficking of women should be seen as one form of illegal migration, and there are undoubtedly connections here that are important. The patterns of movement in some parts of the globe are similar, and the same individuals and gangs are involved in aspects of the transportation. But these links should not deflect from a number of crucial differences. Reducing trafficking in women to just one form of illegal migration means that the exploiters in countries of origin and destination become invisible and the sexual exploitation irrelevant — other than as a form of forced labour or debt bondage. Facilitating illegal migration is usually limited to delivering the person to the country they wish to enter: at this point they are left to their own devices. In some instances they may be being trafficked in order to work in sweat shops, or other industries for minimal remuneration, but none of these forms involve being raped as part of the process, as many women from Albania and Moldova have reported in recent research<sup>1</sup>.

With trafficking for sexual exploitation,

women are delivered to individuals or organisations who are parties to the transaction and who intend to sexually exploit her. They have invariably paid a fee for the 'delivery' of one or more women, which is then translated into a debt that she has to repay through prostitution. To define women who have been trafficked as economic migrants requires redefining traffickers and procurers as providing some form of desired service to women seeking 'work'. It is not economic migration when women are made to stand naked in the street and are literally bought and sold, as they are in the Arizona market in Bosnia.

This perspective also fails to address the meanings and consequences of sexual exploitation for women if and when they return home. Whilst there is increasing attention to 'return and reintegration' programmes, few, if any, of them choose to engage with what it means to have been prostituted in any circumstance, let alone the specific ones for trafficked women. Given that stigma attaches to women in prostitution and is even more intense in countries where culture and religion involve notions of honour, failing to explore these issues means women are left vulnerable to social exclusion, and because of this, to re-trafficking or involvement in the sex industry in their home country. The good intentions of NGOs are rooted in a belief that by viewing women as 'forced' this will in turn mean that they are seen as 'deserving victims' by the community and re-integration will be unproblematic. This optimism is not supported by what we know about other forms of violence against women — the most extreme example being the rejection by families and communities of women who have been raped during conflict. Woman blaming persists in all cultures, although its virulence and precise content may vary. Nor does this strategy reflect what we know about what enables women to not just leave prostitution, but re-construct (and for some construct for the first time) a sense of self as deserving of respect and dignity. A recent evaluation of a project in London working with young women in prostitution made clear that building relationships in which women felt worth something, and within this being able to discuss the realities of prostitution, was the foundation for further change seeming possible<sup>2</sup>.

Another possible reason why NGOs and human rights groups might choose the language of 'slavery' and 'force' is to circumvent the

increasingly ambivalent, if not hostile, attitude amongst western governments to migrants and asylum seekers. The growth in western Europe of stricter immigration and border controls, alongside a narrowing of rights to accommodation and financial support for asylum seekers, creates a context where making arguments for 'special cases' can soften the impact at least for some. But 'special cases' have to be 'special' — different from the majority. In the process some trafficked women will be designated as 'deserving' and others less so.

Whatever the reason, the focus of discussion and debate on the unhelpfully simplistic distinction between 'forced' and 'free' prostitution means that many of the most interesting questions do not get asked.

### *Shifting sands*

Some of these questions are: what is happening in the sex industry internationally, why and what this tells us. It is not just that trafficking in women has increased dramatically in the last decade, but that sex industries globally are increasingly populated by foreign women. Many, but not all, will have been trafficked. Some women from countries where they face limited employment opportunities do migrate legally to work in the sex industry, others are able to pay for their (illegal) migration to be facilitated but are not controlled on arrival, since they are not indebted to anyone. But these are the exceptions, rather than the rule, and there is still the open question of how they find routes into the sex industry in a foreign country; the only accounts which shed light on this suggest that women who are already involved act as informal recruiters when they return home. How organised this is remains unclear.

Many — probably most — countries across the globe are implicated in trafficking. The conventional distinctions designate them as sending, transit and/or destination countries. There is some acknowledgement that it is possible to be all three, with indigenous women being trafficked outwards, parts of the country being used as transit routes between two other countries, and women being trafficked in from still other countries. But current analysis tends to locate countries on either side of the origin/destination divide, with the former being characterised by poverty and the latter by relative affluence. With respect to affluent countries this is broadly accurate. But the reality

for poorer countries is considerably more complex, since they have become destination countries for women from their even more poverty-stricken neighbours, and part of transit can involve 'breaking' women through sexually abusing and prostituting them en route to another destination. Some examples will illustrate these processes. In India street prostitution increasingly involves girls and young women trafficked from Nepal, Laos and Cambodia. In the Balkans, whilst Albanian and Kosovar women are trafficked west, young women from Moldova, Romania and the Ukraine are trafficked into, and through, Albania, Bosnia and Kosovo. These accounts from research done by Vlore Women's Hearth *Through the Traffic of Women* illustrate this, and the diffuse nature of those who facilitate trafficking:

Olga, Kristina, Natalia and Silvia are all from different towns in Moldova. They were caught by the police in Vlora (Albania), while waiting to depart for Italy. The same people recruited them. Escorted by a man they travelled to Romania... the itinerary continues in Belgrade, where they are greeted by a couple who took away their passports and 1,400 deutschmarks. A few days later they were taken to Montenegro where other people met them to wait a few more days.... [then a complicated journey through Albania involving three further stops] Throughout this month long journey the girls are guarded by men who rape and ill-treat them regularly. During their stay in Belgrade, Montenegro and Albania, girls undertake daily prostitution, paying tariffs set by their companions who are trying to get some 'middleman profits' since they are not the 'real' exploiters.

E, from a village in Albania lived in difficult economic circumstances, with a paralysed mother. At the age of 14, her father sold her... to a young man who often came to their village for 'business'. Raped and drugged, she was sent to Italy for prostitution, escorted not by the man who bought her, but another exploiter from another town.

Recent information from Holland, Italy and the UK show that the majority of women in certain locations — the windows in Amsterdam and The Hague, call flats in Soho, and street prostitution — are foreign women. As evidence from across Europe increases, certain consistent patterns of movement are emerging: some seem to be purely about geographic proximity of borders — such as the links as between Albania and Greece and Italy; others reflect the relative size of the existing sex industry, meaning more

trafficked women can be absorbed, such as the Netherlands and Germany; and some reflect historic links between countries including those of colonialism.

I have no wish to suggest that underpinning this shift is a well organised international conspiracy — at the day-to-day level there are many small scale operators involved, who women know vaguely, if at all. This makes tracing and prosecuting traffickers very difficult. At the social level there must be some factors that might explain these processes. But there is a remarkable lack of curiosity or interest in either noticing this shift, or seeking to understand and explain it. Why are sex industries across the globe increasingly populated by migrant and trafficked women? One part of the answer has to be the scale of profits involved; having someone who is hugely in debt, or who has been literally sold or kidnapped, means that she works for virtually nothing, and the profit margin goes to the exploiter — whether they are a pimp, a flat or brothel owner, or part of a modern mafia. But such profits are not possible without demand, demand from men to pay for sex with women who are 'other', who do not speak their language, who have less power and status in general than women who are nationals, and, therefore with respect to what Julia O'Connell Davidson calls the 'prostitution contract'. That this is increasingly the case and that one of the things exploiters and customers alike enjoy about 'foreign' women is the fact that they are more likely to have sex without condoms and not draw lines about which sexual acts they will and will not do, raises a number of fundamental questions for those who have sought to argue that women in prostitution have considerable control over their 'work'. It confirms what Julia O'Connell Davidson argues — that what men are buying is control over another's body, and more than this: that there is a large market for having total control.

Trafficking also questions some of the ways in which the processes of globalisation have been represented. Two processes tend to be highlighted. First, that transnational companies are able to move production to locations where labour is cheap, and labour laws weak. Secondly, that in many industrialised countries certain low-paid, essential infrastructure jobs are becoming harder to fill, and migrant labour is increasingly needed to clean streets, hospitals etc. Neither of these processes 'fit' trafficking precisely, and

exploring why might raise interesting questions about gender and globalisation.

### *What we know about trafficking in women*

There is considerable agreement in the literature about what makes women vulnerable to trafficking:

- ♦ Poverty — economic hardship, economic transition and structural adjustment programmes all differentially impact women.
- ♦ Conflict and social dislocation.
- ♦ Gender inequality — it is not an accident that women and girls are those who are trafficked for sexual exploitation.
- ♦ Family loyalties and responsibility — through, for example, agreeing to migrate for work in order to pay a debt for mortgaging family land.
- ♦ Social exclusion — more marginalised groups are often targeted, such as hill tribes in Nepal, the rural poor in Albania, young unemployed professional women in Eastern Europe.
- ♦ Myths about 'the west' — traffickers exploit naivete and unrealistic ideas about how much it is possible to earn, and how people live in western countries.
- ♦ The desire for a better life.

There are five basic ways in which women are trafficked:

- ♦ Complete coercion through abduction, kidnapping or being sold by one's family. This is thought to be rare, but there is increasing evidence of this taking place in Albania and Kosovo, and it is more common in parts of Asia; girls and young woman are the primary targets.
- ♦ Deception by promises of legitimate employment/entry: women believe that they will be working in restaurants, bars or are entering for marriage.
- ♦ Deception through a legitimate marriage to a young man 'with prospects' who is working abroad, who when the couple arrive in this country becomes an abusive pimp.
- ♦ Deception through half truths, such as that they will be employed in entertainment, dancing or even stripping.
- ♦ Deception about the rewards and conditions of work: some women are fully aware that they are migrating to work in prostitution, but they are unaware of the extent to which they will be indebted, intimidated, exploited and controlled.

Women who are deceptively recruited are led to believe that they can travel to a rich western

country and earn large amounts of money in a short space of time, which they can then use to move themselves and their families out of poverty and despair. The reality is that the amount of debt is so great that it takes months and months to pay off, during which time they receive no payment. If they reach the point of having paid it off, they are then told they have incurred additional debts for accommodation and other expenses, and/or that their earnings are being held for them or sent home for their families. The majority of trafficked women who are either identified by the police, and/or who make contact with NGOs report that they have made little if any money. Should women protest at their treatment, a series of threats will be made to friends and family. Should these levels of coercion still not produce compliance, physical and sexual violence will be used.

The ways women are exploited, therefore, include:

- ♦ being deceived about what their life will be like;
- ♦ not being allowed to control the number of clients;
- ♦ not being allowed to negotiate sexual practice;
- ♦ having their earnings taken at source;
- ♦ having their movements and options controlled through removal of papers;
- ♦ threats to themselves and/or threats to their families.

The consequence is that women have little, if any, control over their bodies or lives, and it is this reality which has led some feminists to call this a condition of sexual slavery. In the late twentieth century, international NGOs and the UN talk of 'contemporary forms of slavery' — where individuals are more disposable and the rights and forms of ownership are temporary rather than life long.

#### *The extent of trafficking in the UK*

Various 'guesstimates' of the global and regional scale of trafficking in women for the purposes of sexual exploitation have been published. There are seldom any calculations provided to support the figures, and they can appear to be 'back of the envelope' calculations; but the paucity of data — there are no accurate figures for any EU country — means that estimates and extrapolations are all that have been possible. Researching trafficking presents a number of almost insuperable problems: the activity itself is illegal, and therefore, hidden; few, if any, exploiters would

participate; and even if one had access to women, many do not speak the language of the country they are resident in and/or may be too intimidated to speak.

In the UK, until recently, we had little more than anecdotes, which enabled a view that it was not 'our' problem. In 2000, Linda Regan and I conducted the first contemporary study using interviews with police services (36 of the 42), immigration and NGOs to try and assess the extent of trafficking into the UK. What follows draws on that report and an unpublished update done in early 2001.

We found a total of 71 women in 1998 — based on 18 confirmed trafficking cases from five police forces, although the majority of cases and women were located in London. The women involved came from Albania, Brazil, Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Thailand, and the Ukraine. All were in off-street locations: call flats, walk up flats, massage parlours and saunas, and in all but one case, the local police had a 'pro-active' approach to prostitution and/or a vice unit.

The most recent information from CO14 (the section of the Metropolitan Police with designated responsibility for trafficking in women) is that over the last two years, 501 foreign women have been identified working in Soho, of whom half were from the Balkans, and a further 98 were in other parts of London. They estimate a year on year increase of 20% within Soho of foreign women for the last five years — there were hardly any women from the Balkans in the call flats in 1995; now they are estimated to be 80% of the women working from them. Whilst it is not possible to say all these women have been trafficked, CO14 believe the majority of them have been. We found indicators of more significant problems, including: inconclusive police investigations outside London; media reports of trafficked women in local brothels where the local police reported not having a problem; evidence of the UK being used as a transit country for girls and young women being trafficked from West Africa to Italy. One London health project for women in the sex industry had 1,385 'contacts' between July and September 2000, 508 of which were recorded as women from the Balkans and eastern Europe ('contacts' is not the same as individuals — some women may have had more than one contact in the time period). The problem is therefore larger than the confirmed cases, they

are the tip of an iceberg of considerably greater proportions

Apart from CO14, which has a pro-active response to trafficking, most police services have a reactive response; responding either to cases where women report themselves (as a few escape and do) or to the rare customers who communicate to the police women's distress and wish to be 'rescued'. Our survey found that only nine police areas were able to provide any information about the scale of the sex industry in their area; in each case this related to a small location in which prostitution (usually 'on-street') was concentrated. There were only two police forces in the survey which regularly monitored their local 'sex market'. As well as having minimal knowledge, prostitution, especially off-street, tended to be responded through a reactive, nuisance-based, approach.

Most police forces, therefore, have no mechanisms to assess whether there is a local problem, meaning it is unlikely that trafficked women or traffickers and exploiters will be detected. The exception here will be cases involving those unusual punters who listen to women's complaints and make a report to the police.

This led us to pose the question whether the lack of monitoring of off-street prostitution creates — albeit unintentionally — 'zones of toleration' within which traffickers can operate with virtual impunity. In recommending increased monitoring of the sex industry we were acutely aware that recommending any increase in the policing of prostitution would be met with hostility from some women in the sex industry and some of the organisations which support them. We argued that any shift in policy must take place within a clear, shared national framework that is based on human rights principles for all those involved. Monitoring off-street prostitution should be understood as a necessary strategy to guarantee that neither children nor trafficked women are in those locations, and to ensure the absence of coercion and violence with respect to local adult women and men. There are possibilities here for inter-agency work with local authorities who are responsible for licensing many of the premises concerned, and monitoring by health and safety officers — rather than police officers — within a local Crime Reduction Partnership was floated as idea worth piloting.

#### *Being trafficked into the UK*

It is rare for women to be trafficked into the UK through entirely illegal methods, such as false floors of trucks, although we came across cases where parts of the journey from countries of origin involved this kind of transportation and a number of the women most recently detected talked of coming in via these methods. Entry into the UK typically involves women presenting themselves at ports of entry with variations of legitimate and illegitimate documentation. They may have a real or false passport, a legitimate or forged visa, or one which is legitimate but has been obtained through duplicitous means (many women from Central and Eastern Europe no longer need visas). A male English-speaking escort, who will pose as her husband/boyfriend or a relative, accompanies most trafficked women. Some traffickers instruct women to apply for asylum on arrival, knowing that the process will take at least a year. On arrival in the UK women are usually transferred from the trafficker to the brothel owner/pimp with whom the traffickers are dealing. False papers will be taken back by the trafficker at this point, and the woman's passport will invariably be handed over to the person to whom she is now indebted, who has 'paid' for her. It is at this point that many women discover the extent to which they have been deceived. For some it is the fact that there is no legitimate employment and that they are expected to work in prostitution, for others that it is prostitution and not stripping or lap dancing, and for still others that they will earn little if anything until they have paid off a large debt. For most, the conditions in which they live and work are not what they expected; rather than their own room/apartment they are sharing with a number of other women; instead of enjoying a cosmopolitan city they work long hours, six or seven days a week.

Most women have a debt of £8,000-£15,000, which they have to repay before they make any money. The most common way they are required to do this is to work 'for free' for a specified number of customers — this strategy ensures that there are no financial records, which have in the past been used as evidence in prosecutions. Once that debt is paid women may begin earning money — but they will also have amassed new debts: for accommodation, for the rent of the flat they work from etc, and also have to save for the cost of their journey home. Few earn anything



close to the money they had been promised, and many return home with nothing at all to show for the months they have sexually serviced men.

### *What is to be done?*

Changes in law, policy and practice must not do further harm, nor increase the potential harms to women. For example, it is difficult to see how strategies to increase detection at points of entry, where they are not based on strong intelligence, will achieve anything more than harassment of women travelling from certain destinations. There is little likelihood of such a strategy being effective in detecting and prosecuting traffickers. Equally, a policy focusing primarily on detecting and removing women both denies them their right to redress and may have the unintended impact of simply increasing demand — as appears to be happening currently in the Netherlands and Australia. Summary expulsion can have dramatic effects on women, since it defines and treats them as criminals, and returns them to contexts where there is minimal support and where, in the absence of protection, they may be swiftly re-trafficked to another destination. Such policies punish the victim, whilst having minimal impact on the exploiters.

A yawning gap in provision in the UK is that there is no specialist NGO working with trafficked women; providing them with safe housing, advocacy and support is extremely difficult. In such a context it is not surprising that on detection most women request to be returned home. This was one of the recommendations at the end of *Stopping Traffic*, but whilst the government has expressed concern, no progress has been made to date.

It is now EU policy that member states should arrange for trafficked women who agree to

give evidence in a legal case to be granted temporary residence rights; at least four countries have enacted law to this effect, but the UK has no official policy, although women in this situation have invariably been given leave to remain. This is a minimal position for women whose human rights have been grossly violated within the EU. A more just position would be to recognise, and enable, applications for asylum under the Geneva Convention, with trafficking counting as gender violence.

There is also a need to develop a legal framework with appropriate penalties which provides redress for all the ways in which women's human rights are violated by traffickers and exploiters and is effective in prosecuting these crimes. It should also include rights for women to sue their exploiters. Too little of the work to date has addressed ways of enhancing law enforcement, finding effective methods for disrupting criminal networks and increasing the costs to exploiters at all levels. Prevention efforts in origin countries have, in the main, focused on young women offering them advice about the dangers of accepting offers of work abroad. Including measures directed at the young men who recruit would provide some balance in these responses, and daring to target demand would be a radical step.

These measures would have some impact, but while the huge differences in wealth between countries not only exist but become more acute and women's inequality remains unchanged, there will always be young women desperate enough to believe promises of a better life. And there will always be and men (and some women) from their own countries and elsewhere ready to exploit their desire for something better. □

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, recent statistics from International Organisation of Migration offices in Kosovo and Bosnia, and a study by Vlora Women's Hearth, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> See, Rachel Wingfield and Liz Kelly, 2001, 'Worth less or worth more? An evaluation of the Maze Marigold project.

# Modestly Radical?

*Can popular media be vehicles for radical ideas? Do women's magazines, for example, offer a means for feminist messages to reach much larger numbers of women than more overtly feminist publications could ever hope to reach—or are commercial women's magazines inherently conservative and antipathetic to any kind of feminism? Here Srimati Basu puts this much-debated question in a less frequently examined cultural context, analysing the contradictory messages about gender and sexuality that appear in the Bengali women's magazine Sananda.*

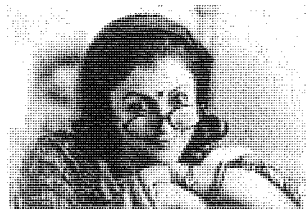
Popular media are often viewed as reproducing patriarchal attitudes rather than subverting them. Members of the 'women and media' division of the recent on-line preparatory working groups for the 'Beijing plus 5' Meeting<sup>1</sup> have been vigorously arguing about the most critical global issues related to media, such as the role of cyberspace, the creation of educational and radical products by women's groups using a range of media, and the need to contest dominant media representations of women. Popular magazines or television or radio programmes been largely ignored as avenues of change, and seen instead as obstacles feminists need to demolish or work around. And yet, popular media reach a large variety of women in ways that are beyond the capacity of individual feminist groups. They may be able to raise feminist issues in non-didactic ways, making them part of everyday

conversations. The question is, does putting potentially radical messages in the context of glossy consumer products and domestication inevitably contaminate them?

### **Sananda: a space for feminist conversation?**

If one divides Indian women's magazines based on the subjects, format and target audience, there is a continuum of feminist awareness of sorts. I visualise this as having *Stardust*, with its virtual obliviousness to women's socioeconomic or cultural problems, at one end, *Femina* and *Eve's Weekly* close by down the line (even though they have been making recent claims to representing 'real' issues for women). *Manushi*, an ad-free progressive magazine focusing on issues of gender and class, is at the other end. At the *Stardust* end, there are no pretensions to subvert,

This piece is an edited version of a more detailed analysis of *Sananda*, which Srimati Basu has published in the journal *Feminist Media Studies* (Vol.1.2, July 2001).



Aparna Sen

and at the *Manushi* end, no pretensions to provide fashion or cooking tips. The publication I want to talk about here, *Sananda*, falls somewhere in the middle; it is squarely within the glossy commercial genre, but simultaneously makes a claim to being 'feminist' both in the sense of covering allegedly taboo topics relating to women and including a range of subjects not necessarily coded as women's domain.

Arguably, a magazine like *Sananda* sees itself as being a different voice than *Femina*, but is enmeshed in relations of production that are similar. The typical consumer is projected as female, urban, wealthy or at least upper middle class, young (although the recipes and sewing projects contradict this somewhat), deeply appreciative of the depth and variety of 'Bengali culture' while being a trendy consumer of global news and products. A glance at any Table of Contents shows a variety of issues that are often broader in scope than most women's magazines, including travel, politics, fiction (rarely in the romance genre), and health/environment, but the giant fashion model visibly dominates the other

images. She is magnified several times in size in proportion to the others (though her body is waif-thin), signifying the economic imperatives that govern a glossy magazine brought out by a commercial publishing empire. As

Gloria Steinem demonstrates in 'Sex, Lies and Advertising', articles and images in women's magazines are often forced to reflect the ethos of femininity portrayed in ads if magazines are to retain major advertisers. In *Sananda*, thus, the giant model on the Table of Contents page sells the designs of a particular boutique but also amplifies the significance of the numerous other clothing and cosmetics ads filling the magazine, underlining the conditions of the magazine's continued existence.

The editor, Aparna Sen, embodies several

contradictions as well: she is known as a film director and regional film star, who draws mass appeal from having starred in numerous commercial films but intellectual credibility from being an important face in 'art' film, e.g. Satyajit Ray's *Teen Kanya*. In certain editorials, she emphasises her position within the world of film criticism: daughter of a well-respected film critic, working with Ray on a film (the ultimate status symbol in the cinema of Bengal), and a film director. Her films, such as *36 Chowringhee Lane*, *Parama* and *Sati*, dealing respectively with the alienation of an Anglo Indian woman teacher, the erasure of sexual desire and markers of selfhood of an elite housewife, and the material significance of compulsory marriage for a poor woman married to a tree, have been important feminist films in Indian cinema, and her authority as the maker of those films marks her authority as editor of a magazine that speaks about transgressive topics related to women.

In other editorials, Aparna Sen constructs identities as a political progressive (anti-fundamentalism, pro-'Fire'<sup>2</sup>), a consumer of international trends (Vitamin E, no-starch diets), and simultaneously a product of a loving 'traditional' Bengali family symbolised by her grandparents' mutual love (this last category is not specifically contradictory to her identity as a feminist, but complicates it in interesting ways). She marks herself as an intellectual who challenges gender and cultural norms while being firmly in tune with Bengali culture, thus embodying *Sananda's* difference from other kinds of women's magazines on both ends of the continuum and its potential as a unique space for feminist conversation.

*Sananda* cannot simply be analyzed as a magazine which has a superficial feminist packaging but really sells products and recycles narrow definitions of femininity. Rather, it is more productive to analyze it in terms of the various demands it must negotiate: incorporating and interpreting the presence of feminism, retaining the more traditional women's magazine reader's expectations of intricate domestic arts, preserving elite and middle-class values, selling an ideology of consumption, symbolising Bengali culture, representing cosmopolitanism in its coverage of national and international issues. These discourses complement and also contradict each other, producing zones of unease. The unease goes to the heart of the question about popular magazines as feminist vehicles: can

conflict be expressed in terms that are oppositional to dominant ideology, and possibly liberating? Or does it express itself as mild heartburn and queasiness that is soon forgotten amid the numerous temptations of consumption?

### Sananda in context: Bengali gender norms

The fact that *Sananda* is a Bengali magazine is critical for the forms of femininity it invokes. These relate to the specific meanings of gender identity in colonial and postcolonial Bengal. Issues centring on women such as *satidaha*<sup>3</sup> and widow remarriage were at the heart of ideological and political struggles in the earlier part of the nineteenth century. They formed the rationale for colonial legal intervention in the interests of 'civilisation' as well as giving grounds for Indian resistance to colonial interference, and an impetus for reform within Indian communities. In the latter part of the century, as the nationalist project occupied centre stage, the 'woman question' appeared to fade away. Partha Chatterji argues, however, that this fading away was not merely a case of new political priorities overshadowing gender issues, it represented a consistent approach to gender issues by reformers. 'Western' material resources and practices were seen as beneficial for the new nation, but 'Eastern' spirituality was seen as superior: the 'outer' forms of the coloniser's world were to be embraced but the 'inner' Indian world was to be sacrosanct from external intervention. Reform for women, who were associated with the 'inner' world, was thus to come from within the community. Ideally, the 'new woman' (educated, middle-class, refined, modest) was to be nothing like a *memsahib* or Englishwoman, yet she was to be a vast improvement over other Indian women of previous generations and poorer classes. Women could move into the public sphere and receive all its material advantages while embodying a particular form of femininity internally. Male conduct had no corresponding prescriptions for modesty and purity.

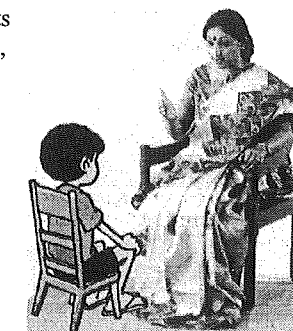
It is startling to see how little Partha Chatterji's argument has gone out of date for the contemporary Bengali woman. The *Sananda* reader is constantly addressed through a discourse of sexual modesty and decency, and contrasted to the 'over Westernised' and the 'old fashioned' woman, in ways that eerily echo nineteenth century injunctions. Dulali Nag's analysis of contemporary sari advertisements

shows admakers' continuing attempts to invent a nostalgic 'essential' Bengali tradition, which idealises rural life and women's domesticity and beauty, but is to be consumed by the wealthy urban elite. Both the imaginary rural culture as well as literary and artistic 'high' traditions become very important in signifying contemporary Bengali culture, which is represented as having a uniquely different spiritual location and intellectual profundity.

In this piece I focus on *Sananda* articles that deal explicitly with sex/sexuality, subjects that might seem wildly transgressive given the history of prescriptive sexual modesty for the Bengali *bhadramahila* (a term that has been translated into English as 'gentlewoman'). It is easy to be distracted by the shock and horror of finding taboo topics on the printed page, but are such moves in fact rupturing established norms for understanding sexuality?

### Mysteries of sex

An article on sex education, 'How to inform your child about the mystery of birth' (22 May 1998) makes the claim to being a modern radical move: the editor introduces it as an important resource for *adhunik* (modern) men and women who need to be able to tell their children about men's and women's bodies and the 'mystery' of birth. 'Experts' in various fields (doctors, child psychologists, teachers, poets) are summoned up as authorities. But the headlines of the articles themselves shift the terms of the discussion: although the narrative is cast in terms of a child's questions regarding sex on television, ('What were Sharon Stone and Michael Douglas doing? Why weren't they wearing any clothes?'), the responses are immediately framed as being about the 'mysteries of birth,' bypassing non-reproductive sexual behaviors altogether (presumably Douglas and Stone had not been shown in a scene where she was trying to get pregnant!). The American movie couple represents the non-spiritual, mindless fuck whose 'meaning' is completely ignored, as opposed to Indian couples who are always represented in terms of repro-



ductive sex. The answer to the child's question is:

The vessel/jug in the mother's stomach has an egg in it. When the father and mother love each other and want to have a child, then the egg hatches and a child is made in the stomach... People are naked when they do private things like bathing, and when they caress each other with love (*aador*) to make a child then clothes cannot be worn either (the passive voice is part of the text).

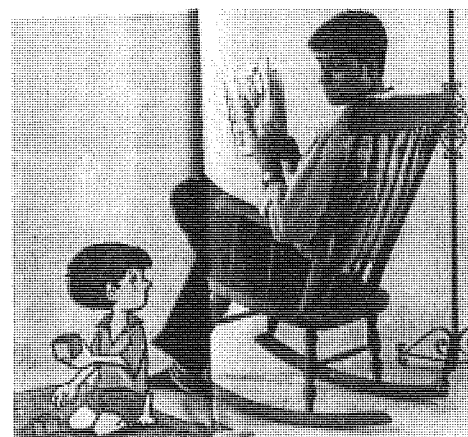
Furthermore, the act is described as specifically heterosexual, as something that only the male and female 'species' can do to each other, and is completely framed within the implied context of marriage. The hypothetical question concerns a television moment rather than the primal scene of one's own parents, creating an alienation from the topic that need never be related back to the parents' bodies, or to the child's own.

The visuals accompanying the article show a nonchalant cartoon child interrogating an overwhelmed mother and startled father. The child voice of the text asks no inappropriate follow-up questions, makes no connection with his/her own sexuality nor even his/her own genitals; the cartoon child in the images also



seems mostly preoccupied with his toys but appears, subversively, rather more mischievous and apt to make trouble. And yet, we might surmise, the hypothetical child who had asked the Douglas/Stone question would likely be puzzled and mis/uninformed on at least the following counts: were Douglas and Stone engaged in baby-making? Might nakedness be somewhat necessary for reproduction, rather than a privacy issue? What about this mysterious hatching of an egg in response to external caresses?

The real mystery of the article for the putative child may be the missing and invisible genitalia. Note that the only actor in the baby-making piece is the uterus; it is described as a



*kolshi*, a jug, that is a receptacle with a specific shape. The uterus mysteriously blossoms in response to *aador*; the vulva, the vagina and even the penis are absent as delivery routes, and of course as sites of pleasure. There is simply no connection between the genitalia and sex or reproduction. There is also the mysterious concept of *aador*, that can be variously translated as respect or love or hugging or making out; while this *aador* is used to characterise sex, the child is also reassured that parents perform *aador* towards children too, and this latter is described as the best kind of *aador*.

Such information, which is supposed to be timely and correct, provides completely non-usable data; there would be absolutely no possibility of having sex or even recognising it from this description, not least because critical bodily zones are absent from it. Apart from accuracy issues—telling a girl there is one egg waiting to hatch in her stomach gives false information about the ovarian cycle and the uterus (which is the place where the baby really grows, not in the stomach)—a significant concern ought to be the very real occasions on which genitalia make an appearance in the Bengali child's life. Knowing the connection between genitalia and sex, and the difference between reproduction and pleasure, might help children understand their self-stimulation as a process of sexual development rather than a vile habit, and it might enable children to resist sexual abuse in Bengali homes if they could understand which body parts were used to do what and thus why they could protest certain advances that were pitched to them as games or as special secrets.

Framing the conversation in terms of marriage and reproduction, and the distant future, renders invisible the many forms in which children are

likely to encounter an actual penis and vulva, or witness sex acts, or encounter their own sexuality. Thus the outrageousness of the topic is contained, and sex is associated with shame and culturally appropriate modesty. While the apparent focus is on modernisation and sex education, the message emphasises compulsory reproduction and represents women as individuals who derive ultimate pleasure from mothering, given that *aador* towards children is said to give supreme satisfaction.

### Marriage, for and against

An article on 'Marriage versus Living Together' (3 April 1998—the actual phrase 'living together' is transcribed in Bengali) also appears to make a transgressive move by its very nature because it suggests the possibility of an alternative to compulsory marriage. In advertising the article, the monthly editorial frames the two options as roughly equal alternatives, comparing the love and happiness of two longtime unmarried Indian couples who are well known actors and authors with that of the editor's married grandparents who are described as having a 'profound companionship'. The author of the article, Mallika Sengupta, describes herself as an oppositional (*pratibadi*) writer, and uses a plethora of historical details and sociological studies as well as interviews to make her point that there is really not much 'difference' between the two options, that both forms involve love and strife and companionship and responsibility. She describes Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir as the archetypal cohabiting couple,



emphasising their aversion to owning and possessing spouses. She characterises Adam and Eve as the first couple who 'lived together,' because societal shame and prescribed 'artificial' codes of behaviour had not yet come into being. Interviews with various Bengali couples who have lived together are used to show that living together may be 'marriage in waiting' for those waiting to be divorced, or a period of figuring out the other person's reliability, or a means of getting together in the midst of very busy schedules.

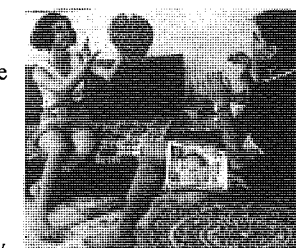
Perhaps most importantly, Mallika Sengupta emphasises a materialist feminist perspective,

arguing that women's economic and emotional independence is a necessary precondition for cohabitation to be viewed positively, given patriarchal ideologies whereby a woman is deemed a whore if she relies on a man for economic

support outside marriage and an ideal role model if this reliance is within marriage. That is, she shows an awareness that marriage is an economic necessity for women based on their dependence, rather than a mystical status, and she also points to the sexual double standard whereby female sexuality is commodified and subjected to moral censure when not bound within patriarchal property relations. She points to the class dimensions of the debate, to the irrelevance of the particular issue for non-elite women as well as to the violence that can befall poor women who have few economic alternatives.

Mallika Sengupta cites a Swedish study showing that a majority of couples living together continued to do so long-term without marrying, given that the 'legitimacy' of children was not a concern within that system, i.e. legal paternity was not judicially or morally significant. She hypothesises that if Bengali women express an interest in living together with partners rather than marrying, this may be an index of their dissatisfaction with marriage, and that the rise in divorce rates is another aspect of this dissatisfaction. She concludes that as long as there is a hierarchical relationship between the husband and wife:

...women will be confined, dependent; they will be beaten and they will be burned in tandoors. Then, they will look for alternatives. If a marriage can be an abode of love between equals rather than a pyramid of







hierarchy, then marriage may last a few more centuries. Otherwise women will want to look for alternatives. It is quite likely that this alternative may be living together or marriageless companionship.

Overall, the article thus makes no overt attempts to condemn the practice of living together for those who do it. Moreover, it ends with the explicit feminist threat that the onus for preserving marriage is on men, who need to relinquish and to share power.

### Mystical inevitability

But the cultural assumptions that frame this critique in the article show some significant cracks. Perhaps most remarkable is the mystical inevitability of marriage, the constant reiteration that living together is just fine and all sorts of great people do it, but for some mysterious and not quite explicable reason marriage becomes a preferred closure anyway. The article opens with a question posed to the author by a famous poet colleague, who asks her why, as a writer who favours a persona of protest, she is getting married rather than living together; Mallika Sengupta admits that the thought intrigued her but never answers it in the article. The aura of the unanswered question pervades the article: given that the audience is aware that she is married, the indicated answer seems to be that ultimately marriage is prescribed and pleasurable, although one can consider the theoretical possibility of alternatives.

This is echoed in several interviews where the poet Joy Goswami and the film director Gautam Ghose both insist that there is no difference between marriage and cohabitation but that they got married because of 'societal injunctions' or 'people saying bad stuff'. A sweetness and solidity to the institution of marriage is demonstrated through further facts about the Swedish study of long-term cohabiting couples, whose children are attracted to marriage despite there being no stigma to cohabitation. And even the feminist threat in the conclusion, that women may prefer cohabitation if marriage continues to be hierarchical, is based on the assumption that women as a group would

ultimately prefer heterosexual marriage rather than other forms of sexuality or even alternative expressions of heterosexual desire.

The putative child makes its appearance again, to safeguard the necessity of marriage. While living together is seen to be comparable to marriage for childless couples, the argument changes entirely with the child in the picture. Mallika Sengupta contends: 'there are very few instances of living together with a child or having a child while living together, because no parents want the risk of bringing a child into such uncertainty, or at least we don't have those conditions in our country yet'. This 'uncertainty' is never explained; particularly, no explicit connection is drawn to the stigma of illegitimacy as being a consequence of patriarchal norms of descent and property ownership, despite the articulation of the connected argument that marriage treats women as forms of property. Marriage is depicted as an important path for safeguarding children's economic rights: legal expert advice is cited to demonstrate the difficulties of obtaining maintenance for children of non-married couples. There is the acknowledgment that 'marriage is socially imperative because of the extreme dependence on the stamp of paternity,' but there is no attempt to analyse the economic or moral basis of this prescription or to envisage liberation from this norm in the same way as divorce is visualised as liberation for the dissatisfied married woman.

The article is illustrated with photographs of two young, urban, wealthy and happy couples in various poses, seeming to represent marriage vs. cohabitation. In one set, the woman appears to be coded as 'Bengali' through saris, bangles and long hair, while the other woman is in shorts, a skirt and a nightie and marked as 'Westernised'. The man pictured with the first woman is in a kurta-pajama in one image, but in the others he is wearing a shirt and trousers; the man with the second woman wears shorts, a singlet and just a towel in one picture. The easy assumption to make would be that the first couple represent the married unit and the other the cohabiting unit, that is cohabitation is represented as westernised and ultimately alien while the true Bengali soul, represented by the docile Bengali female body in 'traditional' attire, is the preferred alternative. This reading fits nicely with Partha Chatterji's analysis that the male may be unmarked by cultural specificity in attire, and can incorporate westernisation without dismantling societal

norms, whereas the woman is expected to embody and internalise cultural traditions including the inevitability of marriage. However, there is no specific label attached to these pictures, and given the assertions in the article that both forms are equal with respect to love and companionship, it is possible to see the images as inverting easy expectations, and mixing up assumptions of who might subscribe to marriage or cohabitation.

Similarly, the short interviews play with the meanings of the central essay in various ways. These statements on the topic at hand come from painters, singers, dancers, actors, directors, writers, feminist organisers; the sample includes an equal number of men and women. Some of the interviewees express virulent opposition to the concept of living together, notably including all the film actors who are most wont to be characterised as morally lax and sexually promiscuous. They characterise cohabitation as unthinking imitation of the West, as temporary and non-monogamous, as a futile attempt to escape social duties, that is, as a spectre against which marriage looks wholesome, responsible and emotionally meaningful. And yet, even as the dancer and actor Mamata Shankar calls cohabitation 'slimy, dirty...self-indulgent...about suspicion and bodily lust,' she says 'I don't believe in wedding vows and in society. I want to remain true, pure and faithful within myself'.

In other interviews, even where the speaker is theoretically unopposed to cohabitation, there is always the ultimate move whereby marriage is recuperated as a stable social norm. From the singer Indrani Sen, 'I believe the auspicious occasion creates a beautiful intimacy between the two people'; from the photographer Raghu Rai, 'if one lives in society one has to follow its laws'; and from the feminist activist Madhu Kishwar, 'in societies where the matter is viewed as being entirely between two individuals, marriage or living together are irrelevant. But here [with families involved] there are many people to put moral pressure on husbands, who then cannot break the relationship and run easily'. The trope of the child appears again and again to justify marriage, although there is never any explanation of how exactly cohabitation is supposed to harm a child physically or emotionally: from Madhu Kishwar again, 'the issue is also connected with giving the gift of an emotionally and physically protected life to the next generation. I would never advise women who

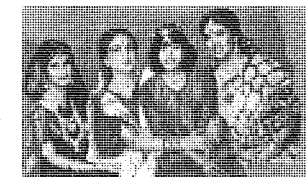
want children to live together [with a man]'; and from several others, 'still, there is the question of the children's future'.

This article puzzles and disturbs me far more than the previous one. It seems to exemplify the core of contradiction that scholars of popular culture have talked about with respect to women's magazines: the centrality of heterosexuality and marriage paired with explicit discontent and critique of patriarchal structures, the pleasures and intimacies associated with marriage that hint at its ideological attractions counterposed with the betrayal and grief of numerous 'bad' marriages. There appears to be a complex acknowledgment of marriage as an economic coping strategy that also becomes a symbol of utopian intimacy. It is possible for readers to identify with the discontent and the pleasure. They may negotiate dominant definitions of the regulation of sexuality in a resistant, troublemaking voice, but they also recover the dominant definition of marriage as optimal when it is not too bad a marriage—the problem is bad practice rather than the concept of marriage itself.

### Contradictions and compromises

Beyond this particular article, too, *Sananda's* message about marriage is infused with contradictions and compromises. Just a few months before the 'Marriage versus Living Together' article is the humorous and nostalgic piece 'Why it is necessary/urgent (*jaruri*) to get married' (30 January 1998) by the male author Parthasarathi Talukdar, which talks about the pleasures of marriage in terms of wedding rituals and bonds of kinship, developing intimacies and sharing life cycle rituals. Brightly coloured folk art illustrates the article, signifying the satisfaction of being associated with allegedly ancient, unchanging and culturally unique traditions.

Significantly, the ad facing the article, advertising a jewellery firm, features a young girl bedecked in gold and gems as a bride in waiting, and another smaller picture of her along with some married women, also heavily bejewelled, meant to represent family members. The ad invokes the same nostalgia about the stability and attraction of 'tradition,' but it is selling a commodity central to marriages and patriarchal notions of



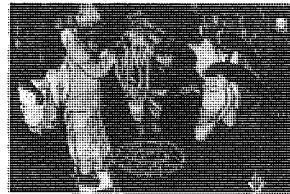


'women's wealth,' drawing upon the mellowness inspired by the article to sell its product (Gloria Steinem gives examples of similar strategies in western women's magazines).

On the other hand, there is the letter sent to the rare feature 'In your ear' (*kaane kaane*), an advice column on sexual behaviour (15 January 1999). It purports to come from a 35 year old Bengali woman (anonymous) who describes herself as leading an 'ordinary domestic' life as a housewife with two children, married to a man working for a computer agency. She narrates a sexual encounter with her husband's friend (the two families are described as being very close) who came over when the husband was out of town on work, and characterises herself as remorseful about this one-time episode, contemplating a confession to her husband. The response from the 'expert':

I believe it, but it will be very hard to convince your husband that a deviation like that was an accident. An excess of alcohol takes our inhibitions away and creates episodes which we would probably not be part of if we were not high. So be careful about alcohol. And forget that episode as an unfortunate accident. Since it's not part of an ongoing relationship, turn to lying. The lie will save your husband and family from needless grief. And make sure your husband's friend does not take further advantage of you based on that episode.

This response, along with numerous columns on legal advice, is part of a pragmatic discourse about marriage. Like other responses to agony columns described by researchers, it appears to conserve dominant cultural norms while being fairly non-judgmental: the 'actor' in this 'crime' becomes alcohol, while the woman is carefully not blamed directly, and is asked to lie to maintain the seeming stability of the domestic order. The stress on adultery as an accident, a mishap, does not confront the ways in which adultery is viewed as deviant based on the notion that marriage creates exclusive forms of bodily property and particularly marks women's bodies as sites of purity. That is, there is no explicit



feminist critique of the guilt over adultery. And yet, the advice to lie is powerfully subversive even as it is conservative: it reminds the reader that marital bliss based on absolute fidelity and domestic harmony, embodied in the non-desiring, spiritually superior Bengali female body, must continue to operate; but it also validates (and perhaps even encourages) the self-preserving silences of women who do desire in forbidden ways and challenge assumptions about marriage in that culture.

#### *Suspect or subversive?*

Along with (and through!) health and shopping tips, political commentary and celebrity gossip, *Sananda* serves up representations of femininity and sexuality that are both compliant and subversive. Invoking both specific (Bengali) cultural traditions and the idea of the rational, modern self, the magazine satisfies both a wide spectrum of readers and its advertisers. Yet there are contradictions in its style and content which make space for challenges and the expression of discontent. The attempt to package outrageously different or oppositional topics in terms that will fit standards of Bengali cultural modesty usually goes only as far as the acknowledgement of diversity and at best a call to tolerance and understanding. But while loud announcements of seemingly modern and oppositional topics often refer to modest if not conservative analyses, gaps of logic and expressions of discontent within statements that seem overtly culturally prescriptive can be subversive. Moreover, raising questions may in itself prompt readers to interrogate the issue, even if the article itself draws a less than radical conclusion.

To answer the question with which I began, the economic imperatives and cultural expectations that govern the production of *Sananda* do make it inherently suspect as a feminist space, but its accessibility and normative tone of social consensus also indicate possibilities for creating ideological unease. □



#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The follow up to the Fourth UN World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995.

<sup>2</sup> An Indian film that deals with lesbianism.

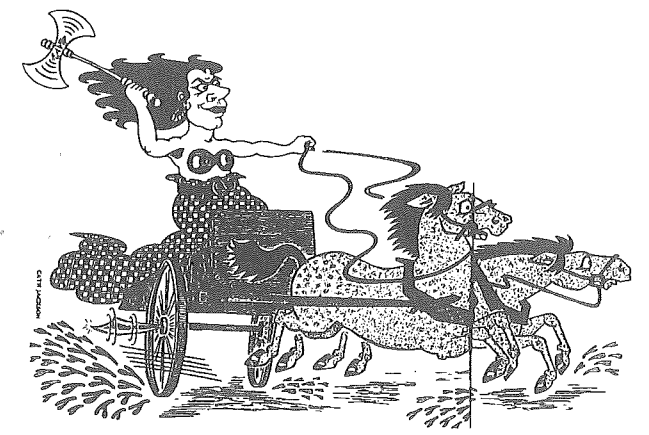
<sup>3</sup> The practice whereby wives in some Hindu communities were expected to sacrifice themselves on the funeral pyres of their husbands.

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The first issue of *T&S* was published in 1983 and copies of the magazine offer a unique record of feminist thinking and activism from that time to the present. Moreover, the magazines are physical objects which we know give great pleasure to many of our readers, and the printed copies, with their brilliant illustrations and distinctive covers, are treasured by many of us. Articles from earlier issues will, however, soon be available online via the *Trouble & Strife* website we are currently developing. We are therefore no longer able to justify the high cost of storing back issues.

If you have missing issues and want to make us a complete set — or if you would simply like a copy of any of the following magazines — order now before it is too late! We only have a few copies left of some early issues.





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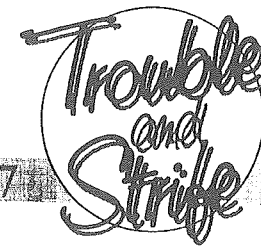
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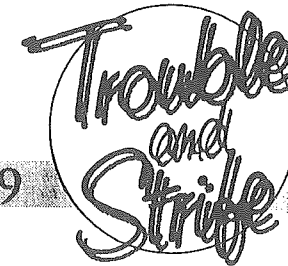
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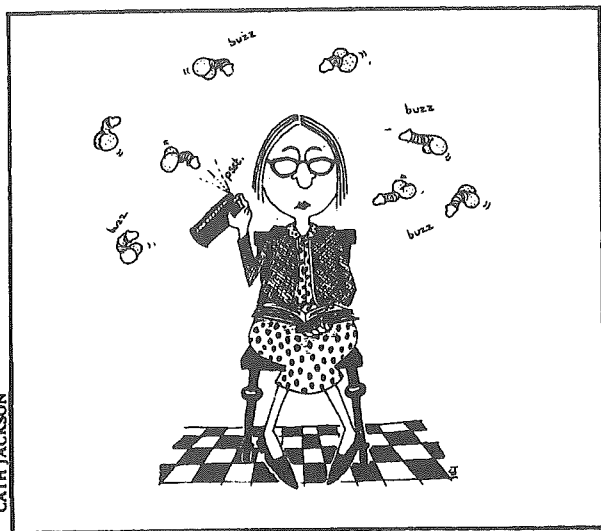
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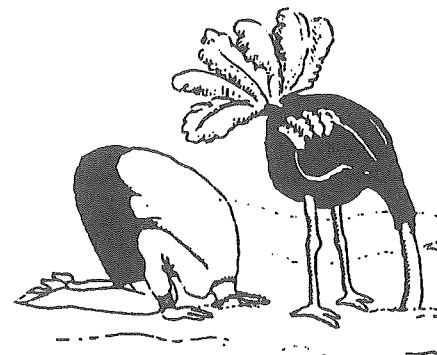
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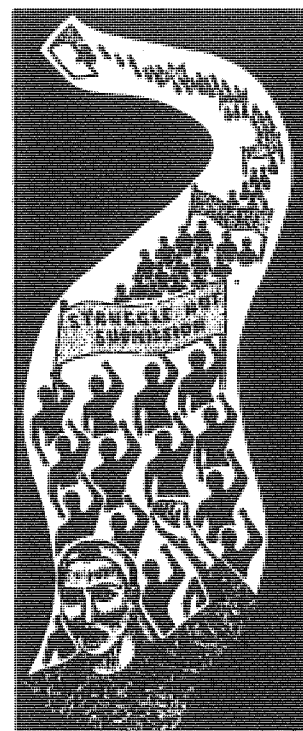
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# It's life, Jim... but not as we know it

*How do we explain the extraordinary popularity of recent TV programmes like Big Brother and Popstars? Are they, like soap opera, directed primarily at women, dealing in stereotypes and trivia — or do they attempt to extend the democratic pretensions of television, embracing lesbians, single mothers and other 'ordinary people'? Carol Morley decodes reality TV.*

In 1994 the trade paper *Television Today* reported a new idea for a British TV programme entitled *Divorce Me* which would feature real life divorcing couples on a quiz show, competing for the contents of their own home. The chief executive of the production company explained, 'We've had reality entertainment shows with programmes like *Beadle's About* and *Surprise, Surprise*, and reality crime shows. I think the new mood in entertainment will be for reality game shows'. Another trade paper from the same time quoted a TV executive as saying, 'I see reality TV as a form of television democracy'.

Reality television (RT) has become more

than a passing trend; it seems to have become a significant part of the television schedules. RT claims to have an authenticity that other TV genres can't capture, but of course it is heavily mediated and constructed, from the starting point of selecting characters to the finishing point of editing footage. The continuing drive of television has been to appear democratic, inclusive and representative, showing all views all of the time. RT relies heavily on the inclusion of so called 'ordinary people' — those previously outside of the TV world — and that is where the claims of democracy begin. Is RT democratic? Does RT





really offer possibilities for challenging attitudes about gender, class, race or sexuality? Or does RT merely work to reinforce existing stereotypes because they are a quick way of presenting characters in the constructed world of performance? What do we find when we apply these questions to two recent and extremely popular reality programmes, *Big Brother* and *Popstars*? Moreover, how was it possible both to revile them and enjoy watching them at the same time?

#### ***Big Brother and the pseudo world***

With a nod to Orwell's 1984, the reality TV show *Big Brother* became a much talked about phenomenon. Part fly on the wall docu-soap, part quiz show, part talent contest, part psychological investigative study, the show even had an interactive element where the viewing audience could ring in and vote to evict. Starting with ten contestants, every week one of the participants was evicted from the show. The reward for appearing was instant celebrity and, for the final survivor, seventy thousand pounds. Broadcast several times a week, the show became a hit for the production company and Channel Four.

The contestants were enclosed in an artificial space, a pseudo house, that they were not permitted to leave. Whether through judicious editing, and/or through the selection of particular participants, issues of great weight or controversy were on the whole never raised. There was one notable occasion when a contestant took George Michael to be a paedophile because he was homosexual and this turned into a heated discussion, but generally opinions vanished, the outside world and history were reduced to

personal anecdotes.

While we can look at *Big Brother* as a show where the contestants appear to explore nothing of any great significance, this doesn't mean that *Big Brother* as a programme is not significant. A comparison to the soap opera form is useful here. Soap operas are often derided and seen as trivial, and were once considered unworthy of serious attention in academia; yet soaps have come to be seen as important in terms of exploring issues that women have been deemed to have some authority over, i.e. the home, the

family, and emotional problem solving. *Big Brother* operated on soap opera principles; it emphasised the relationships between people; it was a drama that unfolded in a domestic space; it was ongoing and it provided a multitude of story lines.

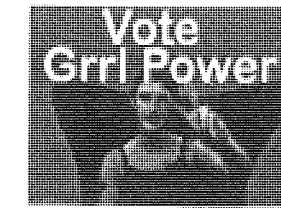
It could be claimed that *Big Brother* is part of a female genre, and, if not deliberately targeted at women, is performing some of the work that soap operas have been seen to do. While male genres have been seen as action, man conquering the big wide world (the Western), women's genres have been seen as domestic and interior (the melodrama/the soap). Of course these genres initially arose in order to locate men in relation to the world, and to keep women inside in an attempt to disempower them, but research and analysis of female spectators show that women can feel an enormous sense of pleasure by seeing even limited representations of themselves. One of the noted pleasures gained from soap opera has been seen as the shared experience with other women of the plots and the characters; the discussions female spectators have around soap operas tie into gossip, an activity largely gendered female and enjoyed by women.

*Big Brother* was, on the whole, tedious, in the sense that nothing much happened, but, in my own and



my friends viewing of it, the TV ratings and press reactions were anything to go by, it was compulsive viewing. It entered the realm of gossip and became much discussed. Everybody had an opinion. If I was meeting somebody for the first time, in that sometimes awkward moment when silence falls, I would mention *Big Brother* and would be guaranteed a smooth and easy conversation that could last for hours (even if they had never watched it). The show became shared experience, and in becoming gossip, *Big Brother* became feminised, in the sense that gossip is attributed to the female realm. A description on the internet of an episode of *Big Brother*, reported that the 'girls shared late night girlie chats', reinforcing the relationship of women to gossip, to a world men consider themselves outside of, if not excluded from, and may ultimately have worked to trivialise and demonise because of their exclusion.

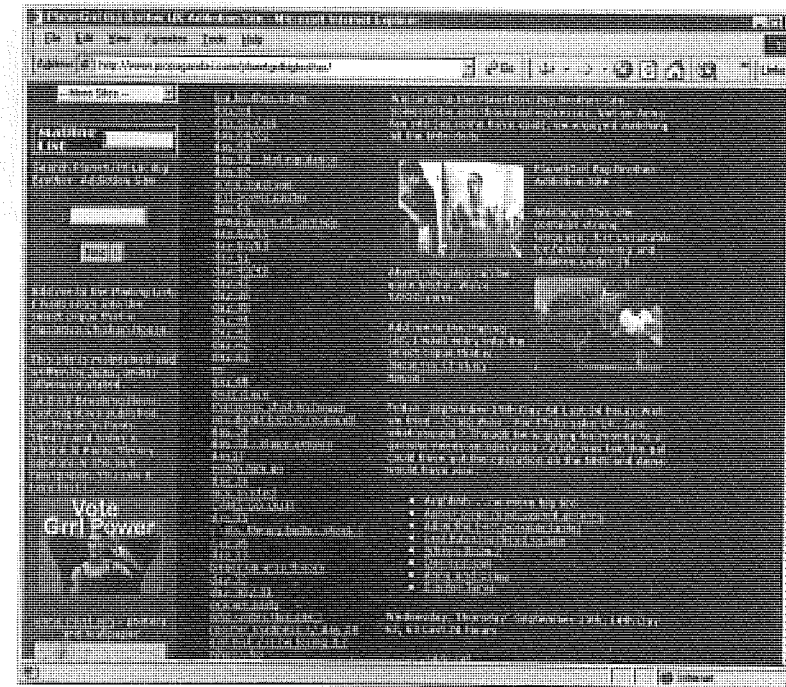
In taking the audience inside the house, into domestic space, into the world of gossip, you could argue that *Big Brother* actually feminised its audience, but it also could be argued that the show was constructed with masculine intent. *Big Brother* was premised on voyeurism, on our pleasure in watching the contestants without them seeing us. The cinema has been theorised as voyeuristic and as reproducing a male gaze, and *Big Brother* seemed to work to consolidate and



reinforce the male gaze, as all seeing, as insidious and, above all, as controlling. After all, even with that post-modern ironic wink, the show was

still called *Big Brother*, and there has to be a recognition that the name in itself is not just a reference to Orwell, but also that it reinforces and underlines the power of patriarchy.

The idea of a constant access to the surveillance of the *Big Brother* household on the internet offered the spectator a degree of power over what was seen, keying in again to notions of voyeurism and to the male gaze. *Big Brother* was streamed on the web 24 hours a day, offering open-ended access. The show was predominantly consumed through the television, with complaints that the internet version was too small, blurred and on the whole difficult to view. New technology and new media have been characterised as male, as boffin, as nerd, as lads in anoraks, and it is probable that the average logger on of the internet site was male. If women did log on, it could be argued that the act of looking at the site tied into the male/active theories around cinema. Laura Mulvey argued that we had to adjust our position to that of the







male spectator in order to identify with the representations we were given, so perhaps the act of logging on to survey an occupied house means that we have to shift identification to that of the voyeuristic male.

The spectators of television now have a chance to appear on it, but they are still chosen by TV professionals and they are being selected not only on their ability to bring along a realistic model of the everyday world, but also on their ability to play the TV game. Every week the contestants on *Big Brother* sang a song they had penned themselves 'it's only a game show, it's only a game show', and here was their group acknowledgment of what their lives had been reduced to as 24 hour quiz show contestants. It highlights how all participants on reality TV shows or docu-soaps are required to 'fit into' the programme. It is a prerequisite that they conform within the programme to the needs of the programme makers. They are featured, and are encouraged to want to be included, but only within the boundaries of the programme. So called ordinary people, those that have greater claim to the real world, can appear on TV nowadays, but only within the confines of what is on offer in the first place. It is perhaps more credible if we look at the contestants and participants of RT as social actors, who auditioned for the show, and were selected on the basis of what they could offer and how they would fit in.

The five female and five male contestants on *Big Brother* arrived through a rigorous audition process, competing with thousands of other

wannabes to appear. While the diversity in the house didn't stretch to age or size, we had a black woman (Mel), a black man (Darren), a lesbian (Anna) and a cross section across class. Definable characters emerged that we could follow, just like the characters from soap operas. Even a cursory look at *Big Brother* showed us that the programmes were heavily edited in order to achieve a semblance of drama and conflict. It is obvious that the hours and hours of footage that were generated from constant surveillance by many cameras all over the house had to emerge into palatable chunks, with a narrative structure, that could find their place in the television schedules. In observing the rules of narrative and character development it seemed that stereotypes relating to class, gender, race and sexuality inevitably arose.

Anna, who survived ten weeks to become the runner up, revealed at the start of the show that she was a lesbian, and also an ex-novice nun. Her sexuality was discussed by the group, and later by the male contestants, who thought it was unfortunate that Anna wasn't 'available' to them as she was quite fanciable. The group saw her



sexuality as an area of intrigue but nobody appeared to view her sexuality as threatening. Two of the women voiced their positions as bi-curious, but were still very much interested in men.

Craig, the ultimate winner of *Big Brother* asked Anna what it was like to share a bedroom with four other women, and did she fancy any of them? Anna didn't reply. Anna had a long term relationship so was unlikely to show an interest in any of the female contestants while her girlfriend was watching. (It is interesting that the programme makers selected her knowing that she was with a partner in the outside world and therefore was unlikely to become involved with anyone on the show.) Anna's sexuality and character was largely shown as non-predatory and docile. While sexual tension appeared to brew in the house between the male and female contestants, Anna was seen as doubly non-threatening because she was not going to compete with the other women for male attention. Exclusion of male homosexuality seemed a very deliberate omission on the show, as though the presence of a gay man would have been a threat to the other male contestants, who were frequently underlining their heterosexual status.

When contestant 'Nasty' Nick was ousted midway through the series for breaking the rules of the game, Claire was brought in from the outside world as his replacement. As Claire arrived in the house, we saw a shot of Mel's reaction, which was widely interpreted by viewers and in the press as a look of jealousy. After her part in the show was over, Mel talked of how what she really felt at that moment was not sexual jealousy, but paranoia, because Claire had watched them all on TV. This 'look of jealousy' is indicative of how Mel was constructed as a sexual predator. She was seen as overtly sexual and flirtatious. She appeared to bond with the male contestants but was wary and competitive with the female contestants. Overall, Mel was continually being presented as devious and manipulative when it came to men. There is a strong racist stereotype at work here. It seems that just as in the case of Mel B from



the Spice Girls, who was dubbed Scary Spice, Big Brother Mel, who is also mixed race, was presented as embodying a threatening 'otherness'.

It is interesting to note that in all the countries where a version of *Big Brother* has taken place, the final winner has always been a white heterosexual male. The winner in the UK, Craig, was presented as an uncomplicated and straightforward working class builder.

Why hasn't a woman won? Anna almost won, probably because she came across as such an unthreatening presence. All the rest of the women on *Big Brother* were represented as problematic. Nicola, who wore a skimpy bikini almost always, was seen as argumentative and volatile (by the male contestants). Sada, author of a book entitled *The Babe's Bible* was presented as duplicitous, one moment giving a lecture on how she would never kill a fly, the next moment shown swatting an insect between her palms with glee. She was the only woman in the house to have a boyfriend, so was therefore perceived as unavailable by the lad contestants (who spent time speculating about which woman they fancied most). Sada was the first to person to be evicted from the house. Caroline was also deemed argumentative and a troublemaker (by the male contestants), while Mel was seen as flirtatious and manipulative (by the audience and female contestants).

Before Craig won *Big Brother*, it was leaked to the press that he was going to donate the prize money to a family friend, a young woman with Downs Syndrome who needed a heart operation. As he left the *Big Brother* house to fireworks and waiting crowds, the young woman was waiting for Craig. He announced to the world, in heroic form, that he was donating all the money he'd made toward her operation. While undoubtedly a charitable act, it had the air of male saviour and hero about it. This was further compounded when Craig continued his walk through crowds, flexing his muscles to waiting photographers. It seemed that unreconstituted masculinity had won the day.

### Popstars

In the 1970s we had TV talent shows such as *Opportunity Knocks* and *New Faces*. *Opportunity Knocks* launched the child star Lena Zavaroni, whose rise to fame, subsequent battle with eating disorders, and early tragic death have been well documented. Her eating disorders appear to have

been tightly woven into her rise to celebrity. In the recent reality TV series *Popstars*, the formation of a pop band through mass auditions, a young woman who clearly had a very powerful singing voice and impressive dancing style remarked that she would never make it to the final round because she wasn't thin. She was right.

Building on the new desire for celebrity, confession and the real, *Popstars* can be seen as the ultimate in reality programming. The premise of the shows was that five finalists would be launched into celebrity status, would be given a recording career and would be awarded one hundred thousand pounds each if their first single reached number one. The TV series followed the competing contestants' heartaches and struggles; we were privy to their intimate confessions. Finally when we were down to the last ten contestants, we were taken into their homes and introduced to their families. We seemed to be offered everything that lay behind the scenes.

The narrative tension on *Popstars* was enormous. Just like *Big Brother*, everyone was brought together in competition and aspiration. Just like *Big Brother*, the only subject of conversation within the show became the show itself, while wider issues from the outside world vanished, and the audience was presented with reality, television style.

In *Popstars* we witness the making of a future celebrity, Suzanne. She doubts she will ever make it to the final band, though she finally does. Along the way she exhibits signs of self-loathing. She compares herself with the other women competing, finds herself not as thin or as pretty. When so much meaning is placed upon the way women look, and thinness is equated with some kind of success it isn't surprising that she focused on her body, her appearance. Yet at



the same time, the show's emphasis on Suzanne's insecurities seemed to be reinforcing a representation of women, yet again, as neurotic and narcissistic, reinforcing and encouraging a notion of women pitched together not in solidarity but in competition.

After Kym is selected for the final band, we



learn that she had hidden from the programme makers that she is the mother of two young children. She defends her omission to Nigel the judge, saying that it would have prevented her selection. We learn from Kym that it has always held her back in the past and often been the reason she has not landed a job. Nigel chastises her; he talks of his disappointment in her and assures her that her maternal status would in no way have prevented her from being picked. The words ring hollow; just as one woman was not selected because she wasn't thin, it is clear that Kym played the game to her advantage by holding back that piece of information. Kym's status as a single mother would surely have raised a number of issues for the judges. They would have discussed the criticism the programme might receive in terms of absenting a mother from her children. They would have discussed her desirability and availability to fans if they were to find out she had two children. They would have talked about the ramifications of a single mother being a role model for young fans. Of course her commitment to the band and her ability to stick it out would also have been questioned, and this plays out in Kym's ranking at the betting shops as odds-on favourite to be the first member to leave.

Kym's decision to withhold information about herself reinforces the notion that people seeking celebrity status and the material rewards that accompany it will do all they can to fit in.

Before they are even at the point of arrival, of having 'made it', they are already performing their role. The female wannabes are already conforming to a stereotypical image of women: they reveal flesh, they wear high heels, they are thin (weaker and taking up less room), all for the sake of appearing sexually available to men.

### *The celebrity body*

*Big Brother* and *Popstars* have captured the spirit of a confessional age, at a time in Western culture where celebrity status and Warhol's fifteen minutes of fame are at an all time high, where stardom and celebrity seem to be some kind of validation of existence. Last week in a restaurant, I caught a glimpse of Baby Spice, aka Emma Bunton. I noticed she was scanning the room to catch the discreet glances, to make sure that everyone in the restaurant recognised her. I was reminded of another celebrity-spotting some months before. I was going into a clothes shop when the woman in front of me tripped and turned around in embarrassment. It was Mel from *Big Brother*. I kept her in my sightline while I circled the shop. She was looking to see who was looking at her. Her new found celebrity status depended on people knowing who she was. She had performed her television role, and here she was seeking her reward: recognition. Mel, famous for being on a reality TV show, famous for being famous.

Both these women were so self-aware and self-conscious in their celebrity status, it seemed to me that it's just a logical extension of what it is to be a woman, constantly objectified and constantly surrounded by unobtainable images of who we are supposed to be.

The contestants on *Big Brother* and *Popstars* are freely participating in the shows, but it is not without manipulation from a variety of sources. They are constructed and marketed, and at the end of the day they are equated with profit and reward for those that manufacture them. The contestants are so desperate to be celebrities and to participate in the star industry that they will do almost anything, and the female participants do appear to be more vulnerable. Because women are constantly objectified, because women are

constantly seen in relation to men in terms of their desirability and fulfilment of a male fantasy, women seem to encounter greater struggles when they enter the star system. We only have to look at the myriad female stars that are becoming thinner and thinner, their earning power growing in inverse proportion to their diminishing bodies. I worry about eighteen year old Suzanne from *Popstars*; will she get too thin? I worry about the contestant from *Big Brother* described in a recent article (written by a man) as 'opening her legs, showing all, desperate to cling onto any celebrity status she'd got left'.

Reality television claims to be a testimony to our 'real' lives, and the way we want to live our lives, but reality shows are not really democratic at all and they seem all too easily to reproduce dominant stereotypes. Despite this, there are pleasures to be found. As women, we have a history of interacting with TV programmes and film genres that may not have our interests at heart, celebrating the images presented, from the film noir femme fatale to the prisoners in Cell Block H. Illustrating this, Anna from *Big Brother* may not have had much of a voice within the show, but she became, arguably, a lesbian icon. The London lesbian hang out, Candy Bar, displayed the 'vote to keep Anna in *Big Brother*' phone number and built a night around her final appearance in the show. It seems that, lacking a range of complexity in popular representations, we are prepared to make the most of what we get. □



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# Bully for men

***Feminists struggled for many years to get the reality of sexual harassment recognised. However, since the antifeminist backlash a more generalised and de-gendered concept of 'workplace bullying' has arisen. Deborah Lee argues that we must not allow the specific nature of sexual harassment to be obscured.***

In the 1970s, US radical feminists coined the term 'sexual harassment' to problematise women's experiences of unwanted male sexual conduct — staring, leering, pinching, touching, innuendos, pornography and propositions, to give just a few examples. This was an important development, for while women had always talked amongst themselves about unwanted male sexual conduct, the term 'sexual harassment' had now publicly established the unacceptability of men viewing women as sex objects.

However, sexual harassment quickly became a more contentious subject. As Sue Wise and Liz Stanley explain in *Georgie Porgie*, in the 1980s

the UK press reinterpreted sexual harassment as just normal male responses to sexually attractive women. Indeed, the *Sun* observed that, 'while serious minded union officials...are getting their knickers in a twist about sexual harassment at work, the workers themselves say "Carry on groping" ... "it makes the day more pleasant"...' (22 March 1982).

Subsequently, surveys demonstrated the sheer implausibility of such assertions. Women who had been sexually harassed reported devastating effects: shock, anxiety, anger, insomnia, anorexia, divorce and depression. Equally, many organisations realised that sexual

harassment disrupts work, reduces productivity and quality of work, demoralises staff and causes financial loss related to increased staff turnover. You might think that the case against sexual harassment had been established — even if the problem itself remained prevalent!

## ***Anti-feminist backlash***

Yet, in the 1990s, the anti-feminist backlash attacked the concept of sexual harassment. As Alison Thomas and Celia Kitzinger explain in *Sexual Harassment*, codes of conduct designed to protect women from sexual harassment were derided as inspired by 'feminazis' who are the enemies of free speech — for example, students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology burned copies of the booklet *Dealing with Harassment at MIT*, which they described as a total abrogation of free expression. Anti-feminist texts — such as Katie Roiphe's *The Morning After* — started to appear, seeking to reconceptualise sexual harassment as just sexual interaction: Roiphe insists that to find reciprocated sexual attention, women and men have to give and receive a certain amount of unwanted sexual attention. She proposes that instead of learning that men have no right to do terrible things to women, women should be learning how to deal with such incidents with strength and confidence. Essentially, 1990s anti-feminists wanted to make the concept of sexual harassment unavailable to women, restoring us to a position where unwanted male sexual conduct is 'just something that happens', rather than unacceptable conduct. Of course, feminists have responded strongly to the anti-feminist backlash against sexual harassment, offering a careful restatement of the dynamics of power and resistance in gender relations.

## ***Enter workplace bullying***

Yet as sexual harassment battled with the anti-feminists, workplace bullying was migrating to the UK from Scandinavia (the first UK self-help text, *Bullying At Work*, written by Andrea Adams, appeared in 1992). The term describes offensive, abusive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behaviour, abuse of power or unfair penal sanctions which makes the recipient feel upset, threatened, humiliated or vulnerable, which undermines their self-confidence and which may cause them to suffer stress. For instance, Andrea Adams related the experiences of a group of male university technicians. They

were bullied by a male lecturer who removed their responsibilities, excluded them from decision-making, gave them menial tasks to complete and called them derisory nicknames. The university's personnel director observed how badly these workers had been affected: 'One was very gaunt, red-eyed and unshaven. ... Another one of them constantly chain-smoked and seemed to have the shakes. A third was pale and withdrawn and seemed very uptight. ... I saw [the bully] as the sort of person who, in wartime, would be taken on as a concentration camp commandant'. The concept of workplace bullying is useful because, prior to the 1990s, experiences such as these would have been understood as part of the social relations of paid work, 'just something that happens', rather than a legitimate reason for complaint.

Subsequently, the concept of workplace bullying has become a media sensation. Scores of sympathetic newspaper articles have appeared stressing the unacceptability of this form of workplace harassment — sexual harassment stories, meanwhile, are not so topical. A strong discourse of physical violence and psychological damage has been invoked in workplace bullying articles: for example, 'Thousands live in terror of bullies at work' (*Evening Standard*, 7/7/93), 'Office warfare and how to survive' (*Guardian*, 15/4/95). A picture foregrounding a very large, angry man twisting the ear of a very small, scared man illustrated one article on bullying in universities (*Times Higher Education Supplement*, 14/3/97). However, at no point in this particular text is there any suggestion that bullied academics are weak individuals. Workplace bullying has not, therefore, been presented by the press as evidence of 'over-sensitivity' by workers — even though there is plenty of scope for this in the way bullying is commonly understood, as illustrated by the type of picture accompanying the *THES* article. This situation is in direct contrast to early media interest in sexual harassment, as described above, which portrayed sexual harassers as just ordinary men having a joke — and sexually harassed women, of course, as humourless individuals. So, why have sexual harassment and workplace bullying been presented so differently?

The answer, I think, is woman-hatred. As is well-known, the vast majority of sexual harassment victims are women — all women will have encountered at least one instance of sexual harassment. In contrast, in 1995, the Institute of



Personnel and Development (IPD) conducted 400 telephone interviews, largely with professional staff (49 per cent of whom were women), and found that only 7 per cent of men and women were aware of men being sexually harassed by women in their workplace. Sexual harassment is, therefore, very clearly a 'women's issue', whereas a particularly significant aspect of the workplace bullying discourse which has emerged in the UK is that it has stressed that *anyone* can be a victim or perpetrator — men and women. So, given that workplace bullying is not just a 'woman's problem', it is not easily trivialised. The presence of male workplace bullying victims makes workplace bullying appear to be real workplace harassment: action must be taken because men are suffering.

However, Scandinavian research has revealed that more women than men encounter workplace

bullying. How has this affected the developing presentation of workplace bullying? Effectively, what has happened is that gender has been recognised merely in order to classify it as relatively unimportant. For example, a Scandinavian researcher, Heinz Leymann, has suggested that the majority of bullies are men. Leymann proposes that the reason why women more frequently than men experience workplace bullying by a member of the opposite sex may *simply* reflect the fact that most managers are men and are, therefore, in a position to act out behaviour which is experienced as workplace bullying. The 'glass ceiling' effect has been deployed to argue that being bullied is only loosely linked to gender.

I would argue that this in fact demonstrates one way in which workplace bullying is very clearly gendered: gender is embedded in organisa-

tions. As Susan Halford and Pauline Leonard remark in their excellent new book *Gender, Power and Organisations*: 'organisational structures do not come to reproduce male power unwittingly, but are in fact designed for this purpose or, at least, actively maintained with this in mind' (p. 50).

Yet workplace bullying activists are reluctant to recognise that aspects of our identities (sex, 'race', sexual orientation, age, disability etc.) are especially relevant to workplace bullying. Indeed, I presented a paper discussing the gender dynamics of workplace bullying at a workplace harassment conference in the late 1990s — the keynote speaker (a Scandinavian male) glared as I spoke and refused to make my acquaintance afterwards. Perhaps workplace bullying researchers do not want to appear to be interested in the feminist concern of gender oppression at a time of anti-feminist backlash — workplace bullying might become tainted by association.

Nevertheless, that aspects of our identities have been swept under the carpet in the workplace bullying discourse is problematic, for we cannot discard parts of our identities when we enter the workplace. I am never just a university lecturer, I am always a white, female, heterosexual, young, able-bodied university lecturer. A small minority of male undergraduate students, for instance, feel justified in showing disrespect for me that they would never exhibit towards my white, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-aged male colleagues. If I were to refer to such experiences as bullying, I would automatically just become a worker: my identity as a woman, which is actually integral to my experience, would be made merely incidental.

This said, some workplace bullying commentators have recognised the relevance of aspects of our identities in workplace bullying experiences. For instance, Tim Field's self-help text *Bully In Sight* says that workplace bullying may include inappropriate remarks, comments, aspersions and suggestions about a person's gender, 'race', colour, beliefs, sexual orientation, background, upbringing etc.; jokes of a sexist, racist, ageist or similar nature whose objective is to humiliate. Furthermore, a number of UK trade unions have said that sexual harassment and racial harassment may be involved in workplace bullying.

This is problematic: saying that sexual harassment may be *involved* in workplace bullying obscures the specificity and visibility of sexual harassment. Of course there are interac-

tions between types of harassment, but it is vital not to conflate types of harassment in a way which obscures their distinctive dynamics. The interpretation 'sexual harassment' has always been effective in demonstrating the unacceptability of women's experiences of unwanted male sexual conduct and the interpretation 'workplace bullying' is now being equally effective in condemning allegations of poor work performance which are levelled at workers.

At present, the concept of workplace bullying — which actively seeks to discount the relevance of aspects of our identities to our experiences of workplace harassment — fails to make a contribution to the project of eradicating women's oppression. I would tentatively suggest that, perhaps, as more feminists research workplace bullying, the workplace bullying discourse will be less able to ignore the gender dynamics of such experiences.

### Reclaim sexual harassment

Nevertheless, feminist involvement in the workplace bullying debate must be accompanied by a reclaiming of sexual harassment from the anti-feminist backlash. Feminist commentators have proposed that the concept of sexual harassment needs revisiting, to make it more useful to contemporary women. Perhaps we might revisit Sue Wise and Liz Stanley's definition of sexual harassment, made in *Georgie Porgie*, as not necessarily 'sexual' behaviour, but rather, 'any and all unwanted and intrusive behaviour of whatever kind which men force on women — or boys on girls, or men on girls, or boys on women'. Or we might consider new ways to define unwanted male conduct. For instance, Debbie Epstein has said that the word 'sexual' in 'sexual harassment' obscures the experience of 'sexist harassment' which is not overtly or obviously sexual in content or form. She feels, therefore, that the term 'sexist harassment' is a useful way of making visible a form of unwanted male conduct towards women which is currently not always visible in common-sense understandings of 'sexual harassment'.

There are, then, ways in which our conceptualisations of unwanted male conduct might be developed — yet the most important point is that feminists must strive to keep the problem of sexual harassment visible: the concept of workplace bullying must not be allowed to eclipse over twenty years of feminist research and activism against sexual harassment. □

Posy Simmonds cartoon from Dianne Atkinson Funny Girls: Cartooning for Equality (Penguin, 1997)



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# UNCIVIL INSTITUTIONS

*One of the most protracted struggles of feminist history has been women's struggle to gain access to the professions and institutions of the 'public sphere': education, medicine, law, the police, the military, politics and the priesthood. Feminists have argued for this not only on grounds of fairness, but also on the grounds that women's presence inside them would change the institutions themselves for the better. But that argument depends on a number of questionable assumptions — for instance that women in public life are significantly different from men, and that once admitted, they will actually have the power to bring about radical change in institutions which excluded them for centuries. These assumptions, and more generally the challenges faced by women in contemporary public life, are examined critically in Clare Walsh's new book Gender and Discourse. Debbie Cameron has been reading it.*

When the 1997 general election brought over 100 women to the House of Commons — the largest number of female MPs ever returned to Westminster — newspapers wittered on about the difference they would make. A creche would be installed, the toilet facilities would improve, and in the immortal words of *The Observer*, the debating chamber of the House of Commons would become 'less of a bear garden'. The puerile jeering and farmyard grunting that lowers the tone of Prime Minister's Question Time would give way, under the softening influence of the

laydeez, god bless them, to something altogether more civilized.

Clare Walsh's book *Gender and Discourse* is about exactly this: the perception that when you let women into a previously male-dominated institution, be it the House of Commons, the Anglican priesthood, a golf club in Surrey or a radical marxist cell, what will happen is that women will *civilize* it. They will knock off the rough edges — no more jeering, grunting, swearing, dirty jokes or war imagery — and bring their own distinctively feminine touch to the

values and the language of the community they are entering.

This belief in women's civilising difference is one of very few points on which crusading feminists and their staunchest opponents have often found themselves in agreement. It is hard to think of a case where women have fought for entry to a profession (like medicine or the priesthood) or access to a public role (like voting or serving on juries) without deploying the argument that the role or profession in question urgently needed women's special qualities of sensitivity and nurturance. To which anti-feminists have just as regularly responded that this special feminine nature was exactly what you *didn't* want in a voter/doctor/police officer — and shouldn't men be allowed to behave like neanderthals in their own golf clubs, undisturbed by women's impulse to put up curtains and engage in polite conversation?

The idea of men as 'primitives' whose natural inclinations are only kept in check by the civilising influence of women is remarkably pervasive and persistent. John Gray's *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, which has been on the bestseller lists for most of the last ten years, uses the metaphor of men needing to withdraw into their 'caves' (or more prosaically, their sheds and garages) as a periodic escape from the pressures of female civilisation. *Men Behaving Badly*, the aptly-titled sitcom in which two pathetic 'lads' chafe against the disciplinary restraints imposed by their more mature girlfriends, is inexplicably popular with both women and men.

But for radical women, this identification of their sex as a civilising influence is at least as much a curse as it is a blessing. On one hand, it does provide them with an argument which has historically been very effective in challenging women's exclusion from powerful institutions. On the other hand, and this is what Clare Walsh is particularly concerned to show, it often means that women enter masculinist institutions on different and unequal terms, and prevents them, once inside, from pursuing the radical agenda which impelled many of them to enter in the first place.

Clare Walsh decided to look at women's experiences of entering three types of male-dominated institution. One type is legislatures (as well as the Westminster parliament she examines the Northern Ireland assembly, with special reference to the Women's Coalition).

Another is the environmental movement, where she contrasts the experiences of women activists in mixed groups like Friends of the Earth with those of women in an all-women, feminist organisation, the Women's Environmental Network. The third case is the Church of England, where she focuses on the experience of women who made the transition from campaigning for ordination to the priesthood to actually working as priests.

The book draws extensively on interviews with women actively involved in the institutions/organisations concerned, many of which are fascinating in their own right. However, since Clare Walsh has a particular interest in language, she also looks at the written texts produced by various groups, asking whether and how women's and feminist texts differ from the mainstream male variety; and importantly (for reasons I will shortly come to) she analyses the representation of women activists, politicians and priests in the media. Partly she is asking the same question newspaper reporters asked after the 1997 election (though needless to say, she frames it much more intelligently): *do* women change the norms of public discourse? Is debating or Question Time a different, less brutishly adversarial event when women participate in it as a matter of course? Is the language of religion changed by women's presence as priests? But in addition, she is asking another question: how does it affect women in public life to be subject to the belief and the expectation that they are there to civilise men's discourse?

## Ordaining sexism

To give something of the flavour of the argument, I will concentrate on the case of women priests in the Church of England. Though the issue of women's ordination leaves me personally cold, the account Clare Walsh gives of women's struggle to achieve it persuaded me that MOW, the Movement for the Ordination of Women, was a radical movement, and also a feminist one. Even very moderate women were (understandably) radicalised by the ludicrous and offensive arguments deployed by their opponents. Behind the bizarre theology ('women can't be priests because they are morally superior to men' was one argument) lurked ancient irrational beliefs about women polluting sacred spaces and profaning sacred language, by sexualising everything they came into contact with. Possibly the most extraordinary statement Clare Walsh

Clare Walsh, *Gender and Discourse: Language and Power in Politics, the Church and Organisations* (Longman, 2001)

Cartoons by  
Grizelda Grizlingham



quotes (against stiff competition) comes from the ineffable Graham Leonard, the antifeminist bishop of London, who remarked that if he were to encounter a woman in the sanctuary (a space in a church reserved for priests) he would be 'unbearably tempted to embrace her'. One hardly expects arguments about God to avoid irrationality altogether, but it is hard to summon up words to describe any argument in which this remark could count as a serious contribution.

The eventual vote in favour of the ordination of women was very far from producing equality, even on paper. Concerned about the divisive effects of the decision (and the possibility of Anglicans who opposed change defecting en masse to the Catholic church), the church adopted the peculiar doctrine of 'the two integrities' — Clare Walsh quite rightly calls it 'casuistry' — according to which it is equally valid to believe that God has called women to be priests, and to believe that he has *not* called women to be priests. People who believe the latter proposition are not obliged to recognise women priests' existence. Antifeminist bishops are not required to ordain women, and sexist local congregations are not required to accept a woman vicar. (The church is governed by ecclesiastical law and not subject to the sex discrimination act.) Individuals within congregations who do not wish to receive communion from a woman are served by so-called 'flying bishops', antifeminists who visit regularly to minister to those who will not accept the ministry of women. Consequently, the status of women priests is not even theoretically equivalent to that of male priests. The authority of a male priest is a given, but the authority of a woman priest can legitimately be denied by any member of the church, from Joe Bloggs to the Archbishop of Canterbury. Fewer jobs are open to her, and no serious promotion, since women have not yet won the right to be ordained as bishops.

The Act of Synod which ratified this strange and unjust state of affairs is a straightforward example of unreconstructed sexism, albeit dressed up in the arcane language of theological argument, which conveniently obscures the fundamentally political nature of the issue. But women priests must also deal with the subtler sexism that results from widespread assumptions that they will bring something *different*, and distinctively female, to the church's ministry.

Predictably, many of the women priests themselves believed that women would and



should do things differently: for instance, reduce the power differential between clergy and laity, preach less abstruse sermons and put more effort into pastoral work in their parishes. These priorities can be seen in two ways: if on one hand they could be taken to express a feminist commitment to more egalitarian structures and a more practical, people-centred idea of ministry, on the other they could also be seen as pandering to the stereotype of women as not wanting power, but simply wanting to serve — just as many served, before women's ordination, in the low-status, unpaid role of 'deaconess'. The belief that women are particularly good at, for instance, dealing sensitively with the bereaved or counselling parishioners with social problems, is producing, Clare Walsh suggests, a sort of gendered public/private divide *within* the public role of priesthood. Women take care of the 'private', pastoral duties while men fulfil the more 'public', oratorical and managerial functions associated with the role.

#### **Disclaiming feminism**

Clare Walsh also says that many women who as campaigners for ordination were happy to call themselves feminists have 'strategically disiden-

tified' from that label since becoming priests. Many have also dropped certain issues that preoccupied feminists in the ordination movement, notably the issue of nonsexist liturgical language. Unlike a commitment to democratise parish governance or put more resources into pastoral work, a commitment to introducing inclusive or feminine terms into the language of worship cannot easily be read as a traditionally feminine commitment to serving others. It is an unambiguously feminist challenge to male traditions, and women who pursue that challenge know they will be seen as 'extremists'. Avoiding extremism is for some a form of self-defence (women priests have not been accepted easily: many have experienced verbal abuse, while one was badly bitten by a parishioner to whom she was administering the sacrament). For others it is justified pragmatically as a way of ensuring that women priests will retain enough support to have a chance of achieving their more 'moderate' feminist goals.

It is clear, then, that when women became priests, they faced pressures which they had not faced as outsiders campaigning to be 'let in'. They were compelled to make all kinds of decisions about how to do the job they had fought for in the light of the attitudes and expectations they found among their superiors, their co-workers and their congregations. Even when these attitudes were not frankly misogynist, they were often essentialist, based on the expectation that women would have particular aptitudes, priorities and values. In addition, women were under pressure to 'heal the wounds' inflicted on the church by the long and bitter fight for women's ordination, by doing what they could to placate their opponents (soft-peddalling their feminism, for example). In a properly christian spirit of reconciliation, MOW had endorsed this policy; by the time of Clare Walsh's interviews, though, some former activists had come to regret their generosity, which was by no means reciprocated by the antifeminist camp.

Another unexpected pressure on women priests came from the media, which have taken a disproportionate interest in them, and whose coverage Clare Walsh analyses. She finds that media reporting of women priests is obsessed with their appearance, portraying them as 'frumps or femmes', and also places emphasis on motherhood — pregnant priests or priests who have recently given birth have been consistently

favoured subjects for media features. It is evident from her interview material that women priests cannot just ignore this sort of thing, but feel compelled to engage with the stereotypes, whether by conforming to them or by challenging them. An issue as trivial as whether earrings should be worn with clerical dress takes on weighty symbolic status when aired in the media, and women must then expend time and energy deciding how to deal with it.

Clare Walsh also discusses high-profile fictional representations of women priests, such as the character of Janet Fisher in the radio soap *The Archers*, and Dawn French's portrayal of a woman priest in the TV sitcom *The Vicar of Dibley*. These are widely regarded as positive representations which have helped to allay mainstream fears about women priests as humourless harridans or frothing feminist neo-pagans (this last being an insult levelled against feminists who want to draw attention to the feminine or maternal aspects of God). But Clare Walsh's informants were more critical, particularly of *The Vicar of Dibley*. They pointed out, for instance, that one strand in the series' humour concerns Geraldine's (the Dawn French character's) frustrated attempts at romance — not something that has featured in previous comedies centring on male priests, but a consistent theme in the discourse of opponents of women's ordination, who warned that the priesthood would attract a monstrous regiment of frustrated spinsters.

The writer of *Dibley*, Richard Curtis, has said that he wanted to make Geraldine 'intelligent and compassionate'. Priests Clare Walsh interviewed agreed that she was both, but suggested this in itself constituted a new stereotype — the long-suffering woman vicar who remains calm and cheerful in the face of adversity — which was problematic for real women trying to 'prove themselves' in a context of suspicion or even hostility. Clare Walsh notes that the real woman on whom Geraldine is based, Rev. Joy Carroll, does not work in rural Dibley but in a disadvantaged inner-city parish. Whether by choice or because of the number of parishes which will not accept them, many women priests do work in particularly challenging situations, where material deprivation and the attendant social problems loom large in their day-to-day concerns. This goes strikingly unacknowledged in fictional portrayals of them.

The case-study of priests in the Church of



England provides a particularly good demonstration of one of Clare Walsh's main points, that women (still) do not enter masculinist institutions on equal terms. Even if we leave aside the structural inequality enshrined by the Act of Synod and the 'two integrities', which is peculiar (in both senses) to the Church, inequality results from the entrenched expectation that women will do the job *differently*, but without disrupting existing male traditions. They are neither allowed to be 'the same' as men, their competence and achievements judged on the same criteria, nor so different that they threaten men's control over the institution. Their allotted role is to add the civilising feminine touch to a fundamentally masculine enterprise, and if they either decline to do this or take it too far they will face ferocious opposition.

The same pattern is repeated in all the mixed organisations Clare Walsh examined. In mixed environmentalist groups, for example, the high-profile managerial, media/PR and scientific functions tend to be fulfilled by men while women do fundraising and administration. A similar gendered division of labour obtains within mainstream political parties. What, though, of the cases where women have withdrawn from mixed organisations and set up their own?

#### Radically different

Both the women-only organisations examined in *Gender and Discourse* — the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) and the Women's Environmental Network (WEN) — appear to be genuinely and radically different from comparable mixed organisations. This is not, however, simply because their members are *women*; and it does not ensure either that they achieve their radical goals, though both organisations in Clare Walsh's view have real achievements to their credit.

The women's organisations are different, not because women are somehow naturally different, but because the organisations are committed to feminist principles and feminist political process. Clare Walsh does mention one other, nonfeminist women's organisation, WAOW (Women Against the Ordination of Women). Although this is a women-only group, and strongly committed to the idea that women are 'different', its arguments and language are in fact very similar to those of male opponents of women's ordination. Gender only makes a radical difference when it is part of a radical politics, i.e. feminism. In contrast to the

'critical mass' theorists who suggest that culture-change in institutions will happen when women make up 30% of their members, Clare Walsh argues that even very large numbers of women will have little or no impact if they accommodate to institutional norms and do not specifically organise for change. Conversely, she suggests that a very small number of women — for instance the two NIWC representatives at the Northern Ireland peace talks — may have a major impact if they are politicised, organised and determined.

The difference feminism makes is particularly marked in the language used by the NIWC and WEN, which is a more concrete, inclusive and accessible language than that of mainstream parties and environmental groups. In the case of the NIWC this kind of language was especially striking, even revelatory, because it contrasted so markedly with the clichéd oppositional rhetoric of the loyalist and nationalist groups that dominated Northern Irish politics. Clare Walsh remarks on the extent to which the Good Friday Agreement, a key document in the peace process, incorporated the language of the NIWC — coalition women, who as members of a cross-community organisation based on gender politics were well-positioned to negotiate across the sectarian divide, did a lot of the drafting. If that made them appear to other participants as typical women, facilitating others while effacing themselves, it also meant that ultimately, they had considerable influence on the outcome of the negotiations. The role they played also ensured that feminist concerns about women's, and more broadly, human rights were written into the Agreement. This is a case where women really did civilise a form of political discourse, and when one contemplates its previous rank incivility, one can only applaud this astonishing achievement.

As regular readers of *T&S* will know, though (see issues 35 and 40), the NIWC received little applause: from mainstream reporting of the peace talks you would hardly have known the coalition was there, let alone that its members played a major role in drafting the Agreement. At the talks themselves, coalition women encountered a degree of sexist hostility even more astounding than that meted out to feminists in the Church of England. Men did not yield easily to the civilising influence of women, for in this context, as Clare Walsh remarks, the slightest intimation of civility (e.g. the idea that one might



listen to an opponent's argument, or express some willingness to search for an acceptable compromise) was perceived as threateningly radical.

Apart from the personal cost to coalition women of dealing with continual hostility and abuse, they were compelled to expend enormous amounts of time and energy enlisting support from the media, even the less hostile parts of which tended to patronise or ignore them. True, this courting of the media is part of the game now for anyone in politics; but there are particular difficulties in keeping the media sweet while retaining some vestige of feminist principle. As a feminist, Monica McWilliams did not want to be represented as the 'leader' of the coalition, nor defined primarily as a wife and mother, nor photographed making tea; but she was often unable to resist the media's desire to represent

her in these ways. Feminists like her are faced with a dilemma: believing that the personal is political, and that politics should deal with the things people care about, they do not want to deny that they have personal lives. But the culture in which they practise politics is one in which personalising often means trivialising, and is often used, specifically, to undermine women in public life.

#### A theoretical challenge

The existence and significance of dilemmas of this kind is something Clare Walsh tries to address at the level of theory as well as description. She is a good, clear writer and she never allows the theory to overwhelm the other material, but she does want to take issue with certain currently fashionable postmodernist ideas about language, gender and identity. This gives



her work an additional dimension for feminists who are interested in such ideas (and more especially, in criticising them from a political standpoint) — though it should not deter other readers, since the ‘theoretical’ element does not dominate the book, and the occasional dense passage is easily skipped.

The position Clare Walsh criticises is associated with the postmodernist philosopher Judith Butler, and lays emphasis on the concept of ‘performativity’. What that means, roughly speaking, is that we ‘perform’ our identities rather than them being inalienably part of us, determined by our genes or our early childhood ‘conditioning’ or whatever. For instance, we bring ourselves into being as sexed and gendered subjects — women or men — when we repeatedly speak and act in ways that our societies deem ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’. In some versions of this argument, the main point that follows from the ‘performative’ nature of identity is that you can, in effect, perform it however you like:

just because you were born and brought up female, for instance, does not mean you have to go through life performing the identity of a woman. You can remake yourself as a man, or as something outside the traditional gender categories. As we know, more and more individuals are engaging in this kind of ‘self-fashioning’, not as a theoretical experiment but as a life-choice.

Clare Walsh is not dealing with the phenomenon of transgender (though she does mention the idea that priesthood for men has always been a form of socially-sanctioned gender ‘crossing’ and that this may be a reason why so many male priests are vehemently opposed to the entry of actual women into their ranks). However, she is dealing with contexts in which women have both

the opportunity and the obligation to invent a new kind of gendered identity, because they are taking roles, such as ‘priest’, which were previously understood as exclusively masculine. And what she finds is that women in these contexts are not the free self-fashioning agents celebrated in some versions of postmodernist theory. On the contrary, they are severely constrained by the institutional and social structures in which their identities must be created and performed.

‘Performance’ is a theatrical metaphor which turns the spotlight, so to speak, on the performer. But performances have audiences, and it is their interpretations, rather than simply the intentions of the performer, which determine what the performance will actually be taken to mean. The woman priest who wants to talk about ‘God the mother’ cannot guarantee that her audience will interpret this as creative feminist theology rather than paganism. The women MPs who ostentatiously refuse to join in with what

they call ‘barnyard noises’ in the House of Commons may intend this as a critical comment on the puerility of their male colleagues, but it is often interpreted by others as a sign of the natural feminine reticence which makes women less successful politicians than men.

In short, postmodernists have given too little weight to the truism that you can control your performance, but not your reception. In reality, understanding that discourse is a two-way process, we design our performances in the light of calculations about the reception they are likely to get. It is because of this that sexism, overt or subtle, can continue to exert such effective pressure on women whose ambition is to radicalise discourse rather than merely to civilise it.

### Only the beginning

That doesn’t mean, of course, that women can have no positive impact on historically male institutions. Rather it means that just getting into the institutions is not the end-point of the struggle, but only the beginning. ‘Historic victories’ like the vote for women’s ordination or the election of a record number of women MPs should be regarded by feminists as neither historic (in the sense of marking an entirely new era) nor victories (in the sense of putting sexism decisively to rout). If politics is ‘the art of the possible’, Clare Walsh’s analysis suggests that perhaps we can best support our sisters in masculinist institutions by understanding that all things are not always possible for them. There are good reasons (as well as more dubious ones) why they cannot always be as radical as we want them to be. At the same time, Clare Walsh feels that we should not underestimate the extent to which many of them are in fact doing radical things, but strategically cloaking their real agendas in a language of moderation or essentialism.

This argument may depress or irritate radical feminists — why should feminists have to disguise themselves like this? — but if we accept that it has some purchase on reality, it might make us think about the potential of alliances with women whose institutional position has

apparently led them to ‘compromise’ politically. Feminists inside institutions need relationships with feminists outside, and vice-versa. For radicals who remain outside (and thus also have more scope for remaining radical), access to the ‘establishment’ can be a route to getting things done. For feminists inside institutions, being able to refer to an outside constituency which demands x, y and z is a way of legitimising those demands — you are not just speaking in your own interest, but in the interests of people you are there to serve or represent (one reason why the women’s ordination movement succeeded was that two thirds of ordinary churchgoers supported it).

What I find most admirable about *Gender and Discourse* is that it gives a real sense of what it’s like to be a feminist woman in a world of sexist men (and for that matter, anti-feminist women like WAOW). The pressures, the dilemmas, the strategic compromises, and the sheer unremitting prejudice women constantly have to face, are evoked here in telling detail. The writing is lucid and its tone is measured, but the writer’s evident anger about some of the things she describes gives it an edge that I find pleasing. Also pleasing is the respect she shows for her interviewees, and more generally the way she injects a dose of common sense into debates where so much nonsense has been talked in recent years — not least, I regret to say, by academic feminists.

Rather than engaging in abstract speculation, Clare Walsh has taken the trouble to find out how women have experienced their hard-won freedom to participate in public life. She has exposed some persistent myths (e.g. that women are naturally, uniformly ‘different’, that institutional sexism is now a marginal problem, and that simply gaining access to institutions gives women the power to change them) and raised a number of questions of direct practical importance for feminist politics. It would be a pity if the book’s location in a series about language obscured its relevance for feminists more generally: it deserves a wider readership, and I hope that it will find one. □



# The Grand Delusion

**Most men who use child prostitutes are ordinary punters, not the monstrous 'paedophiles' of popular stereotype. The reasons and justifications they give for their behaviour derive from ideas about sex, race, gender, and money which are widespread and indeed 'normal' in the societies punters come from. Unless we acknowledge that the commercial sexual exploitation of children is more than just a law enforcement issue, argues Julia O'Connell Davidson, we will not be able to produce an effective response.**

Over the past two decades, child sexual abuse has increasingly been treated as a newsworthy topic in the West, and media coverage almost invariably invokes the concept of 'paedophilia' to explain the phenomenon. So, for example, child prostitution and child sex tourism are widely assumed to involve 'paedophiles', abnormal individuals who specifically seek out contexts in which pre-pubertal children will be made sexually available to them. Though shocking in themselves, such stereotypes are also comforting for

Western audiences because they help to establish a clear boundary between prostitution and child prostitution, between sex tourism and child sex tourism, between 'normal' clients and morally repugnant 'paedophiles'. They make the problem of child prostitution appear to be a simple matter of good versus evil, and the policy response appears equally simple – all we need to do is devote more and better resources to catching the 'baddies'.

However, the commercial sexual exploitation of children cannot be reduced to a simple-law enforcement issue. Unless we are willing to face the unpalatable fact that the people who use prostitutes (including child prostitutes), are not monstrous 'Others' but are actually members of our society, produced by us, we are in danger of formulating policies that, at best, do nothing meaningful to address the problem, and at worst, intensify the vulnerability of those already most vulnerable within prostitution.

## *Beyond the 'paedophile'*

Popular stereotypes are not entirely without basis. The existence of 'paedophilia' (a clinical condition or personality disorder involving a specific and focused sexual interest in prepubertal children), and of 'preferential child sex abusers' (individuals whose preferred sexual objects are children who have reached or passed puberty) is not in dispute here. The attraction of child prostitution to adults who have a focused sexual preference for children is obvious. Laws and social conventions make it very difficult and dangerous for such people to satisfy their sexual interests in non-commercial contexts, but prostitution potentially provides 'instant access', often to a selection of children. Since there are very few countries where large numbers of prepubertal children are prostituted, those which have a reputation for child prostitution attract child abusers from around the world—at least those who can afford to travel. However, the idea that child prostitution in the contemporary world is sustained solely by demand from 'paedophiles' is actually quite untenable.

Childhood is a socially constructed condition, rather than one which can be clearly defined through reference to biological fact or chronological age. Its boundaries vary cross-culturally and historically, and even within any one nation state, they are often indistinct. For the international community to concern itself with the condition and experience of children around the globe, however, it must necessarily employ some universal definition of childhood, and the United Nations and many other international bodies define a child as a person under the age of eighteen.

Even when a definition of childhood is agreed, it is extremely difficult to obtain accurate information about the extent of child prostitution in the contemporary world. Yet the more general body of empirical evidence on prostitution

around the world does provide enough reliable information to enable us to challenge popular myths and stereotypes about child prostitution and child sex tourism on a number of grounds.

To begin with, academic and journalistic research suggests that the vast majority of child prostitutes in the contemporary world are postpubertal, rather than prepubertal, children. This is, of course, irrelevant to questions about the harm caused by prostitution, but it does have implications for our understanding of the demand for child prostitutes—it means that not all of their clients can be technically defined as 'paedophiles'.

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***The existing body of research evidence suggests that most child prostitutes of whatever age are actually integrated into the mainstream prostitution market serving all prostitute users, rather than working in some discrete 'market niche' that caters solely to the desires of 'paedophiles' or child molesters.***

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Moreover, the existing body of research evidence suggests that most child prostitutes of whatever age are actually integrated into the mainstream prostitution market serving *all* prostitute users, rather than working in some discrete 'market niche' that caters solely to the desires of 'paedophiles' or child molesters. So, for example, girls between ten and fourteen years of age are variously reported to be prostituting alongside older teenagers and young women in brothels serving demand from local men and migrant workers in Latin America, India and Bangladesh, and in tourist areas in the Caribbean and Thailand, as well as on the streets in red light areas in affluent Western countries.

The same research further suggests that, depending upon the setting from which they work, child prostitutes 'service' between two and thirty clients per week, that is, somewhere between 100 and 1,500 clients a year. Even if the lowest estimates on the numbers of child prostitutes are accepted, the number of *clients* of child prostitutes would still run into several millions annually. These millions of clients are a disparate group in terms of their nationalities and



their socio-economic, cultural and religious backgrounds. To explain the behaviour of such a large and varied group through reference to a clinically defined personality disorder, paedophilia (a diagnostic category which is itself based on research with a relatively small and atypical sample of Western men) would clearly be unsatisfactory. Indeed, it is more reasonable to assume that a majority of these people are first and foremost *prostitute users* who become child sexual abusers through their prostitute use, rather than first and foremost paedophiles using prostitution as a means of obtaining sexual access to children.

If we want to understand the demand for child prostitutes, we therefore have to concern ourselves with questions about the sex trade and the demand for prostitution more generally. This means addressing much broader and more difficult questions about prostitution, gender and sexuality; it means questioning the way in which we socialise our children and the attitudes that we tolerate. Here I look at the stories men tell about their own prostitute use and the ideas they use to justify even the use of minors in the sex trade. I argue that these ideas are not aberrant or abnormal, but widely accepted or tolerated in European and North American society.

### **Punter Fictions**

In the course of research on prostitution and sex tourism over the past seven years, I have interviewed more than 350 Western men about their prostitute use. Prostitute users and sex tourists are not a homogeneous group, and it is particularly important to distinguish between 'habitual' and 'situational' prostitute users. Large numbers of sex tourists, men and women, can be termed 'situational' prostitute users. They end up having sex with a prostitute not because they have gone out with that intention, but because they find themselves in situations where they can tell themselves that prostitute use is acceptable or 'different', or that the woman/man/child involved is not *really* a prostitute, and that they themselves are not *really* paying for sex. The habitual prostitute user is someone who makes a both a conscious choice and a habit of prostitute use, and the vast majority of habitual prostitute users are men.

Clearly, not all men are habitual prostitute users. Sven-Axel Mansson's review of research in European countries shows significant differences between countries in terms of the percent-

age of men who admit to ever having used a prostitute, but this percentage varies between around 7% and 39%. Mansson argues that of those men who have used prostitutes, only a minority engage in habitual prostitute use. This minority nonetheless 'consume' a large quantity of prostitution contracts. Here, I want to focus on this minority of men who habitually use prostitutes. They are the ones who furnish the core demand for both adults and minors in the sex trade. Without them, the sex trade could not exist on its current scale, and others would not find themselves in the 'situations' where prostitute use seems normal, acceptable, and so on. My aim is to show that the stories such clients tell about their own prostitute use are not the product of 'warped' or 'aberrant' individual minds, but are instead perfectly consonant with widely accepted European and North American ideas about economic life, gender and sexuality.

### **The Natural Born Client**

One explanation that clients typically offer for their prostitute use draws upon the idea of male sexual 'needs'. Some men view themselves as lacking the physical or social charms necessary to meet these 'needs' in non-commercial contexts. Because prostitution affords them instant access to a selection of females, they can, as one man put it, get their 'sex drive out for the night'. Other clients describe their prostitute use as a quick and simple expedient in situations when no other 'outlet' is available. For instance, a sailor told me that he was visiting a red light district in a port town because 'I'm a man, I have biological needs. I've been on ship for months without a woman. I had to have one'.

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***'I'm a man, I have biological needs. I've been on ship for months without a woman. I had to have one'***

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There are also clients who have wives or girlfriends from whom they are not physically separated. They tend to explain their prostitute use as a function of rather more specific sexual 'needs' which would otherwise go unsatisfied or else as a response to their wife/partner's lack of sexual interest in them. Finally, there are clients who say that they use prostitutes as a means of satisfying a 'natural' impulse to have sex with as many different females as often as they possibly can.

The idea that people have sexual 'needs' rather than 'wants' or 'desires' is very widely accepted in European and North American society. Indeed, it is quite rare to find anyone who challenges the basic assumption that human sexual behaviour is shaped by biologically based sexual 'appetites' or 'drives'. But what does it actually mean to say that people have sexual 'needs'? Deprived of sexual gratification, people do not wither and die as they do when deprived of water, food or sleep, or suffer in the same way they do when other basic bodily needs are denied. There is no biological imperative to orgasm any set number of times a day, week or year, and whilst an individual may on occasion find it unpleasant or even uncomfortable to go without sexual release (assuming s/he is unable to masturbate), the absence of another person to bring him to orgasm does not actually threaten his continued survival.

An article in a British broadsheet newspaper, headlined 'Disabled people don't have sex, do they?' is interesting in this regard. It describes an English travel agency that was set up to take disabled people to Amsterdam for holidays which include commercial sex. It tells of a Dutch businesswoman who will supply details of sex workers willing to service disabled people 'be they men or women, straight or gay'. The Dutch woman is keen to point out that these sex workers are not all older people, a good thing, she says, since 'If you are twenty-five you don't want to ask someone who is old enough to be your mother to make you come'.

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***'Men are like yo-yos, emotionally they're controlled by women. It's always women who hold the strings.'***

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This draws attention to the fact that human sexual desire is grounded in emotional and cognitive, as much as physiological, processes. If the urge to reach orgasm were a simple biological function, such as the impulse to evacuate the bowels, it would hardly matter whether the person you asked 'to make you come' was old or young, or man or woman. But sex is not a mere bodily function. A person's erotic interests are inextricably bound up with the ideational world, and this surely renders the idea of a 'need' for sexual gratification hugely problematic. Since

non-masturbatory sex by definition involves another person or persons, to grant one the right to control if and when they have sex, with whom, and how, would very often be to deny those same rights to another.

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***'She was expecting something, and it wasn't a lollipop'***

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Notions of biologically based sexual 'drives' and 'needs' cannot provide a direct explanation for prostitute use. They leave unanswered questions as to why some men do not use prostitutes, even when they are 'deprived' of other sexual 'outlets', and why those who do use prostitutes are not indiscriminate as to how their 'need' for sexual 'release' is satisfied and by whom. Biology is an enabling, not a determining, factor in human sexual arrangements, and the story of the 'Natural Born Client' does not, therefore, describe a biological reality. But naturalising prostitute use through reference to ideas about male sexuality does allow clients to construct the sexual license and/or services alienated by the prostitute as a 'good' or 'commodity' which satisfies a perfectly understandable and reasonable demand on the part of the 'consumer'. And this is the second way that the stories habitual prostitute users tell about their prostitute use can be seen as reflecting and reproducing very ordinary, everyday attitudes and beliefs about the world.

### **Sovereign Consumers**

Prostitution involves the exchange of sexual license and/or sexual labour across a market, and it is usually (but not always) organised and constructed as a commodity exchange like any other. In order to imagine the prostitute-client transaction as a commodity exchange, clients have to treat sexuality as though it were something which can be detached from the person. The prostitute's sexuality then becomes something which she can freely alienate, and the client's sexuality is also imagined as somehow estranged and divisible from his *real* self. He enters into the exchange merely to 'control' his 'sex life' or satisfy his 'sex drive'. One client I interviewed even compared his sexuality to a vehicle which the owner has to maintain, describing his visits to prostitutes as being 'a bit like taking your car to the garage to get it serviced... you're paying for the services of an

expert, someone who really knows what they're doing'. Thus 'sexual needs', which are in reality nothing more than productions of the human imagination, are invested with a life of their own and viewed as an external force driving the client to behave in particular ways.

By telling himself that prostitution is a commodity exchange (he and the prostitute meet freely in the market place and voluntarily contract to dispose of their property), the client can conceal his own power from himself. He can also overlook certain facts about the person to whom he secures sexual access, facts which would often make sexual contact with her illegitimate in terms of the rules and conventions which, in non-commercial contexts, he would himself endorse. The prostitute may be extremely young, a child even. She may be another man's wife or girlfriend or pregnant by another man. She may be being coerced into prostitution by a husband, boyfriend or pimp. She may even be debt-bonded or otherwise enslaved to a brothel keeper. But because his relationship to her is constructed as a commodity exchange, the client does not feel morally compelled to interrogate what lies behind her sexual 'consent'. She is a seller, he is a buyer and he can simply think in terms of an exchange of 'values':  $x$  amount of money for  $x$  sexual benefit (and clients do really talk about 'value for money').

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***'a bit like taking your car to the garage to get it serviced... you're paying for the services of an expert, someone who really knows what they're doing'.***

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I have interviewed many American and European men who would not dream of asking their daughter's teenage friends for sex, let alone think it right to coerce them into performing sexual acts. Yet they will quite happily enter into sexual-economic exchanges with girls of fifteen or sixteen years of age in Latin America, the Caribbean or Thailand, because, they say, the girls approach them, rather than vice versa. The same undoubtedly holds true of many Finnish and German men who travel to Russia or Latvia or Estonia for business or leisure purposes and find themselves approached by teenage girls or boys working in prostitution. Because prostitution is contractually organised as a commodity

exchange like any other, the buyer can tell himself that his own actions are quite legitimate. He is simply behaving as a sovereign consumer in a free market behaves, and if he does not accept the child's offer, the man behind him will.

### ***Moral indifference***

In this sense, many men's use of child prostitutes is best understood as an act of moral indifference, and again, this is perfectly consonant with the dominant moral codes of liberal democratic states. In a book which starts from a consideration of the holocaust, the British political theorist Norman Geras asks how we can make sense of 'the depressing but widespread fact that so many people do not come to the aid of others under attack, whether fellow citizens or merely other human beings, and also do not come to the aid of them in dire need or great distress' (1998, 26). Geras' idea is that people imagine themselves as parties to a contract of mutual indifference, whereby they do not feel obligated to come to the aid of others who are under grave assault and do not expect others to feel obligated to help them in similar emergency. Geras goes on to argue that this kind of moral indifference is underwritten by liberal political thought:

The principal economic formation historically associated with liberalism, defended by liberals – whether confidently or apologetically – today as much as ever, is one in which it has been the norm for the wealth and comfort of some to be obtained through the hardship and poverty of others, and to stand right alongside these. It is a whole mode of collective existence. Not only an economy. A world, a culture, a set of everyday practices (1998, 59).

Prostitution is one such everyday practice; a practice which expresses moral indifference, and justifies it by invoking the liberal concept of contractual consent. At base, the client is saying: 'I will not recognize any connection with you or obligation to you beyond paying the sum we agree, and I do not expect you to recognize any connection with me or obligation to me beyond providing the agreed service. I will not concern myself with questions about why you are willing to enter into a prostitution contract, and I do not call on you to concern yourself with my motivations for entering this contract'.

In the contemporary world, this often means that the client is willing to disregard immense human suffering and hardship. The vast majority of sex tourists and habitual clients I have

interviewed are entirely morally indifferent to questions about why the women and teenagers they exploit are willing to enter into prostitution contracts with them. Some even feel that the prostitution contract can be morally executed with women they know to be debt-bonded to a brothel-owner, or with ten and eleven year old children they know to be homeless, destitute and/or addicted to solvents. They reason that they do not expect the child, or anyone else, to give them help or care, and thus they are under no obligation to give help or care to the child or to anyone else.

### ***The Prostitute as Other***

Habitual clients seek to justify and defend the power they exercise over prostitutes as power over commodities, rather than power over persons, and to tell themselves that this is a commodity exchange like any other. But at another level, they are quite conscious of the fact that they enter into the contract precisely in order to exercise personal, and not material, power over the prostitute. Clients know that in reality they contract for the use of a human embodied self, for the right to temporarily command what is embedded in and cannot be detached from the prostitute's person. Indeed, they complain bitterly when, in their view, the prostitute fails to keep to 'her side of the bargain' by refusing to respond to this kind of command. To quote one client:

[Some prostitutes] they just lay there, like a dead fish on the slab. They just lay there. I don't know how you can get any satisfaction with a woman just lain there like that. You might as well go home and have a wank.

Furthermore, few clients really accept that the prostitute's sexuality can be estranged as a 'thing' or 'commodity' separate from her person. In fact, quite the reverse. Habitual clients actually tend to buy into very traditional ideas about gender, sexuality, and prostitution. They generally believe (just as strongly as do religious fundamentalists and moral conservative politicians and journalists), that there is a firm and meaningful line of demarcation between 'good' and 'bad' women, 'Madonnas' and 'whores', the sexually pure and the impure. A female who sells sex is considered by most habitual clients (as well as by many non-prostitute using men and women) to be somehow different from other women. The client may see the prostitutes he uses as 'dirty whores' or as 'tarts with hearts',

but whichever image he finds erotic, the point for him is that she is Other—she is not like his own wife, sister, mother, daughter or any other 'respectable' woman.

In this, he accepts and reproduces what is widely socially endorsed: the idea of the female prostitute as somehow outside the imaginary community of good, respectable, heterosexuals. This idea of the prostitute as a socially excluded, sexually deviant, Other is very necessary to habitual clients. If prostitute women were imagined as part of the 'community', then men's access to them would be circumscribed in the same way that their access to non-prostitute women is circumscribed, and prostitution would no longer function to 'safeguard' the status quo by soaking up men's excess sexual 'needs' and 'appetites'. Prostitute women *have* to be imagined as outside the community.

Because they 'agree' to sell their sexuality as a commodity, prostitutes are held to have placed themselves outside the remit of the socially agreed rules which govern sexual life. They are expelled and excluded from the community, and thus the rape, even the murder, of prostitute women does not evoke the same degree of popular outrage as the rape or murder of women who are covered by the rules, and the sexual abuse of a child is adjudged differently according to whether it takes place within a commercial or a non-commercial context. Equally, the sexual use of women who would normally be considered 'off limits' (for instance, because they are pregnant, visibly ill or injured) becomes acceptable when those women are prostitutes. To exercise personalistic power over females who are included in 'the community' in order to have sex with them is considered transgressive, but exercising personalistic power over the prostitute is viewed as perfectly acceptable—implicit in 'the deal' even.

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***'when I was married, I felt caged... Men are very insecure in relation to woman... And I honestly feel that the prostitution side... it's because they're... trapped.'***

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The extent of the prostitute's exclusion from the imagined community can be graphically illustrated by a story told by a British sex tourist in Thailand. This man, like many of his compatri-



ots, was quite happy to sit through live sex shows in which prostitutes (some of whom are debt-bonded, some of whom are under the age of sixteen) pull strings of metal bells, scarves, or razor blades from their vaginas in front of an audience of leering men. He would also happily visit brothels where women and children are lined up, numbered and displayed in order that clients can 'select' an anonymous, visibly objectified female body for his sexual use. And although he claimed to disapprove of the sexual exploitation of children, neither he, nor any of his 'mates' had ever challenged another sex tourist about their abuse of child prostitutes. However, he did tell me the following story:

When I was in Ko Chang there was this old Austrian bloke, must have been 70 at least, and he was enticing the dogs into his beach hut, tempting stray dogs in there with food. It was fucking disgusting. Anyway, someone told the police and they had words with him, but I was telling this bloke at the bar one night and I pointed the bloke out to him and he just walked over to the Austrian bloke and punched him in the face. He said 'You dirty fucking poofter' and he floored him. He says to me after, 'He comes to paradise and what does he do? Fucks dogs'.

In other words, it was easier for this man to imagine dogs as part of his community, covered and protected by rules pertaining to sexual life, than to include prostitute women and children amongst those worthy of protection.

#### **Prostitutes, not children**

This has great significance for our understanding who uses minors in the sex trade and why. For many men, the child prostitute's status as 'prostitute' is far more significant than her or his status as 'child'. A fifty-four year old Italian sex tourist I interviewed in Cuba described picking up a thirteen year old girl off the streets, taking her back to his apartment and having sex with her. Yet he attributed agency to the child: 'She was expecting something, and it wasn't a lollipop', he said.

This notion of children in prostitution as sexually experienced, as spoiled goods, as agents in their own exploitation, as exploiters of adult men's frailty even, is widespread amongst the men we interviewed who practice sex tourism including child sex tourism. And again, their attitudes are not so very far away from ordinary, mainstream beliefs about childhood, gender, sexuality and sexual community. Men and women who do *not* use prostitutes also equate

childhood with sexual innocence and inexperience, such that a minor who is involved in prostitution is no longer deemed to be or treated as a child.

In Britain, as well as in 'Third World' or 'developing' countries, girls who work in prostitution have historically been legally constructed as 'prostitutes', not as sexually abused children (and as recently as 1998, the police in England and Wales cautioned 260 girls aged between sixteen and eighteen, and just over twenty girls aged under sixteen, for prostitution offences).

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***the stories such clients tell about their own prostitute use are not the product of 'warped' or 'aberrant' individual minds, but are instead perfectly consonant with widely accepted European and North American ideas about economic life, gender and sexuality.***

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Racism also often plays a vital role in helping the client to imagine the prostitutes he uses as Other, as outside or beyond the rules which protect 'good' women and children. European beliefs about 'racial' difference have historically constructed 'racial' Others as sexual Others, and sexualised racisms are still widely accepted in Europe and North America (for example, racist myths about black men and women as sexually aggressive, Latino women as naturally 'hot', Asian women as sexually passive, and so on). White western sex tourists and clients draw on these popular, everyday racisms to tell themselves that the 'racially' or ethnically Other women and children they exploit are 'different', and so either do not deserve or do not require the kind of protection or respect that is merited by 'their own' women or children. Thus, for example, European and American sex tourists will say that children are not really children in the Caribbean—they 'grow up faster' than do children back home, they are 'naturally' more sexual, and so on.

#### ***The client's tale of woe***

Behind the stories considered thus far, there is another tale which men who habitually use prostitutes tell about their prostitute use. It is a

tale about masculinity, but this time, the focus is on how their gender has exposed them to exclusion, grief and loss. The habitual prostitute users I have interviewed invariably describe a childhood in which they suffered repeated and humiliating attacks upon their gender identity. They report frequent incidents in which they were physically chastised or verbally reprimanded for not being sufficiently 'manly', they describe having been told not to cry, not to display emotional vulnerability or physical fear, having been expected to perform well in competitive sports, and so on.

Clients typically move from such descriptions to express enormous resentment of women. They tell you that life is easier for women, and in particular, that it is easier for women to achieve intimacy and to give and receive care from others. In the words of one interviewee, a fifty-five year old man who habitually seeks out minors in the sex trade:

Mothers train their daughters, they prepare them... They teach girls how to look pretty, tell them how to sit, how to cross their legs. They teach them how to be attractive and how to please a man. But they don't teach boys anything. Boys are neglected, and then, next thing you know, you're expected to be a man, to be in charge. You're expected to know what women want. They expect you to fight in wars, go out and fuck whores, be a real man. The mother's even happy if her son dies for his country so long as she gets a flag, all neatly folded, and a letter saying that her son was brave. She doesn't care if he goes out and fucks some dirty whore. She just says 'Good, that shows he's a man'. Boys get nothing. They might be hurt, but they have to hide it, they're not allowed to cry. And no-one tells them how to please women. The boy reaches the age of 15 or 16, he has biological urges, he needs to find a girlfriend. So what happens? He goes out and gets humiliated. Girls are just laughing at him... Men are like yo-yos, emotionally they're controlled by women. It's always women who hold the strings.

In this story, the client presents himself as emotionally victimised, neglected, vulnerable and misunderstood, and describes non-prostitute women as powerful, vindictive, careless. The 'good' women (mothers and wives) upon whom men depend for love, care and emotional support have too much power and control. As another habitual prostitute user, again a man who regularly sexually exploits child prostitutes, put it:

You get the gold-diggers, the women who'll do anything to get a bloke because he's got a

few bob, and once she's got in, that man is caught, because if he tries to get out, she'll take him to the cleaners. It's a web... I found when I was married, I felt caged... Men are very insecure in relation to woman. They want the woman for security, at the same time they feel insecure in the marriage because they know they can be taken to the cleaners any time. And I honestly feel that the prostitution side... it's because they're... trapped.

In this way, clients shift from explaining their prostitute use as a simple consequence of biologically given male sexual 'drives' and start to explain it as a consequence of the supposedly 'excessive' social and emotional power exercised by women.

A recurring theme in the stories of woe which clients tell about their prostitute use is that men are weak and non prostitute women are strong. 'Good' women are berated for their power to 'incite' sexual desire and then 'withhold' sexual access, for their power to refuse unconditional emotional support, for their ability to freely withdraw from intimate relationships - in short, for being autonomous individuals. Prostitution is valued because it strips women of this kind of autonomy (and, of course, minors in the sex trade are amongst the least autonomous of all).

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***If we want to understand the demand for child prostitutes, we therefore have to concern ourselves with questions about the sex trade and the demand for prostitution more generally. This means addressing much broader and more difficult questions about prostitution, gender and sexuality; it means questioning the way in which we socialise our children and the attitudes that we tolerate.***

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If 'femininity' is imagined as the right to care and be cared for (i.e. to acknowledge one's relation to others), and 'masculinity' rests on rejection of such 'femininity' (i.e. to deny one's relation to others), then it is small wonder that sexual relationships often represent such difficult terrain for men, or that prostitute use seems to promise a means of resolving inner conflicts.



With a prostitute, clients can manage their sexual and emotional life in any way they choose. They can treat the prostitute as nothing but a sexually objectified body, they can play-act intimacy and romance, they can command the prostitute to perform as the phallic woman they dread and in so doing symbolically conquer their fears, etc., without incurring obligations or expectations, and with little threat of any real mutual dependency developing. Furthermore, prostitution provides a forum in which men's fantasies of unbridled sexual access can be momentarily realised, and thus with a prostitute, clients experience none of their usual rage and frustration about their inability to control their own and other people's sexual behaviour. The female prostitute's sexual behaviour is controllable through the simple medium of money, and the younger and more the vulnerable the prostitute, the more controllable she is.

The client's tale of woe is a story which centres upon both a longing for and a dread of intimacy. This is a story in which men fear entering into close and dependent relationships with women because they feel that in so doing, they risk being infantilised, engulfed, out of control, open to rejection and humiliation. It reflects a fear of their own need for care. Again we need to recognise that such a dread is not simply the product of individual pathology. In European societies, many ordinary people—perhaps even the majority—are complicit with a set of beliefs about gender that refuse and deny men both the right to care and to be given care.

#### *Not just a criminal justice issue*

I welcome the fact that in the European Union more resources and greater priority are now being attached to policing 'paedophiles' who sexually abuse children at home and abroad, and to policing third parties who use violence or the threat of violence to force women and children into prostitution. But I do not believe that the problem of minors in the sex trade can be reduced to a criminal justice issue.

To begin with, we have to recognise that the state plays a significant role in shaping the sex trade and the experience of prostitution, not just through the prostitution laws it enacts and enforces (or doesn't enforce), but because it is

implicated in creating the conditions under which for some individuals or groups, prostitution comes to represent the best of a bad bunch of economic alternatives. State policies on welfare, employment, education, health, immigration and, in many countries, tourism, make certain groups vulnerable to prostitution, and also increase their vulnerability within prostitution. Though it is the state upon which we must rely to police violence against and abuse of prostitute women and children, the paradox is that states are also heavily implicated in making certain groups vulnerable to, and within, prostitution.

This paradox should not be forgotten by those lobbying governments in relation to particular prostitution issues. We need to insist that governments recognise and take on board the complexities of prostitution as a whole and address the inequalities of economic, social and political power which underpin it, rather than treating problems such as minors in the sex trade, or trafficking, as simply or primarily law enforcement or criminal justice issues.

Second, instead of comforting ourselves with the idea that those who sexually exploit minors in the sex trade are monstrous Others, we need confront the more difficult fact that they are products of our own societies. Most of the European men who pay for sex with prostitutes, including child prostitutes, hold attitudes that are perfectly consonant with their own societies' dominant, popular discourses on gender, sexuality, race, prostitution and sexual community. And Europeans are, in general, socialised to tolerate massive global, class, race and gender inequalities. Many will happily take advantage of those inequalities to obtain cheap consumer goods, or package holidays, or domestic workers when it suits them to do so. In campaigns against sexual exploitation, we would do well to remember that prostitutes' clients do not have the monopoly on moral indifference.

Ending children's exploitation in the sex trade requires Europeans to do more than think about the law enforcement problems posed by 'paedophiles' and 'traffickers'. We must also begin to think critically about how to transform our own societies' attitudes towards economic action, gender, class, sexuality, race and prostitution. □

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